Opera across Borders

Transcodification: Arts, Languages and Media

Edited by
Simone Gozzano

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Opera across Borders

Word, Image, Scene, and Digital Transformations

Edited by
Angela Albanese, Marina Bondi, Benedetta Bronzini
and Vincenzo Gannuscio

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Introduction: A Diachronic Journey Across the Borders of the Operatic Genre

Since its emergence in seventeenth-century Italy, opera has developed into the most multidisciplinary, "elitarian and expensive of the performing arts",[1] inextricably linked to the public sphere and to urban spaces. Today, it stands at a pivotal crossroads, poised between its rich historical legacy and the pressing necessity to engage with an increasingly globalized and rapidly changing world. As Tim Carter observes in his crucial contribution to *The Oxford Handbook of Opera*, although opera is "messy by definition",[2] it nevertheless succeeded in establishing itself as a canonical genre, maintaining its status as a highly specialized artistic practice "despite periodic attempts to remove opera from the pantheons of high art and into more experimental theatrical (and even non-theatrical) performance spaces".[3] While this remains an accurate characterization, it is equally vital to underscore the permeability of the operatic genre. Opera – an inherently multimodal art form[4] – is a space where music, literature, technology, and social history are inextricably intertwined.[5] The development of opera has been shaped and profoundly transformed not only by technological innovations but also by the proliferation, especially in the past four decades, of alternative performance venues beyond the opera house, from the street to television, and more recently, to digital and virtual realms such as the metaverse.[6]

The present volume considers these dimensions by investigating how the "code"[7] of the operatic language has been rediscovered, transformed, rewritten, recontextualized, and remediated over time. Spanning from the latter half of the nineteenth century to the present, the essays collected here, drawing on Linda Hutcheon's notion of the "dramaturgical turn",[8] interrogate the porous boundaries of opera. They foreground the multiplicity of elements that shape an operatic work: the performance space (opera houses, conservatories), the agents of production (poets, composers, singers, instrumentalists, stage designers, costume makers),

1 Towse 2011, 313–316.
2 Carter 2014, 42.
3 Carter 2014, 48.
4 See Hutcheon/Hutcheon 2009 and Rossi/Sindoni 2016.
5 See Goehr 2014, 130–131.
6 See Lepa/Müller-Lindenberg/Egermann 2023.
7 Fusillo/Legge/Lino/Petricola/Rossini 2025.
8 Hutcheon 2006, 807.

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technological and scenographic resources, and the specificity of the audience, all in a constant dialogue between past and present.

In such a perspective, the opening essays in the volume are dedicated to the reception and rediscovery of lesser-known works from the nineteenth century. One such example is *Il Bagno freddo*, a "comic operetta in two acts" composed by Camillo de Nardis and first performed during the Carnival season of 1879 in Naples. The work is here critically examined and contextualized within the operatic landscape of late nineteenth-century Naples by Alberto Mammarella, who also serves as editor of a modern edition of the score. This edition is accompanied by a vocal score with piano reduction prepared by Luca Incerti.[9] A further case study is *Spartaco*, the final opera by the Sicilian composer Pietro Platania, associated with the *scuola Leista*, which premiered at the Teatro San Carlo in Naples in 1891. This work provides here both a case of analysis and rediscovery of a forgotten work and a proper example of rewriting and digital remediation carried out by the Composition and Electronic Music Schools of the Conservatory Licinio Refice (Frosinone, IT). In this innovative version, the audience is invited to influence aspects of the performance in real time, offering a compelling example of the intersection between artistic reinterpretation and technological experimentation.

Nineteenth-century Naples is the protagonist of a further challenge to the boundaries of the operatic genre and serves as a site for examining the interaction between opera and its socio-cultural milieu. The comic parodies of Giuseppe Verdi's masterpieces staged at the Teatro San Carlino by artists such as Pasquale Altavilla and Antonio Petito reimagine operas in dialect and prose. These adaptations highlight opera's popular appeal while offering critical insight into bourgeois society of the mid-nineteenth century from the perspective of lower social strata, making opera an effective tool for sociological analysis.

These instances of code adaptation, along with the democratization of the hypotext[10] through its hypertexts, underscore both the evolving diversity of opera audiences and the genre's capacity for reinvention. At the same time these examples highlight the enduring significance of opera houses and performers in shaping the reception of operatic works within European and European-influenced cultural contexts.

A case in point is the role of nineteenth-century Italian opera singers in London, such as Angelica Catalani, Giulia Grisi, Giuditta Pasta, and Marietta Piccolomini, who are the focus of a study examining how their international careers contributed to the global dissemination and cultural prestige of Italian opera. These

9 The two volumes have been scheduled to be published in October 2025 by LIM in Lucca.

10 Genette 1982, 13.

interpreters not only perpetuated the mythos of the *primadonna*, but also played a pivotal role in sustaining the international allure of the genre. The development of the opera industry and the transformation of opera into a marketable cultural product are revisited in a contemporary framework through an analysis of the evolving relationship between iconic Italian opera singers of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and technological innovation. This trajectory begins with Enrico Caruso's popularization via the phonograph and audio recording technologies, and extends to Luciano Pavarotti's televised performances, which brought opera into millions of households worldwide. These developments are examined to identify how modern media and communication technologies can rejuvenate and democratize the operatic tradition, bridge generational divides, and secure the relevance of opera within twenty-first-century cultural production.

The intersection of opera with technology and new media is further explored through cases of rewriting, remediation, and transcodification. This is the case of the reverse procedure of the operatic adaptation of Edgar Lee Masters' *Spoon River Anthology* as a "Secular Oratorio" by the Italian composer Gino Negri, who adapted and reassembled some epitaphs from the collection composed shortly after April 25, 1945, in the final phase of WWII. Negri's work was performed for the first time in 2024 through the collaboration of three Milanese institutions, the Brera Academy of Fine Arts, the State University of Milan, and the Giuseppe Verdi Conservatory. Another example of *Literaturoper*[11] are Yuval Sharon's experimental stagings of Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities* (2013) and of Julio Cortázar's *Hopscotch* (2015) with the Los Angeles opera company *The Industry*. Sharon's productions expand the concept of opera as a volumetric art form, saturating architectural space with sound and meaning through voice, gesture, and scenography. These works, in their most extreme form, fundamentally challenge the spatial, acoustic, and ritual norms of traditional opera houses.

Peter Sellars' intermedial adaptations of the Mozart/Da Ponte trilogy – *Così fan tutte ossia La scuola degli amanti*, *Le nozze di Figaro*, and *Don Giovanni* (1991) – are also discussed, particularly the 1991 television version of *Don Giovanni*. Sellars transposes Enlightenment masculinity into the context of 1980s African-American culture in New York, offering a compelling example of opera's social and historical recontextualization through mass media.

The political, social and pedagogical potential of opera is addressed in the analysis of the *Decolonizing Opera* initiative at Northwestern University (USA). This program, particularly through the course *Opera and Race* (ongoing since 2021), focuses on racial and gendered implications of canonical operas, such as Gioachino Rossini's

11 Carter 2014, 51; Giroud 2014, 171.

L'italiana in Algeri or Giacomo Puccini's *Madama Butterfly*, within the context of contemporary North American society, seeking to uncover and dismantle entrenched stereotypes. The *Selam Opera!* Project also exemplifies opera's potential as a tool and a resource for intercultural dialogue and social commitment as it aims to bridge operatic tradition with the multicultural identity of Berlin, focusing specifically on the city's Turkish-German community.

In a volume dedicated to *Opera across Borders*, it is fitting to consider the most radical redefinition of operatic boundaries: the very boundaries of sound. Can a work in which sound is absent, or lacks defined pitch, still be considered an opera? One essay addresses this question through *Face Opera II*, a work by American Deaf sound artist and activist Christine Sun Kim. In this opera, the primacy of pitch and audible sound is replaced by body movement, gesture, mimicry, and American Sign Language (ASL). *Face Opera II* challenges the sonocentric foundations of Western opera, presenting an alternative aesthetic where meaning is constructed visually and kinesthetically rather than aurally.

This volume originates from the interdisciplinary research project *Polimnia. Opera for All!*, launched in 2024 and bringing together the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia, IUL University of Florence, the Conservatories of Modena, Reggio Emilia, Gallarate, Potenza, Pescara, and Frosinone, and the Academy of Fine Arts of Frosinone. Drawing on the theoretical framework of Community Opera, as explored in the afterword, the project examines contemporary opera production through the lens of inclusive co-creation, cultural growth, and social change. It engages with the challenges confronting the operatic genre, which often risks being seen as outdated or out of touch with contemporary society. At the same time, the project investigates strategies, forms, and models aimed at making Italian opera more appealing to new generations, emphasizing inclusion, education, and training, in dialogue with the international Community Opera model. These themes also informed the International Summer School *WISD: Word, Image, Scene and Digital Transformations*, held at the Vecchi-Tonelli Conservatory in Modena from 22–25 September 2025.

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Angela Albanese

Opera as a Popular Genre? Verdi Parodies at the San Carlino Theatre in Naples

Abstract: This study addresses the central question: can opera become a truly popular genre? Focusing on the nineteenth-century Neapolitan context, it examines the role of operatic parodies, particularly those staged at the San Carlino Theatre, in the vernacularisation and popular dissemination of opera, with a special emphasis on the works of Giuseppe Verdi. Originally conceived for elite audiences within institutional settings such as the Teatro San Carlo, operas like *Il Trovatore* and *Aida* were reimagined in comic, dialectal, and prose forms by author-performers such as Pasquale Altavilla and Antonio Petito. Although structurally and linguistically simplified, these parodies offered accessible reinterpretations that integrated opera into the everyday life of lower and middle-class audiences. Far from ridiculing the original compositions, they often expressed admiration for Verdi's music while satirizing the cultural rituals and bourgeois aspirations surrounding operatic consumption. Drawing on major contemporary theories of parody, the study frames these rewritings not as oppositional critiques but as forms of reverential parody that simultaneously democratize and celebrate the operatic tradition. In doing so, it highlights how parody functioned as a key cultural mechanism in the transformation of opera from an elite spectacle to popular entertainment.

Keywords: Opera Parodies; San Carlino Theatre; *Trovatore*; *Aida*; Censorship.

All the better for *Il Trovatore*'s success.
Enjoy yourselves – and for a good while, if you can.
Had I come to Naples, I would have gone
to the parody... and to the San Carlino! But here I am!
What am I doing in this freezing cold, you might ask?
I'm cursing!

Giuseppe Verdi, *Letter* to C. De Sanctis[1]

1 Verdi 2012, 303. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from Italian are the author's own.

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1 Was Opera Ever for Everyone?

On February 16, 1854, writing from Paris, Giuseppe Verdi sent a long and detailed letter to his Neapolitan friend Cesare De Sanctis. In it, he not only expressed satisfaction with the success of *Il Trovatore*, which had premiered at the San Carlo Theatre on October 4, 1853, and had already enjoyed an impressive forty-two performances, but also confessed a desire (quoted in the epigraph) to attend a parody of his opera: *Li fanatece pe' la bella musica de lo Trovatore* by Pasquale Altavilla. At the time, this parody was achieving comparable success at the popular San Carlino Theatre. Far from an isolated example, Altavilla's work was part of a vibrant tradition of nineteenth-century Neapolitan parodies, several of which were inspired by *Il Trovatore*. Among them were *Una prova del Trovatore* (1854) and *Un amore col Trovatore* (1859), both musical parodies grounded in the refined idiom of *opera buffa*, as well as *Na famiglia 'ntusiasmata pe la bella museca de lo Trovatore* (1854), a prose parody in dialect also by Altavilla.

This example alone illustrates the extraordinary success and widespread diffusion of Italian melodrama throughout the nineteenth century, particularly in Naples, which has been described as "the city most 'popularly' entangled with opera".[2] The notion of opera as a "popular" form, especially in the case of Verdi, has been critically examined by Roberto Leydi in his rigorous and insightful essay on the vernacularisation and dissemination of melodrama. As Leydi emphasizes, melodrama cannot be classified as a "popular" genre in itself, if by *popular* one means that "the music of Rossini, Bellini, Donizetti, and Verdi was the music *of* the people", composed *for* the people, and rooted in traditional musical heritage.[3] The myth of Verdi as "the voice of the people", and of his music as grounded in folk traditions, is, according to Leydi, more a product of anecdotal and hagiographic narratives than of analytical scrutiny.[4] Opera, he contends, was originally an elite genre: intellectually demanding, culturally refined, and economically inaccessible to large portions of society.[5] It became *popular* only when removed from its original institutional and artistic framework, when simplified, fragmented, and recontextualized. Typically, this meant a reduction to melodic surfaces (such as arias), and a proliferation through various forms of remediation and adaptation.[6] In these instances, opera exited the lyric theatre –

2 Leydi 1988, 330.
3 Leydi 1988, 307.
4 Leydi 1988, 313–318.
5 Rosselli 1988, 80.
6 See Bolter/Grusin 1999.

the "designated site of its existence"[7] – and began to inhabit a range of alternative spaces, both official and marginal, institutional and informal.[8]

The widespread popularity of melodrama in the nineteenth century, particularly across diverse social classes, can thus be attributed to its many imitative and adaptive offshoots: instrumental fantasies and transcriptions performed in bourgeois salons, band concerts in public squares, prose adaptations of *libretti* that softened tragic elements,[9] and a robust tradition of parody. While parody was not unique to Naples, it found especially fertile ground there, flourishing in both the cultivated idiom of *opera buffa* and in more popular, often non-musical forms that reimagined melodramatic narratives through the comic conventions of dialect theatre.

2 The San Carlo Theatre, Verdi's Works, and Censorship

To better understand the appeal and significance of operatic parody, especially in its popular, dialectal, and prose-based forms, as exemplified by performances at Naples' San Carlino Theatre, it is useful to consider the broader cultural and institutional context. This includes the history of the San Carlo Theatre, Naples' principal opera house (of which the San Carlino served as a kind of inverted reflection), the composition of its audiences, and Giuseppe Verdi's complex relationship with both the city and its most prestigious lyric venue.

Alongside the del Fondo Theatre (later renamed Mercadante), the San Carlo Theatre functioned as the official opera house of Naples. Commissioned by Charles III of Bourbon and designed by Giovanni Antonio Medrano, it was built in just over seven months in 1737 beside the Royal Palace. After being severely dam-

7 Leydi 1988, 303.

8 It is evident that the widespread popularity of opera in Naples, particularly in its various forms of simplified rewritings, remediations, adaptations, and parodies, cannot be explained only in terms of a humorous engagement with the operatic institution. Rather, these are more complex reasons that pertain specifically to the Neapolitan theatrical context, both artistically and in terms of production. In the case of Antonio Petito's parodies in particular, one of these motivations was the desire to defend and assert a distinct theatrical and cultural identity in opposition to the official genre; at the same time, from a more strictly productive standpoint, opera represented a readily accessible repertoire reservoir, in response to a system that required two performances per day and constant repertory renewal.

9 See Leydi 1988, 359.

aged by fire, the theatre was entirely rebuilt in 1816 and underwent further renovations over the years.[10] From its inception, the San Carlo was intended for the royal court and a highly cultivated, aristocratic audience.[11] Its direct proximity to the royal palace allowed the sovereign to exercise tight control over its administration and patronage. The king himself decided who could obtain or relinquish a theatre box, whether a dancer could be granted a passport, or even whether furniture like benches could be added. Modifications to gala programs also required royal approval.[12]

As such, the San Carlo was less a space of artistic engagement than a stage for social visibility and political control. It functioned as what one contemporary described as a "place to be inhabited", a site where audiences would spend five hours receiving guests, engaging in conversation, and performing social rituals, all against the ambient backdrop of music and light.[13] In fact, the young Charles appears to have had little personal interest in theatre, and opera reportedly left him indifferent. This is suggested by a remark, cited by Benedetto Croce, from the French magistrate Charles De Brosses, who, visiting Naples and while attending a performance at the San Carlo, observed the king spending half the evening talking and the other half asleep.[14] Artistic appreciation was often secondary.[15]

This aristocratic social structure persisted throughout the nineteenth century, even as the nature of opera evolved from courtly entertainment to a fully industrialized system. In this new paradigm, impresarios rather than monarchs oversaw relations with composers and companies.[16]

Verdi's association with the San Carlo Theatre began in 1841, with the Neapolitan premiere of *Oberto, conte di San Bonifacio*. Yet his relationship with the theatre's impresarios – and even more so with the Bourbon censors – was often fraught and disappointing. Although Verdi expressed admiration for Naples' beauty, climate, and people, his enthusiasm was consistently dampened by the city's heavy-handed censorship practices, as he wrote in an 1845 letter to translator and librettist Andrea Maffei:

> From my perfectly quiet Busseto, I write to you – in the noisiest city in the world. [...] What a contrast between this place and Naples! Whether life is better or worse there, I cannot say. I

10 Di Giacomo/Conforti 1892, 237.
11 See Sapienza 1998, 19–21.
12 Rosselli 1988, 82–83, 99 and 1983, 370.
13 Giammattei 2008, 452.
14 Croce 1992, 181–182.
15 See Galasso 2008, 441.
16 See Rosselli 1988.

> only know that Naples is beautiful, with an enchanting sky, healthy air, and surroundings that are pure paradise… and that's all I know. Except for a quarter of an hour, half an hour at most, I enjoyed myself immensely. […] You will move in social circles that are, to be fair, quite brilliant, and you will be celebrated as your talents deserve. Here, nothing happens… absolutely nothing… We eat, we drink, and we sleep twenty-five hours a day […].[17]

What truly frustrated Verdi and prevented him from fully appreciating the city of Naples was the persistent interference of Bourbon censorship, which sought to purge the libretti of any content considered morally offensive or politically sensitive. Few of Verdi's works escaped their scrutiny. *Rigoletto*, for example, was only permitted on the San Carlo stage in 1856, and then only in a drastically altered version titled *Lionello*. The same occurred with *La Traviata*, allowed that same year under the innocuous title *Violetta*, following heavy revisions to both plot and character.[18] Verdi's correspondence clearly reflects his deep resentment toward these imposed changes. In a letter to sculptor Vincenzo Luccardi, he wrote of the unauthorized 1854 Roman premiere of *La Traviata*:

> I shall not come to Rome for two reasons. First: because the impresario is a miser. Second: because the censors have destroyed the essence of the drama. They've made *La Traviata* pure and innocent. Many thanks indeed! In doing so, they have ruined every dramatic situation, every character. A whore must remain a whore. If the sun were to shine in the dead of night, it would no longer be night. In short: they understand nothing.[19]

This acrimony, exacerbated by the constant censorship's encroachment on Verdi's libretti and on artistic vision, cast a long shadow over his relationship with the San Carlo Theatre, and more broadly, with the institutional musical life of Naples.

3 The Other Side of the Coin: The San Carlino Theatre

While Verdi's relationship with the San Carlo Theatre and the Neapolitan censors was often marked by tension, frequently compromising his artistic autonomy, the same cannot be said for the parodies of his operas staged at the San Carlino Theatre. Verdi did not perceive these works as threats to his intellectual property, nor

17 Verdi 2012, 124.

18 See Verdi 2012, 315. On the censorship of *Rigoletto*, see also Lavagetto 2010. For a good account of operatic censorship, with particular attention to the Italian Risorgimento, see Izzo 2014.

19 Verdi 2012, 313.

did he express disapproval of the comedies. As will be shown, such parodies represented not so much a critique of his operas as a transformation: a vehicle for constructing entirely different narratives that only tangentially – and often in a playful or apologetic manner – involved the original work and its composer. The widespread prose parodies in dialect performed at the San Carlino, including those based on Verdi's operas, were likely seen as an innocuous comic phenomenon, and perhaps even a useful means of enhancing the composer's popularity among social groups otherwise excluded from access to the operatic repertoire.

Within a theatrical system defined by rigid hierarchies of space and audience, the San Carlino Theatre was devoted almost entirely to comic performances inspired by current events, local news, ballets, and operas. Located just a short distance from the San Carlo Theatre, its name was itself a comic distortion of the more official venue.[20] The San Carlino functioned as a space of parody, offering immediate, accessible reinterpretations of the works staged at the San Carlo, often within hours of their premieres. On these occasions, members of the petty bourgeoisie and the urban proletariat gathered at the San Carlino expecting "the other side of the coin": a comic counterpart to the serious productions they could not afford to attend at the royal theatre.[21] The San Carlino thus operated both as a cultural "echo chamber"[22] and a comic mirror of high operatic tradition, contributing – through distortion and simplification – to its broader dissemination and popular recognition.

The origins of this modest but influential theatre date back to 1740. Its earliest incarnation, located in Largo Castello beneath the Church of San Giacomo degli Spagnoli, was little more than a cellar, a fact that became part of its colloquial identity. One of the most vivid contemporary descriptions comes from the English physician and man of letters Samuel Sharp, who visited Naples in 1765 and left an unflattering account of the theatre and its audience:

> The play-house is hardly better than a cellar, and is really very much known by that name, being usually called the Cantina (cellar). You descend from the street down ten steps into the pit, which holds seventy or eighty people, when crowded, each of whom pays a carline – that is, four pence halfpenny – for admittance. There is a gallery round the pit, which is formed by partitions into ten or twelve boxes. These boxes, holding four persons conveniently, let for eight carlines. Under these discouragements, it will not be difficult to conceive that the scenes, the dresses, the actors, and the decorations of the house must be very indifferent.[23]

20 See Sapienza 1998, 31.
21 Massarese 1978, 21.
22 Sapienza 1998, 23.
23 Sharp 1766, 93.

Sharp's observations soon shift into a harshly critical tone, particularly in his depiction of the uncouth audience:

> It will not, however, be so easy to imagine the shabbiness of the audience, which chiefly consists of men in dirty caps and waistcoats, in the pit, for the boxes are generally empty. All the Italian gentlemen and ladies are very indelicate in the article of spitting before them, never making use of a handkerchief, or seeking a corner for that purpose; but in the Cantina their nastiness is offensive to the last degree, not only spitting about them, but also on every part of the wall, so that it is impossible to avoid soiling your clothes. This habit is carried by some to such excess that I cannot but ascribe the leanness of many Neapolitans, and the sallowness of their complexions, to the abundance of this evacuation.[24]

He also casts doubt on the questionable artistic quality of the performances:

> The present state of the stage here is what it always must have been in its infancy, before it became polished, and while the audience were a rude and illiberal people; that is to say, the principal entertainments seem to arise from double entendres and blunders, mistaking one word for another, and even from dirty actions, such as spitting or blowing the nose in each other's faces. [...] But what appears most essential to the delight of a Neapolitan audience are two or three characters, such as Punch and the doctor's man, who speaks the dialect of the lower people; and it is chiefly by these characters that the company is recreated, not only with the poet's obscenities, but also with as many loose jokes of the actors as their extempore wit and humour can suggest. The rage for this species of comicality is such that even in their burlettas they introduce one or two personages who speak Neapolitan, and I question whether a serious opera would be borne [sic] without them, if the populace frequented that theatre.[25]

Sharp's account refers specifically to the original *Cantina*, which was eventually dismantled, both due to concerns over public disorder and because of the perceived indecency of staging irreverent comedies in a venue so close to the Church of San Giacomo. In 1770, the rudimentary structure was replaced by a new San Carlino Theatre, again located in Largo Castello, just steps from the San Carlo. This new theatre would remain in operation until its final demolition in 1884, part of a broader urban redevelopment initiative.

Despite Sharp's evident bias, the San Carlino's success – described as "the only one of its kind" despite its "miserable construction" – was undeniable and aroused great curiosity among locals and foreigners alike. Many foreign visitors who attended performances at the San Carlo made a point of visiting the San Carlino as well.[26] Aristocratic patrons were known to hurry to the small theatre

24 Sharp 1766, 93–94.
25 Sharp 1766, 94–95.
26 Cossovich 1977, 358.

immediately after a major opera premiere at the San Carlo, sometimes joined by singers eager to witness the parody of their own work.[27] This one-way cultural exchange thus saw members of the elite audience of the San Carlo descending into the modest space of the San Carlino, even as the lower-class public of the latter remained barred – economically and socially – from access to the official theatre and the full experience of its operatic productions.

4 Pasquale Altavilla, Antonio Petito, and the Parodies of Opera

Pasquale Altavilla and Antonio Petito, both authors and performers of operatic parodies, are widely recognized as the foremost figures in the Neapolitan comedy-parody genre. Their extensive repertoire dominated the stage of the San Carlino theatre for many seasons. Among Altavilla's works, noteworthy titles include: *Pangrazio Biscegliese ammoinato pe l'arrivo a Napule de lo celebre maestro Tolberg* (1849); *Li appassiunate de la museca de la Parisina* (1850), a parody of Donizetti's *Parisina*; *Li appassiunate pe la Sonnambula* (1850), based on Bellini's *La Sonnambula*; *Li contraste tra duje 'mpresarie pe le musiche de li maste Verdi e Donizetti* (1850); and *Li fanatece pe lo canto della sig.ra Erminia Frezzolini* (1851). From Petito's extensive oeuvre, a few titles stand out: *'Nu matrimonio segreto in museca e 'nu matrimonio segreto in prosa* (1874), a parody of Cimarosa's *Il Matrimonio Segreto*; *Virginia e madama Virginia* (1866), based on Mercadante's *Virginia*; *La figlia di madama Carnacotta* (1874), inspired by Charles Lecocq's *La Fille de Madame Angot*; and *Aida dint' 'a casa 'e Donna Tolla Pandola*, a comic reworking of Verdi's *Aida*.

Altavilla and Petito's lives were deeply intertwined with the world of theatre. Petito, the son of a celebrated *Pulcinella*,[28] was semi-literate and came to embody

27 See Petito 1978, 37–59.

28 It may not be entirely superfluous to recall here that Pulcinella, one of the most iconic Neapolitan masks and among the most popular figures in the Italian *Commedia dell'Arte*, originated in the 17th century and has been portrayed by numerous Neapolitan performers over time. Among these, not only was Antonio Petito one of the most skilled and celebrated interpreters of the famous theatrical mask, but his father, Salvatore Petito, was also a renowned performer in the role. In later generations, the character was memorably reinterpreted by figures such as Eduardo De Filippo. While initially rooted in local theatrical traditions, the character underwent a significant evolution over time, becoming a universal symbol of *Neapolitanità*. Pulcinella embodies exuberance, vocal and mimetic virtuosity, and an ironic, roguish spirit. His character is rich in

the mask with an authenticity rooted in familial tradition, having inherited the role directly from his father at the San Carlino. Both men were multifaceted performers – authors and actors of their own comedies, but also singers, jugglers, dancers, and mimes – capable of improvising the most daring comic scenes, often together on the same stage. Even their deaths reflected their theatrical destinies: Altavilla died in 1872 after falling down a flight of stairs while promising a neighbor a ticket to his show; Petito's death was more dramatic still, occurring onstage during a performance of *La Donna Bianca* by Giacomo Marulli on March 26, 1876.[29]

The defining feature of Altavilla and Petito's parodies lies in their close temporal and thematic proximity to the original operas. The comedic retellings were often staged shortly after the premieres of their source texts. As noted earlier, the effectiveness of parody seems to diminish with temporal distance: "Parody is institutionally bound to its historical context, to the texts that must remain vivid in the audience's consciousness, so that they can understand, or at least sense, the parodic subtext".[30] A striking example of this dynamic is *Virginia e madama Virginia* (1866), which was never performed at the San Carlino because the San Carlo Theatre had canceled further performances of Mercadante's *Virginia*. Similarly, Petito's parody of Verdi's *Aida* was performed 28 times, the exact number of performances that *Aida* received at the San Carlo in 1873.[31]

The Verdian parodies discussed here – Altavilla's *Na famiglia 'ntusiasmata pe la bella museca de lo Trovatore* and Petito's *Aida dint' 'a casa 'e Donna Tolla Pandola* – preserve this tight correspondence with the source operas, beginning with their titles, which explicitly signal their derivative nature. However, as is often the case in the broader tradition of operatic parody, Verdi's operas serve less as direct targets than as backdrops for independent comic plots. These comedies diverge from the original narratives, overturn their tragic conclusions, and instead celebrate Verdi's legacy through a playful misappropriation of his work. The protagonists, often *en travesti*, struggle, awkwardly but enthusiastically, to embody the grandeur of the original operas, rendering them in absurd and humorous ways.

nuance and contradiction, both comic and tragic, opportunistic and kind-hearted. An indefatigable talker, he is also known for his laziness and insatiable appetite: he is always in search of food and would do anything for a plate of macaroni.

29 See Di Giacomo 1967, 364–365, 371–374.

30 Giammattei 1989, 220; see also Genette 1982, 17–96.

31 Greco 1995, XVIII.

5 A Parody of *Il Trovatore: Na famiglia 'ntusiasmata pe la bella museca de lo Trovatore*

The parody of *Il Trovatore* unfolds in three acts, preceded by a prologue in which Altavilla recounts to his friend Petito his experience attending the twenty-second performance of Verdi's opera at a fully packed San Carlo Theatre. He enthusiastically praises the libretto by the late Cammarano and the "beautiful music" of Maestro Verdi, which, he claims, left him "deliriously happy".[32] Already in this preliminary scene – setting the stage for what may be described as a "reverential"[33] or "consecratory parody"[34] – the playwright offers an explicit homage to both the opera and its composer.

The decision to write a parody of *Il Trovatore*, prompted by its resounding popular success, ultimately comes from Petito. Altavilla's response is a comic entanglement, a farcical weave of plotlines driven by misunderstandings and mistaken identities that sustain the dramatic momentum throughout.

The action is set in the home of Donna Eleonora, namesake of Verdi's Leonora, a wealthy but comically uncultivated woman "fanatical about music". Having just attended a performance of *Il Trovatore* at the San Carlo, she decides to stage a domestic reenactment of the opera's final quartet, "with scenery, costumes, everything, everything", within the walls of her "declamatory house, harmonic house, Trovatorian house".[35] This homage is also intended to celebrate her upcoming marriage to Don Filogonio, an equally enthusiastic opera devotee.

From the opening scene – in which two household servants, Saverio and Teresa, comically position themselves as musical connoisseurs while lamenting their mistress's obsession with opera – it becomes clear that the true object of the parody is not *Il Trovatore* itself, but the feverish veneration of opera by its bourgeois audience, and exaltation that each time triggers the operatic event. The servants' dialogue offers an early instance of this metatheatrical critique:

SAVERIO: *Trovatore*! *Trovatore*! That's all anyone talks about in this house!
TERESA: You may be right, but I – though just a simple woman – when I hear Miss Eleonora sing that music at the piano… I get swept away…
SAVERIO: Fine, talk about it a little, maybe now and then… but here, it's nonstop! All you hear is: (*imitating different voices*) "Last night at San Carlo, how beautifully the prima donna

32 Altavilla 1860, 4.
33 See Hutcheon 1985, 60.
34 Almansi/Fink 1991, VII.
35 Altavilla 1860, 64, 30, 29, 31.

sang!" And someone else says, "And the tenor! That final note, what passion!" And then there's Don Liccardo: "Oh, how moving the voice of the *contract* in Act II!"

TERESA: *Contract*? He said *contrarco*, not *contract*.

SAVERIO: *Contrarco*, *contra-pillar*, *contra-whatever* – you mean *contralto*! A voice that doesn't screech like market women but sings like a steady bellows![36]

This dialogue exemplifies a recurring comedic strategy found in both Altavilla's and Petito's parodies: the intentional linguistic distortion and misappropriation of operatic terminology. In this instance, the voice type *contralto* is progressively and humorously garbled into *contrarco*, *contratto*, and *contropilastro*, showcasing the playful irreverence that characterizes these texts. At the same time, the admiration for Verdi's opera remains palpable, as the characters repeatedly reinforce its grandeur and emotional power.

Donna Eleonora's effusive praise is echoed by her guests, self-declared *Trovatoristi*, who, one after another, celebrate both the opera and its creators with the refrain: "Long live the music of *Il Trovatore*, long live the *maestro di cappella* of *Il Trovatore*, long live the poet!".[37] The parodic tone escalates through a dynamic mix of direct textual quotations and impromptu renditions of *arias*, all drawn from the "sublime, most sublime music"[38] of Verdi's original. These moments attest to Altavilla's detailed knowledge of the source opera and his underlying reverence for its artistry.

Among the guests and music lovers gathered in Donna Eleonora's home, the character of Pulcinella, servant to the groom-to-be Don Filogonio, stands out as the master of comic distortion. Speaking in a richly expressive dialect, Pulcinella infiltrates the party under the false identity of Baron Tira-Tira, in a comic duo with another servant posing as Count Molla-Molla. Though he pretends to be an

36 SAVERIO: *Trovatore*! *Trovatore*! E ddinto a sta casa non se parla d'auto che dde lo *Trovatore*!

TERESA: Saverio mio, diciarraje buono, ma io simbè materiale, pure quanno sento cantà da D. Lionora quacche piezzo de sta museca ncopp' a lo chianoforte [...] non ne pozzo fa ammeno d'iremenne in èstrice [...].

SAVERIO: Va bene: no poco se nne parla, n'auto ppoco no... ma cca se fa una tiritela. Non sient' auto: (*imita diverse voci*) aissera a S. Carlo comme cantaje bello la primma donna: n'auto risponne, e lo tinore co cche espressione se spremmette a chillo finale: lesto te siente n'auto D. Liccardo: comme tocca, comme tocca a lo seconn'atto la voce de lo *contratto*.

TERESA: Che *contratto*, se dice la voce de lo *contrarco*.

SAVERIO: Qua contrarco e contrapilastro... se dice.. se dice contrauto; cioè, a ssenzo mio vo dicere ch'è na voce che non tocca chilli truone stridente, ma canta a mmiezzo mantice [...]. Altavilla 1860, 11–12 (*our italics*).

37 Altavilla 1860, 81.

38 Altavilla 1860, 54.

opera expert and volunteers to take part in the domestic *Trovatore*, he has no idea what the opera is about. When Don Achille, the music master, attempts a brief explanation of the plot, Pulcinella's utter confusion triggers a cascade of misinterpretations and linguistic mishaps that unravel into nonsense.

The mayhem sparked by Pulcinella's verbal subversions and disregard for social norms – resulting in jealous quarrels, mistaken identities, disguises, and near-ruined marriages – is finally resolved in the last scene. With all misunderstandings cleared up and the excitement at its peak, the characters gather for a performance of the quartet, staged "in parody, with corresponding scenery and costumes".[39] Here, Altavilla concludes the comic tangle with a classic *theatre-within-the-theatre* device, a technique frequently employed in parody comedy, and especially suited to the genre's aim of presenting "a low-perspective version of a high cultural level".[40]

6 A Parody of *Aida*: *Aida dint' 'a casa 'e Donna Tolla Pandola*

The dramaturgical device of *theatre within the theatre* reappears in Petito's *Aida dint' 'a casa 'e Donna Tolla Pandola*. This meta-theatrical structure is signaled from the outset by the double list of characters at the beginning of the play: one naming the dramatis personae of the comedy, the other indicating the operatic roles they will assume within the parody. The play opens with a mirror reconstruction of the vestibule of the San Carlo, immediately activating this structural frame.

Within this fictionalized vestibule, staged significantly between the acts of Verdi's *Aida* as performed at the San Carlo, the principal characters of the parody gather to discuss the opera with unrestrained enthusiasm. Among them are Donna Tolla Pandola, an aging opera fanatic ("vecchia fanateca");[41] her long-suffering husband Don Palombo, weary of his wife's obsession; and their daughter Modestina, who is formally promised to the wealthy but ineffectual Don Felice Sciosciammocca, though secretly in love with her music teacher Felicietto. Additional characters include the inevitable Pulcinella, who first appears as a street vendor hawking outdated newspapers, and later as a servant in Donna Tolla Pandola's household, alongside his sweetheart Annarella, a penniless flower-seller.

39 Altavilla 1860, 84.
40 Angelini 1979, 106.
41 Petito 1978, 653.

The entire first act takes place in this reconstructed vestibule, a theatrical illusion that, though staged in the modest San Carlino playhouse,[42] symbolically collapses the spatial and cultural gap between the prestigious San Carlo Theatre and its popular comic double.[43] Throughout the act, Verdi's plot remains a distant backdrop, while the stage is overtaken by a series of overlapping subplots propelled primarily by Pulcinella's relentless wordplay, his grotesque distortions, and a barrage of misunderstandings and mistaken identities.

As in Altavilla's *Trovatore* parody, Petito's work critiques the aspirations of the newly affluent bourgeoisie, characters who attempt to elevate their social status through exaggerated devotion to opera.[44] The plot, closely mirroring that of Altavilla's and of many other parodies, once again revolves around a flamboyant matron – Donna Tolla Pandola – who, to celebrate her "natalistic day," decides to stage an opera in her garden featuring "various pieces from *Aida*".[45]

From the very first scene, the hyperbolic praise of Verdi's opera becomes a comic device, driven by theatrical excess and linguistic missteps of Donna Tolla Pandola herself. Consider this opening *tableau*, in which a chorus of exaggerated acclaim erupts among the opera's ardent fans:

VOICES (*as the curtain rises, amid thunderous applause*):
Bravo! Well done! Encore! Encore!
TRAMBELLINO (*descending a grand staircase*):
What glorious music!
DONNA ANGIOLA (*exiting from the orchestra door, with Don Achille, Don Luigi, and Donna Amelia*):
What a delight!
DON ACHILLE: Music to drive you mad!
DON LUIGI: What a poet!
DONNA AMELIA: Number one!
[…]
DON FELICE: (*with enthusiasm*) But what is this! What a marvel! It's like sugar! So fresh, so wonderfully fresh!
DON ASDRUBALE: *Don Felì*, are you selling sorbet now?
FELICETTO: He's the emperor of composers, no denying it!
TRAMBELLINO (*to Don Palombo*): This is music you gotta hear, even if it kills you in your seat!
DONNA ANGIOLA: Not a single note should be missed!
DONNA AMELIA: Nor a single sigh!
DON ACHILLE: If I could swallow every note whole, I would.
[…]

42 See Greco 1995, XVIII.
43 See Sapienza 1998, 51.
44 De Simone 1987, 428.
45 Petito 1978, 688, 654, 691.

DON FELICE:	[...] These things, you just can't let them go. They're too beautiful. Now you'll see, Aida's got a date with Radamès, and then her father, Amonasro, catches them in a private moment and pushes her to coax from her lover the secret of where the army's hiding. At first she says no, and then the father sings to her (*dramatically quoting the third act, second scene of* Aida): A horrible form Comes toward us from the shadows... Tremble! Its wasted arms Are raised toward your head... It is your mother... recognize her... She curses you...
OFFICER (*interrupting*):	Silence! What is this, a tavern?
DON FELICE: (*apologizing*)	Forgive me... it's the passion talking. [...]
MODESTINA: (*to Felicetto*):	You're totally embarrassing.
DONNA TOLLA: (*observing*):	At this rate, Verdi's going to have us all committed! [46]

46 VOCI: (*al levarsi della tela, dopo fragorosi applausi, gridando*)
Bravo, bene... fuori, fuori... bis, bis!
TRAMBELLINO: (*comparendo sul pianerottolo dalla destra e, scendendo per lo scalone, con entusiasmo*)
Che gran musica!
DONNA ANGIOLA: (*simultaneamente uscendo dalla porta della platea, seguita da Don Achille, da Don Luigi e da Donna Amelia, scendendo insieme ad essi per lo scalone, con entusiasmo*)
Che cosa cara!
DON ACHILLE: Cosa da far uscir pazzi!
DON LUIGI: Che gran poeta!
DONNA AMELIA: Numero uno! [...]
[...]
DON FELICE: (*con entusiasmo*) Ma che cosa!... Che bella cosa! È nu zucchere. Che freschezza!... Che freschezza!
DON ASDRUBALE: Don Felì, che staie vennenne 'a surbetta?
FELICETTO: [...] Non possiamo negare che è l'imperatore dei maestri.
TRAMBELLINO: (*a Don Palombo*) Ma questa è una musica che, a costo di morire in teatro, s'ha da sentì.
DONNA ANGIOLA: [...] Non bisogna perderne una nota.
DONNA AMELIA: Né un sospiro.
DON ACHILLE: Io, se mi potessi ingoiare tutte le note, lo farei.
DON FELICE: [...] Queste sono cose che non si lasciano; sono troppo belle. Mò vedete l'appuntamento che tiene Aida con Radamès, e il padre di Aida, Amonasro, che li sorprende in colloquio intimo ed inculca alla figlia a far uscire dalla bocca dell'amante il segreto addò tene annascosto l'esercito. 'A figlia primme nunn bò, e 'o pate lle dice

As in Altavilla's parody, the linguistic distortion generates humor but does not detract from the dignity or artistic value of the original opera. Rather, the precise quotation of Verdi's score, lifted from its narrative context and reinserted into an absurd setting, produces a subtle, ironic shift in tone.[47] The true target of the parody is not Verdi himself but the cultural environment surrounding his operas: the melodramatic language of fandom, the amateur critiques of self-declared connoisseurs, and the farcical misappropriation of operatic emotion.

Once again, Pulcinella emerges as the central force of comic disruption. When asked to explain the plot of *Aida* to a naïve commoner – who has received a ticket in exchange for a few kilos of beans – he delivers an absurd and baffling summary. This moment encapsulates the nonsense at the heart of the parody, exposing the vast gap between high art and popular reception.

As the first act closes, with the entrance of an extra dressed in tailcoat and made up to resemble Giuseppe Verdi himself, the play shifts to a new setting: the home of Donna Tolla Pandola. The second and third acts revolve around the chaotic casting and rehearsal of *Aida's* final scene, staged as a parody. This version is saturated with exaggerated praise, dialectal distortions, and comic mishaps. Don Anselmo, the conductor specially invited to oversee the production, is ultimately powerless to preserve any semblance of order. The final casting falls to the unlikely pair of Don Felice and Pulcinella, who perform the roles of Aida and Radamès. The parodic technique of "lowering", defined as the substitution of base or domestic contexts for noble or heroic ones,[48] is fully enacted here. Already in the play's title, the dramatic world of *Aida* is relocated to the domestic sphere of Donna Tolla Pandola. In the rehearsal scene, the bush behind which Amonasro hides in the original becomes a large armchair with armrests, while the solemn crypt in the final scene is comically transformed into a chicken coop.

(*canta la seguente strofa del baritono, nel duetto fra Aida ed Amonasro, nell'atto terzo, scena seconda del melodramma* Aida):

	Una larva orribile / Fra l'ombre a noi s'affaccia… / Trema! Le scarne braccia / Sul capo tuo levò… / Tua madre ell'è… ravvisala… / Ti maledice…
Appuntato: (*redarguendolo*)	Silenzio. Che, siete alla bettola!
Don Felice: (*giustificandosi*)	Perdonate… è l'entusiasmo. […]
Modestina: (*a Felicetto*)	È proprio sguaiato.
Donna Tolla: (*osservando*)	Perdonate: ma Verdi, oggi o dimani, ci manda all'ospedale dei matticoli. (Petito 1978, 647–652).

47 Tynianov 1997, 40.

48 Almansi/Fink 1991, 46.

7 Conclusions

Despite the predominantly comic tone that defines their works, both Altavilla's and Petito's parodies of Verdi's operas retain a deeply respectful and even celebratory attitude toward the original compositions. Though embedded within the ludic and irreverent framework typical of parody,[49] neither *Na famiglia 'ntusiasmata pe la bella museca de lo Trovatore* nor *Aida dint' 'a casa 'e Donna Tolla Pandola* expresses any intent to ridicule the source text itself. As Carlo Donà insightfully points out, "One must always distinguish clearly between the object of parody (the original work being parodied) and the target or victim of the author (what the parody aims to critique): the two may coincide – as they often do in most parodic texts – but they do not necessarily do so".[50]

In both *Trovatore* and *Aida*, the true target of comic deflation is not Verdi or his music, but rather the broader operatic culture and the social rituals surrounding it. The parodic critique is aimed at the melodramatic conventions of opera and the behaviors of its most fervent devotees, especially those members of the rising petit bourgeoisie for whom opera represented cultural aspiration and social validation. These operas are refracted through the naïve, instinctive, and often distorted perspective of popular audiences, whose misinterpretations both parody and celebrate the genre's grandeur.

This approach aligns with the broader theoretical understanding of parody offered by Jurij Tynjanov, who argued that parody need not be directed at a single, identifiable work. Instead, it may address an entire genre, an author's body of work, or even a whole literary or cultural movement: "Defining parody as being directed at a single, specific work limits the scope of the concept too narrowly".[51]

Altavilla's and Petito's operatic parodies exemplify this expansive vision, using specific operas as points of departure to stage a wider comic commentary on the opera world at large. And Linda Hutcheon's influential theory of parody further enriches this reading. As she argues, the prefix *para-* in *parodia* should be understood not only as "against" but also as "beside", thus allowing for a model of parody that is not inherently oppositional. Parody in this sense becomes "a form of imitation, but imitation characterized by ironic inversion, not always at the

49 The ludic framework is certainly predominant but not exclusive to the parodic genre. See Bachtin 1968 and 1979, 407–444; Genette 1982; Bonafin 2001; Sangsue 1994; Gorni/Longhi 1986, 459–487; Tynianov 1968, 135–171, and 1997, 25–42; Hutcheon 1985.

50 Donà 1985, 70.

51 Tynianov 1997, 29.

expense of the parodied text. [...] Parody is repetition with critical distance, which marks difference rather than similarity".[52]

This expanded, less antagonistic conception of parody permits the existence of what we might call reverential parody, a mode that maintains critical distance while also expressing admiration.[53] Both *Trovatore* and *Aida* operate within this space: they are humorous and irreverent, but they also testify to the enduring power and widespread appeal of Verdi's music. Indeed, far from mocking the composer, these works helped disseminate his legacy, bringing opera into new popular contexts and rendering it accessible to audiences far removed from the elite spaces of the San Carlo.

Finally, the demise of this genre, so emblematic of Neapolitan popular culture, was precipitated by the demolition of the San Carlino Theatre in 1884, as part of the city's sweeping urban renewal program known as the *Risanamento*. The so-called *age of the pickaxe* brought about the destruction of entire historic neighborhoods and, with them, the closure of iconic popular institutions like the San Carlino. Its loss marked the symbolic end of a theatrical tradition that, for over a century, had served as a space where opera was not only consumed but reimagined, filtered through dialect, humor, and parody, and in doing so, profoundly woven into the cultural life of Naples.

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52 Hutcheon 1985, 5, 6, 21, 32.
53 Hutcheon 1985, 60.

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Un bagno freddo o *Una notte fortunata*: An Unknown and Unpublished Source for the Reconstruction of Neapolitan Musical Theatre in the Late 19th Century

Abstract: In 1879, Camillo de Nardis completed his composition studies at the Real Collegio of Music in Naples. As a 'last exercise' he proposed a two-acts comic operetta entitled *Un bagno freddo o Una notte fortunata*. The article will analyse both the musical structure of the opera and that of the libretto, trying to identify the relationships between the new writing and the standardised 'musical formulas' of the late 19th century. Particular attention will be paid to the romances and arias, melodic structures in relation to what remains of the lyric-form, orchestration and harmonisation as musical descriptors, and the vocabulary and linguistic strategies employed by Golisciani in his reduction of Luigi Coppola's comic scherzo in one act. No less significant will be the presentation of all those, singers and instrumentalists, who were involved in the premiere of *Bagno Freddo*. The *Bagno Freddo* is preserved in manuscript form in the Library of the Conservatorio 'San Pietro a Majella' in Naples and, after the success of the premiere, has not been resumed. Nonetheless, de Nardis' work constitutes an invaluable piece for reconstructing Neapolitan musical life at the end of the 19th century, investigating the opera music language of the new generations of Italian composers and assessing the response – in terms of taste – of the public of the time.

Keywords: Camillo de Nardis; *Un bagno freddo o Una notte fortunata*; Neapolitan Musical Theatre; Enrico Golisciani; Operetta.

1 Introduction

This paper is the first study of *Il Bagno freddo* by Camillo de Nardis, a comic operetta in two acts. It was composed in 1879 and remained in manuscript form after its initial two performances in Naples. The only surviving source of this operetta is an autographed manuscript held at the Library of the Naples Conservatory of Music.

The Conservatory of Music in Pescara, partner in the PNRR POLIMNIA project *Opera for All: Lifelong Learning and International Performance for the Development of New Musical Professionals and Community Education in Italy*, has planned the

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publication of a modern edition of the score, edited by the author of this chapter, along with a vocal score with piano reduction prepared by Luca Incerti.[1]

Musical theatre in Naples in the second half of the 19th century was able to draw on a multitude of venues creating network of halls where impresarios, publishers, and composers were able to practise their trade. Born in the shadow of the two grand royal theatres, the Teatro San Carlo and the Teatro del Fondo, Neapolitan theatres fell into two groups: music and prose, a division often more theoretical than practical at what was established by the Murat decree of 1811.[2] Beyond the Teatro S. Carlo and the Teatro del Fondo, primarily active for musical performances, there were other theatres such as the Teatro Nuovo, the Teatro Goldoni, the Teatro Volpicelli, the Teatro Rossini, the Teatro Politeama, the Teatrino della filarmonica at Monte di Dio, the Teatro Sannazaro, the Teatro S. Ferdinando, and the Teatro Bellini. Those mainly dedicated to prose theatre and vernacular comedies were the Teatro dei Fiorentini, the Teatro S. Carlino, the Teatro Fenice, the Teatro Partenope, and the Teatro S. Ferdinando.[3]

To better understand the *Bagno freddo* by Camillo de Nardis, in this essay we will examine the decade 1870–1880, using mainly information about performances of musical works, together with the pertinent comments provided by *Napoli musicale*, a bi-monthly journal of "music and related arts" (1868–1880), and a primary and indispensable source for to the focus of our study.[4] This magazine was founded and directed by the composer and teacher Luigi Mazzone (1820–1897) and is a natural continuation of the *Gazzetta musicale di Napoli*, which had ceased activity in 1868. The aim of this essay is therefore to present and analyse de Nardis's operetta within the context of the Neapolitan theatrical system of the time and the tastes of

1 The two volumes have been scheduled to be published in October 2025 by LIM in Lucca. All references to measure numbers and musical sections of *Il Bagno freddo* in this article refer to the forthcoming modern edition. I would like to thank Giorgio Pagannone for his valuable advice and for the exchange of ideas regarding certain formal aspects of the de Nardis's operetta.

2 The Murat decree of 1811 established the division of theatres into two groups: those dedicated to "perfect" performances, with or without music, staged by recognized companies, and those for "popular actions" which were created by amateur companies. See Sapienza 1998, 19.

3 Although essential in nature, this list provides a preliminary idea of what nineteenth-century spectacular culture in Naples may have resembled, though this is a phenomenon that still lacks a thorough and comprehensive scholarly investigation. See Cotticelli 2015.

4 After 1880, the magazine's activity was carried on by Umberto Mazzone, Luigi's son, who directed it from 1882 to 1936. See RIPM: *Napoli musicale.* The first part of each issue of the journal generally contains a short essay-like of historical interest or dealing with significant musical events that took place in Naples, such as newly composed operatic and sacred works, the artistic activities of the alumni and faculty of the Conservatory of music.

the local audience, which, as will be shown, was particularly captivated by the arrival of the Parisian operetta on Neapolitan stages.

Camillo de Nardis's *Il Bagno freddo*, as explicitly stated by the composer on the title page of the manuscript, is a "comic operetta in two acts" that was presented to the public during the Carnival of 1879. At that time in Naples – as well as in Milan and Florence – there was a proliferation of performances of Parisian operettas and their parodies, which were widely attended and much loved by Neapolitan audiences. To avoid any terminological confusion, it is important to clarify from the outset that the term *operetta* here refers to a "small opera" – in terms of both the actual duration and structure of the work. However, as will be discussed later, certain vocal characteristics bring it quite close to the style of the Parisian operetta. It does not seem unreasonable, then, to view the specific use of the term *operetta* on the title page as a deliberate marketing choice – a way of appealing to the large segment of the public captivated by the many new operettas being staged in the city, and of playing on the potential double meaning of the term.

2 The "Frenchification" of Neapolitan Stages

The Neapolitan programming of the decade in question is quite diverse and interesting. The main venues feature both the well-known composers and titles that are sure to attract audiences, such as Verdi (*Ernani, Il Trovatore, Un ballo in maschera, Rigoletto*, etc.), Rossini (*Il barbiere di Siviglia, La gazza ladra, La Cenerentola, Matilde di Shabran, L'italiana in Algeri, Il conte di Ory*, etc.), Bellini (*I puritani, Norma*, etc.), Donizetti (*L'elisir d'amore, Lucia di Lammermoor, Don Pasquale, La figlia del reggimento, Belisario*, etc.), along with the *older* Domenico Cimarosa (*Il matrimonio segreto, Giannina e Bernardone*), and less famous, but highly appreciated composers like Vincenzo Fioravanti,[5] Luigi Ricci,[6] Giuseppe Apolloni,[7] Carlo Pedrotti,[8]

5 Vincenzo Fioravanti, originally from Rome but adopted by Naples (Rome, 1799 – Naples, 1877), made his debut in 1819 at the Teatro San Carlo with *Pulcinella molinaro spaventato dalla fata Serafinetta*. He went on to compose around forty operas, mostly comic, all of which were highly appreciated by the Neapolitan audience. See Meloncelli 1997.

6 See Vernazza 2016.

7 See Mischiati 1961.

8 See Vernazza 2015.

Nicola D'Arienzo,[9] Mario Aspa,[10] Emilio Usiglio,[11] Leopoldo Mugnone,[12] Errico Petrella,[13] and others.[14] The theatre programming – as is evident from a reading of the reports published in *Napoli musicale* – in addition to the traditional season running from Christmas to Carnival, now included a spring season with a good number of performances, and less intense summer and autumn seasons featuring more comedies and lighter shows.[15] This schedule, spread differently across all theatres, allowed the Neapolitan audience to enjoy musical works throughout the entire year. Reading what is reported in the pages of *Napoli musicale* provides valuable information for the framing of the period under review. First of all, the public's enduring appreciation for French operas: "*French operettas* are always favoured, translated and rewritten as best they can be",[16] although the note reveals an obvious sarcasm on the part of the author.

In January 1875, *Giroflé-Girofla*, a three-act opéra bouffe by Charles Lecocq, was staged at the Teatro Nuovo, and on February 1st of the same year, *Napoli Musicale* reported that the opera "had already been performed more than 40 times":[17] a clear sign of the Neapolitan public's appreciation. There is also evident disapproval of the practice of *centoni* – works resulting from the creative contributions of multiple composers – beginning with the performance of the "lyrical patchwork" ("guazzabuglio Lirico") *Cristianella o sia l'urdemo juorno de le banche*, composed by Antonio Artuso, Aniello Barbati, Claudio Conti, Raffaele Fertucci, Francesco and Giovanni Petillo, Fortunato Rajentroph, Michele Ruta, Luigi Sangermano, Carlo Scalise,

9 See Antolini 1986.

10 Mario Aspa (Messina 1795–1868), a well-regarded opera composer, was also director – by Barbaja's will – of the Teatro San Carlo and the Teatro del Fondo.

11 See Vernazza 2020.

12 See Giannetti 2012.

13 See Fornoni 2015.

14 For reasons of brevity, we provide only this brief list. A comprehensive overview is available in the Music Theatres section, which is a permanent feature of Napoli musicale. This section offers a thorough account of the operas staged in Neapolitan theatres, often accompanied by detailed reports on the performers and the audience's reception. In addition, see also Cafiero 2003, 10–12.

15 Regarding the program of the main Neapolitan theatre, see Maione 1999.

16 In this case, the term *operetta* is clearly used in a pejorative sense, intended to diminish the value of the composition rather than to denote a specific musical form. The reference is to *La Juive* by Jacques Fromental Halévy, staged at the S. Carlo Theatre on March 30, 1870, under the title *L'Ebrea*, an opera "translated for the most renowned theatres", appreciated by the audience "despite strong prejudice, both because the music was not Italian and due to the recent failure of the production in Milan". See *Napoli musicale* 1870, n. 7–8, 1. Unless otherwise indicated, translations from Italian are my own.

17 Napoli musicale, 1875, n. 3, 1.

and Achille Silvestri, and staged at the Teatro Goldoni in 1870.[18] The author repeatedly draws attention to the lack of interest shown by composers toward comic opera. As early as the April 1870 issue, commenting on the schedule of the Teatro Nuovo, he observes:

> Nothing new is happening in this theatre, and we regret it, for it could serve as the ideal venue to foster comic opera, to encourage many young composers sadly lacking in ideas and initiative, and to enrich the repertoire with works of real value. *Cristianella* at the Goldoni is a most evident example. However, we would never support the practice of *centoni*.[19]

In March 1875, returning once again to the issue of French operas, he thundered:

> At the Teatro Nuovo, there is a surprising degree of Frenchification! Italian opera buffa lies dormant, nor will it be awakened, for the time being, by these new productions. The public is drawn to novelty, it is stimulated, it laughs and is entertained – and that is precisely what the fortunate impresario desires".[20]

The year 1875 also marked the temporary closure of the Teatro San Carlo, and the editor of *Napoli musicale* expressed profound regret over the deteriorating state of musical life in Naples:

> Despite entreaties, protests, petitions, anxieties, complaints, and letters, this theatre [San Carlo], after 160 years since its founding, will remain closed for the first time. On Sunday the 10th, the State Property Office and the Civil Engineering Department will hold a public auction. Some impresario – or more likely, a speculator – will no doubt submit a bid. And the day may not be far off when, in our most important theatre, the strains of *Madame Angot*, *Orpheus*, and the like, accompanied by the inevitable can-can, will resound.[21]

And yet again:

> Let San Carlo, then, go to public auction, since the Municipality no longer wishes to be concerned with it. *Sic transeat gloria mundi!* If you fall asleep or hiss while listening at the Fondo to a battered *Educanda*, *Rigoletto*, or – more insistently still today – *Un Ballo in maschera*, then run, O people, to the Nuovo and the Politeama: it is Carnival season, and there you will find every possible return on your amusement. And if that is not enough, there is the Fenice, offering *La fille de Madame Angot* reduced to a ballet. And if you are still unsatisfied, there are theatres even more modest than the Fenice, with further 'transfigured' versions of *Angot*. And

18 "How much genius languishes in this Naples!", *Napoli musicale* 1870, n. 7–8, 2. Another performance took place at the Goldoni in February of the same year: it was the *Masto Raffaele* by "various authors".

19 *Napoli musicale,* 1870, n. 7–8, 2.

20 *Napoli musicale*, 1875, n. 5–6, 2.

21 *Napoli musicale*, 1875, n. 1, 1.

> finally, the historic, the renowned, the celebrated San Carlino, presenting an *Orpheus* that is a parody of a parody – praised to the skies by our modern (!) connoisseurs. Never has there been a better way to announce the year of grace 1875 in our dear Naples. And if all else fails, there are always the street barrel organs, which nobly uphold the Palladium of the Land of Music – if only they were at least in tune.[22]

No less significant is the irony with which he comments on the activity at the Teatro Politeama: "Offenbach's *Orphée*. The can-can is danced! Just imagine, dear reader. The theatre is packed to the rafters. Poor music!"

3 Naples and the French Operetta

Equally significant for constructing a comprehensive picture of musical theatre in the decade 1870–1880 is the emergence – and subsequent popularity among Neapolitan audiences – of Offenbach-style operetta, which took root beginning in 1868, the year the French troupe led by the Grégoire family set up a wooden playhouse in Piazza del Municipio.[23] The first to create parodies of Offenbach's works in Naples were Antonio Petito and Antonio De Lerma, who fused the Neapolitan opera buffa tradition with that of French operetta, producing works such as *Na bella Elena imbastarduta infra lingua franzesa, napoletana e toscana* (by Petito), which premiered to great acclaim at the Teatro Nuovo in November 1869.[24] Particularly striking is the metaphor employed by the *Napoli musicale* editor to describe the size and eagerness of the audience: "Dearest reader, have you ever witnessed a swarm of locusts descending upon a field of wheat? Such seemed the crowd flocking to the Politeama on Wednesday evening, before the performance began".[25]

In the following five-year period, and continuing through to 1880, Naples emerged as the Italian city in which operetta – both in its original French and in translation – was most frequently performed.[26] Although nearly all Neapolitan theatres were swept up in this widespread and seemingly unstoppable phenomenon, the Teatro Nuovo, the Fenice, and the San Carlino appear to have been the most deeply involved. It was precisely at the Teatro Nuovo – long regarded as the sacred

22 *Napoli musicale*, 1875, n. 2, 1.

23 The dissemination of the Parisian operetta and the Offenbach model is a phenomenon that, during the same period, also affected Milan and Florence, and has been extensively studied by Elena Oliva. See Oliva 2020a; 2020b, 183–197.

24 See Oliva 2024.

25 *Napoli musicale*, 1875, n. 3, 1.

26 Oliva 2020b, 224–232.

temple of opera buffa – that the Parisian operetta, translated into Italian for the first time made its entrance thanks to the initiative of impresario Giuseppe Maria Luzi.

The season's program, alongside works from the classical Neapolitan opera buffa repertoire, included the staging of numerous operettas, among them *Orphée aux enfers*, *La belle Hélène*, and *Zagranella*. The latter, an Italian translation of Offenbach's *La Périchole*, was performed twenty times within its first month at the Teatro Nuovo and was reported as "still pleasing" audiences. The announcement of *Zagranella*'s staging in the pages of *Napoli musicale*, while acknowledging the novelty of an increasingly unstoppable phenomenon, also identified it as a "painful" one with respect to the Neapolitan buffa tradition:

> *Zagranella*, a new French opera by Maestro Offenbach, translated for this stage like the previous ones, has met with great success. The only comic opera theatre we can truly claim as our own is the Teatro Nuovo; yet, almost in mockery of the many Neapolitan composers who remain inactive, the Nuovo turns to foreign masters to offer us new comic opera. It is truly painful to witness such neglect on the part of an impresario who – without detracting from the pleasure that a foreign repertoire may bring to our audience – could also include national works, particularly those from Naples, renowned for their tradition and style, thereby rousing our capable Neapolitan composers from the undeserved lethargy in which they now lie.[27]

Naples would soon attain the distinction of being the Italian city with the highest number of performances of Parisian operettas, whether in the original language or in translation. Elena Oliva, who has conducted a meticulous study of the phenomenon, notes that the number of performances of French operettas in the original language amount to 647 in Milan, 582 in Florence, and 712 in Naples. The figures for Italian translations are even more revealing: 973 in Milan, 650 in Florence, and an impressive 2643 in Naples. Although the "Frenchification" of Neapolitan stages was particularly widespread, the phenomenon "failed to awaken the good Neapolitan composers from their lethargy", and those who did responded by composing in the style of Parisian operetta. Particularly emblematic is the case of *Elena in Troia*, an operetta by Vincenzo D'Alessio, performed for the first time at the Politeama on January 20, 1875, which aroused considerable reaction from contemporary critics.[28] No less important in this context is the figure of Enrico Golisciani,[29] a prolific and highly intriguing librettist and translator of French operettas and *vaudevilles*, who played a role in Naples comparable to that of Antonio Scalvini in Milan.[30]

27 *Napoli musicale,* 1870, n. 2, 2.

28 Oliva 2020a, 130–131.

29 See Bruni 2001; Oliva 2020a, 128–130.

30 Oliva 2020b, 83–87; 97–137. Antonio Scalvini (Milan, 1835 – Turin, 1881) was author and comic actor beginning in 1870, with his operetta and fairy tale troupe, he brought to the stage in Milan –

4 Camillo de Nardis and his *Bagno freddo*

It is within this context that *Un bagno freddo*, a comic operetta in two acts composed in 1879 by Camillo de Nardis, is situated. Born in 1857 in Orsogna,[31] a small town near Lanciano, de Nardis began studying flute at an early age and was admitted as a boy to the musical chapel of the Cathedral of Lanciano, which at that time was under the direction of Francesco Masciangelo. It was Masciangelo himself who recommended him warmly to Saverio Mercadante, at the time Director of the Royal Conservatory of Music in Naples. At the Conservatory, de Nardis began his training in flute before moving to Nicola D'Arienzo's composition class, where he soon demonstrated his considerable talent. His *Saggio di quartetto* (1875) was awarded a prize in 1876 at the competition organized by the Società del Quartetto in Palermo, and two years later, his *Trio in C major* for violin, cello, and piano received another distinction from the Società Bellini in Naples.[32] Dating back to 1878 is *Arabella*, a semiserious opera in three acts with a libretto by Golisciani, his first stage work. Commissioned by the *impresario* of the Teatro Nuovo, it was performed only in concert form due to the collapse of the theatrical company.[33] The following year, on 24 February, the Conservatory's small theatre (*Teatrino*) was reopened.

> It has been reborn, and in the very same place where it stood thirty years ago. But why, one might ask, was the Conservatory's little theatre closed for so many long years? – To answer that would require considerable courage: it is therefore better, on this occasion, to refrain from dwelling on the past – lest time be wasted – and instead to offer our congratulations to those who now govern the still-precarious fortunes of our music college, which is all the more reason to commend their good deeds. Although we were not sent an invitation to this

and subsequently throughout Italy – the first translations of Offenbach's operettas. Scalvini initially devoted himself to the theatre by adapting the works of other playwrights, before turning to writing his own.

31 See Della Sciucca 2006.

32 See Della Sciucca 2006.

33 "[…] After the fiasco of *Gli Equivoci*, an opera by the poor Sarria, the company suffered a colossal failure, and *Arabella* could not be staged. De Nardis was so indignant about this that he discarded the opera, to which he had devoted such serious work, and refused to have anything more to do with it. However, I hear that they intend to persuade him to present it at the Teatro Fenaroli in the autumn season of next year. I have not had the pleasure of hearing even a single note, so I cannot offer my own judgment, but some Neapolitan professors have assured me that *Arabella* cannot fail to achieve true success, as it is a genuinely serious work, worthy of a first-rate theatre", Renzetti 1894, 8.

> reopening, this omission in no way affects our positive assessment of the theatre's revival, nor does it diminish our praise.[34]

Under the direction of Lauro Rossi, successor to Saverio Mercadante, Naples saw the addition of a new musical venue – another stage that further expanded the already dense network of theatres active in the city. The editor of *Napoli musicale* continues his account by informing us of the musical program that was performed:

> The evening program featured the overture to *Raymond* by Ambroise Thomas, performed by the Conservatory orchestra, a choral piece composed by Maestro Vespoli, and the symphony *Le cheval de bronze* by Auber. This was followed by the performance of the one-act operetta *Un bagno freddo*, with libretto by E. Golisciani and music by student de Nardis. Noteworthy among the performers were students Colonnese and Marzolla – the latter particularly distinguished herself in the role of the maid, delivering a performance well above what might be expected from a debutante. Also deserving of praise were the tenor Costa and comic bass Rossi, both of whom displayed precision and comedic flair. We extend our congratulations to all involved, especially to those who remembered that the Conservatory ought to have an experimental theatre space – a resource that had been unjustly silenced for far too long, to the great detriment of young musicians. The hall was well arranged and, although temporary, exceeded expectations; it is imperative that a proper theatre space worthy of Naples be permanently established at the Conservatory. A large audience attended all four evenings and offered enthusiastic applause for both the works and the performers.[35]

The director of the Conservatory, Lauro Rossi, also expressed great admiration, and following the performance of the work on 21 February, he wrote a letter to de Nardis with evident enthusiasm:

> I have always held a high opinion of your musical talent, and last night, upon listening attentively to the rehearsal of your new operetta, I found further confirmation of that belief. For this reason, I wish to extend my sincere congratulations, both for the originality of the ideas that pervade the work and for the sound and thoughtful dramatic conception. Allow me, however, to offer one observation (which I might have shared earlier had I heard your operetta before last night): at certain moments, I perceived a few touches that seemed somewhat exaggerated, accentuated by an orchestration that, while naturally suited to the form of the composition, may not be entirely appropriate to the overall character of the piece and, consequently, somewhat excessive for the space in which it is performed. But this is a minor flaw, and I trust you will not take offense at my sharing it with you – indeed, I do so frankly as a mark of the esteem I hold for you. [...] So bravo, truly bravo, and let us hope that fortune may soon reward you with the honours and success that your talent so clearly deserves.[36]

34 *Napoli musicale,* 1879, n 5, 2.
35 *Napoli musicale,* 1879, n 5, 2.
36 Caroccia 2012, 379.

De Nardis's *Bagno freddo* was thus received very favourably and appreciated by the public. The following year, it was revived at the Teatro Nuovo. However, this time the review published in the columns of *Napoli musicale* was markedly less enthusiastic, perhaps due to the fact that the work was being compared with the more acclaimed Parisian operettas staged in Naples that same year:

> Il Bagno freddo, composed by the young de Nardis – now conductor at the same theatre – was appreciated above all for the figure of its composer. Conceived for the Conservatory's small theatre, the operetta is a youthful work. Yet, as a first attempt and a modest composition, the fact that it was met with applause at the Teatro Nuovo already constitutes a noteworthy credential in the promising career of the talented de Nardis.[37]

5 The Libretto and the Music

The manuscript of the full score, preserved at the library of the "San Pietro a Majella" Conservatory of Music in Naples (shelf mark I-Nc 20.07.19–20),[38] contains valuable information. The title page bears, at the top, the inscription *Carnival of 1879*[39] followed by the names of the Conservatory students who performed the operetta on 24 February.

D. Policarpio	Sig. Rossi [Arcangelo]	student (alunno)
Adele	Sig.na Colonnese [Elvira]	student (allieva)
Cesare	Sig. Costa [Pasquale]	student (alunno)
Barbara	Sig.na Marzolla [Elisa]	student (allieva)

The title *Un bagno freddo* is followed by the annotation "Comic operetta in two acts / adapted from a farce by Coppola" which is then followed by "Performed for the first time in the Conservatory's small theatre" and the approving signature "Prof. Nicola D'Arienzo / Feb. 1879". On the flyleaf of the manuscript volume (the modern half-title) is inscribed *Poetry by Enrico Golisciani*. On the final folio of the manuscript, marked as c 123r, centred on the blank staves – unused due to the absence of vocal parts – appears the inscription "written in fifteen days. de Nardis C." and again "February 1879". Thus, our composer took only two weeks to compose the operetta, making use of a libretto by Enrico Golisciani, who adapted it from a farce by Luigi

37 *Napoli musicale,* 1880, n. 19–24, 5.

38 The manuscript may be accessed in digital format at the following URL: https://www.internetculturale.it/jmms/iccuviewer/iccu.jsp?teca=MagTeca+-+ICCU&id=oai:www.internetculturale.sbn.it/Teca:20:NT0000:IT%5C%5CICCU%5C%5CMSM%5C%5C0148762.

39 In 1879, Carnival was celebrated on Tuesday, 25 February.

Coppola (1831–1881). Coppola published his *Bagno freddo*, a comic one-act play, in Naples in 1869 through the Libreria Teatrale Domenico Abbatino.

The story is set in Paris and involves four characters: Policarpio, his daughter Agatina, his nephew Maurizio, and the servant Brigida. After an evening at the theatre, Policarpio and Agatina return home, but the servant, being asleep and distracted by dreams, delays opening the door, which provokes Policarpio's anger. Maurizio, having fallen in love with Agatina upon seeing her at the theatre, follows them to their residence, enters covertly, and hides in a wardrobe. To avoid missing the stagecoach back to his hometown, he seeks the servant's assistance in order to speak to Agatina, with whom he exchanges vows of love. When attempting to leave, he finds the door locked; Brigida suggests that he go down into the well and pass through an opening that leads directly to the garden. As Maurizio descends, Policarpio arrives and helps the two women to draw up the water bucket from the well. Startled, Policarpio recognizes Maurizio as his nephew and consents to the marriage between his daughter and the young man, who expresses his happiness in becoming a husband and soon a father. The episode concludes with Maurizio joyfully declaring: "I am a husband and soon will be a father, as I have promised; for with me you shall not have… a cold bath".[40]

De Nardis's *Un bagno freddo* is structured around the libretto prepared by Enrico Golisciani, who reworked Luigi Coppola's *Un bagno freddo*.[41] Unfortunately, no printed libretto of Golisciani's version survives. However, in preparation for the modern edition of de Nardis's operetta, the text was reconstructed from the orchestral score and a manuscript libretto preserved at the Conservatory Library of Naples (shelf mark Rari I-Nc 10.11.18/2). This manuscript was prepared for the 1880 performance at the Teatro Nuovo[42] and features on its title page not the title *Un bagno freddo* alone, but *Un bagno freddo* (in smaller script) *or Una notte fortunata* (written in significantly larger lettering than the former). The cast remains composed of four characters, though only the master of the house retains his original name: Don Policarpio Cravachon, former major. His daughter is renamed Adele, the maid becomes Barbara, and the medical student nephew is called Cesare. The setting remains Paris at the end of the previous century (late 18th century). The number of scenes is unchanged (eight scenes), but the text is notably enriched,

40 "Sono marito e fra poco sarò padre, come ho promesso; giacché in me non avrai … un bagno freddo", Coppola 1920, 16. The pamphlet reprinted in Bologna in 1920 by Libreria Brugnoli is a reissue of the one originally published in Naples by the Rondinella printing house.

41 See Coppola 1920.

42 On the title page, there is also the authorization for the performance issued by the regulatory authority: "Approved. Performance permitted. Naples, 4 December 1880. For the Prefect. The Reviewing Councillor. F. Petrelli".

primarily through the inclusion of much more detailed stage directions, although Coppola's original libretto already contained some such indications. A brief comparison between the opening and closing verses of Coppola's and Golisciani's versions reveals the extent of the intervention undertaken by the Neapolitan librettist.[43]

Luigi Coppola, *Un bagno freddo*	**Enrico Golisciani, *Un bagno freddo***
Scena prima	**Scena prima**
Stanza ad uso cucina con armadio e pozzo. – Porte laterali – La comune in fondo	Tavolo sul quale lume acceso. Sedie. Sera avanzata. *S'alza la tela*
BRIGIDA, poi POLICARPIO e AGATINA	(*Barbara, seduta accanto al tavolo, appoggiando il capo su quello, e dormendo. Indi dalla porta d'ingresso Policarpio e Adele in abito da teatro*)
BRI. (appoggiata al tavolo dorme e sogna). Fatti più in qua Paolotto; discorriamo un poco; un altro mese e saremo sposi. Oh! Che consolazione! (si bussa alla porta, svegliandosi) Chi è? Chi è?	BARBARA (*Barbara sognante, dice teneramente*) Vien t'appressa, vien qua mio Gigin parliamo un po'…
POL. (di dentro) Siamo noi. Apri. Brigida. Apri.	(*Si ode suonare il campanello a sinistra*)
BRI. Oh! I padroni che ritornano dal teatro. Ed io sognavo il mio caro Paolotto. Farmi svegliare proprio in questo momento. (apre)	Io tra un mese tua sarò … O gioir che ugual non ha.
POL. (entra con Agatina) Ci voleva tanto ad aprire? Farci intirizzire dal freddo fuori la porta!	(*Suono più forte*)
BRI. Che volete? Stavo dormendo.	Qual baccano (*Destandosi s'alza*).
POL. (ironico) Perdono, madama. Dunque, io le pago il salario per farla dormire?	Ah li avea dimenticati. Dal teatro ritornati I padroni alfin saran. (*Con tenera dispiacenza*)
BRI. Bel salario! Venti franchi al mese!	Io sognava il mio sposino. Si, io sognava e interrotta fui così.
POL. In provincia con venti franchi ci tengono venti cameriere. BRI. E a Parigi ce ne vogliono cinquanta per averne mezza.	
POL. Se ella non è contenta, quella è la porta, e felicissima notte.	

43 For a general overview of Golisciani's figure and the opera libretti he authored see Bruni 2001.

Luigi Coppola, ***Un bagno freddo***	**Enrico Golisciani**, ***Un bagno freddo***
	(*Suono fortissimo*)
BRI. Scacciarmi dopo otto giorni di servizio?	
	Vengo. Vengo. Son qui.
AGAT. Via, caro babbo, non andate in collera. La poverina poi che gran male ha fatto? Dormiva mentre noi eravamo a divertirci.	(*Apre*)
	POLICARPIO
POL. Bel divertimento! Un dramma da far venir le convulsioni.	Capperi! Capperi! Fulmini e tuoni! Per mille diavoli,
BRI. Che cosa hanno rappresentato?	mille cannoni! Mi metto in vena
AGAT. Mosca incendiata.	e chi mi frena? Capperi, capperi!
BRI. Davvero?... Oh che gusto. È un animale che io non posso soffrire.	(*Impetuosamente*)
POL. E voi siete un animale cento volte più insopportabile. Andate a preparare la cena.	Chi? Chi? Chi? Chi?
	ADELE Ma papà coi modi vostri.
	BARBARA Io di male nulla ho fatto.
	POLICARPIO No! Dormivi. E che son matto a pagarti per dormire.
	BARBARA Venti franchi! Bel pagare!
	POLICARPIO Quattro serve ho con tal somma!
	BARBARA Al villaggio, lui sborsare dee per mezzo il doppio! ADELE Insomma. Lei dormiva mentre noi ci stavamo a divertire!
	POLICARPIO Divertirci? Sciocca, inetta!

Luigi Coppola, *Un bagno freddo*	**Enrico Golisciani, *Un bagno freddo***
	Coi drammacci d'oggi dì! Per un uom che si rispetta il lasciarlo al fresco esposto merta pena ad ogni costo! Domattina via di qui…
	(*A Barbara*) vi congedo … non fiatate. Or la cena preparate!
Scena ultima	**Scena ultima**
MAU. Mio zio!? Brru!	Policarpio (*Riconoscendolo*)
POL. Mio nipote!?	Tu?! Cesare!
AGAT. Possibile? Egli mio cugino?	Barbara Zio!
POL. Ma in che modo sei nel pozzo? Ti se messo forse a fare il ladro?	Adele Che ascoltai!
MAU. Ma che diavolo dite? Son medico fon nelle midolla delle ossa. Ero nel pozzo perché amo Agatina (*Strizza la falda destra e l'acqua cade addosso a Policarpio*)	Policarpio Ah, non più il medico, il ladro fai?
POL. Che diavolo fai? (*Passa a sinistra*)	Cesare (*Indicando Adele*)
AGAT. Si padre mio! È l'amante del teatro.	Amo quest'angelo oltre ogni idea!
POL. Io non capisco nulla.	Adele Egli è quel giovane della platea.
MAU. (*passa in mezzo*). Vi spiegherò io tutto a suo tempo. (*leva una carta tutta bagnata*) Ecco il mio diploma di dottore. Accordatemi mia cugina e fateci felici (*strizza la falda a sinistra*).	Policarpio (*Stordito*) Capperi. Capperi. Per cento diavoli!
POL. (*passa a destra*) Che tu sia maledetto! … Pigliala e non spruzzar più.	Cesare Tutto saprete. Intanto vedi
MAU. Sono marito e fra poco sarò padre come ho promesso; giacché in me non avrai … un bagno freddo.	molle il vedrete al par di me ecco la laurea.

Luigi Coppola, ***Un bagno freddo***	**Enrico Golisciani**, ***Un bagno freddo***
	(*Trae di tasca un diploma stillante acqua*)
	Policarpio Tu sei dottore? Adele sposalo! Non parlo più!
	Barbara Gli sposi, evvivano!
	Policarpio Sta zitta tu!
	CESARE e Adele Ora mio ben, son pago appien! O notte avventurosa, o notte prosperosa, d'una nuziale aurora forier per noi brillò amore mio
	Barbara e Policarpio [con Cesare e Adele] O notte prosperosa, O notte avventurosa d'una nuziale aurora forier per noi brillò
	Policarpio, Barbara, Adele e Cesare Amor che vince ognor. Amor che tutto può.

Golisciani's intervention on Coppola's farce consists in metrically versifying the prosodic text, adapting it to the specific demands of comic operetta, that is, a small-scale comic opera, and immediacy and brevity. In previous years, the librettist had authored the texts for *Don Bizzarro e le sue figlie*, a one-act comic operetta by Leopoldo Mugnone (Teatro Nuovo, 20 April 1875), and for *Mamma Angot a Costantinopoli*, a three-act operetta by the same composer (Teatro Nuovo, 26 July 1875). Building upon this framework, Camillo de Nardis composed his *Bagno freddo*. The young

composer was well aware of the defining characteristics of French opera[44] and of the public's growing appreciation for this type of spectacle, which increasingly resonated throughout the theatres of Naples month after month. The Offenbach "model" in Naples, as throughout Italy,[45] was increasingly becoming a vibrant source of inspiration, highlighting what appeared to be an unstoppable crisis in Italian opera buffa. Although de Nardis presents his *Bagno freddo* as a comic operetta in two acts, this division seems to be less of a formal concern and more a practical choice related to staging requirements. On c 105v of the manuscript orchestral score – the last page of the first act – it is noted: "for the convenience of the actors, this operetta was divided into two parts, and this page served as the prelude to the second part". The composer had the full conservatory orchestra at his disposal but opted for an instrumentation of his own design for *Bagno freddo*, notably excluding percussion. The orchestra thus consists of flutes, oboes, clarinets, bassoons, horns, trumpets, and trombones, alongside the strings. The vocal parts are four: Policarpio is a bass, the nephew Cesare a tenor, Barbara a mezzo-soprano, and Adele a soprano. De Nardis divides the operetta into nine numbers: four in the first part and five in the second, crafting a well-structured crescendo both sonically and emotionally. The overall structure is as follows:

ATTO I

N. 1 Scena I, Vien t'appressa, vien qua… No! Dormivi. E che sono matto… Con moine e smorfiucce… Caro invece è stato a me… Oh! Che diluvio! (Adele, Barbara, Don Policarpio)

N. 2 Recitativo e romanza, Adele, via! Se burbero ha il linguaggio… Nel ricordarne il viso… Tutto il mondo, se ci aggrada (Adele)

N. 3 Recitativo e romanza, L'uscio aperto…Alcuno? No!… Io vi saluto (Cesare)

N. 4 Leggenda e duettino delle risate, Eccomi, v'ubbidisco… Allor che giovanetta… Fingersi spirito (Adele, Barbara)

ATTO II

N. 5 Duettino, E portan via la chiave?… Io sono un disperato… Se cortese appagherai… Sono schietta, una figliuola (Barbara, Cesare)

N. 6 Duetto, Da brava! Ma pian piano!… No, dirti pria concedimi… Son lo studente Cesare (Adele, Barbara, Cesare)

N. 7 Ronda e Buonanotte a 4 voci, Non mi convinci, ho inteso un chiacchierio… Passo passo senza chiasso… Mia cara figlia addio! (Adele, Barbara, Cesare, Don Policarpio)

N. 8 Terzettino, La porta è serrata!… Venti piedi quel pozzo è profondo… Un piè qua, un piè là (Adele, Barbara, Cesare)

44 By the term *French opera*, we refer to the collection of French operatic genres that were being staged in Neapolitan theatres at the time: Parisian operettas, *grand opéra*, and *opéra-bouffe*, all of which are extensively documented in the columns of *Napoli Musicale*. Oliva 2020b, 198–210.

45 See Oliva 2022.

N. 9 Finale per Grazia di Dio, *Barbara! Barbara!... Che peso, che peso!... O notte avventurosa* (Adele, Barbara, Cesare, Don Policarpio)

Even before listening, it is evident that the composer aims to highlight the vocal presentation of the two young lovers in the first act by entrusting them with the two arias. The second act, in contrast, unfolds as a crescendo featuring the first two duets, the trio, and the final quartet "per grazia di Dio". The scope of this contribution does not permit an in-depth analytical discussion; however, it is worth emphasizing how the vocal writing conceived by the composer for his characters departs from the melodic conventions typical of opera buffa, favouring instead a declamatory singing style often close to speech, which is more characteristic of the French operetta.

While it is true that the world of French operetta undoubtedly attracted considerable interest among the new generation of composers, it is equally true that their formal musical education was primarily grounded in the structures of contemporary Italian melodrama.[46] It is therefore both necessary and useful to briefly focus on certain elements in order to better assess the musical language of the young composer and the knowledge he acquired during his composition studies at the Naples Conservatory. Our brief analysis will concentrate on two romances from the first act and two duets from the second act. The romances have been selected because, by their very nature, they serve as the primary vehicle for the vocal introduction of a character on stage, and also due to their direct derivation from the French *opéra-comique* tradition.[47] The duets, by contrast, have been selected because they represent musical dialogue[48] – the site of major dramatic conflicts – and are closely linked to that distinctive formal structure known as the *solita forma*.[49] Both forms are furthermore closely related to the *lyric form*.[50] Both the first and the second romance are preceded by a recitative:[51] the first (No. 2, Recitative and Romance for soprano), set in A-flat major, reintroduces the character of Adele vocally, – although she had already been heard in the opening number (Scene I) for soprano (Adele); the second presents the tenor Cesare, her passionate lover (No. 3, Recitative and Romance for tenor). Adele's romance is structured in two sections: an Andante in triple meter, followed by a Moderato, also in triple meter (3/4):

46 See Rothestein 2022.
47 See Beghelli 2000; Pagannone 2022.
48 See Beghelli 2005; Pagannone 2012.
49 See Powers 1987; Gallarati 2009.
50 Rothestein 2022, 149–172.
51 It is worth remembering once again that this comic operetta contains no spoken dialogue.

Romanza n. 2,

Andante (3/4) [F minor]
A a8 (4+4+) [I–V]
a'8 (4+4) [I–V]
b8 (4+3) [V–I] (O mio soave fremito)
c 4+2
Moderato (3/4) [Ab major]
B a8 (4+4) +6
a'8 (4+4) +3 (Noi sfidiam …)
b8 (4+4)+2
Ripresa of b+c(A): *O mio soave fremito* (4+4)+2
Ripresa of a'(B): *Noi sfidiam, vinciamo ognor* + 8 bars of instrumental coda

By examining the formal structure, it becomes evident that the piece can be characterized as a type of romance with a double refrain, wherein the first refrain is interwoven with the second lyric form. In the *Andante* section, the melodic line is more graceful and delicate, marked by a strong sense of singability within a limited range (F_3–G_4). Conversely, in the *Moderato*, the writing becomes livelier, and the melodic span extends from E_3 to C_4.

The second romance, however, exhibits a much more straightforward structure, framed by two recitatives. Cesare, finding the door ajar, enters the house and, surveying his surroundings, reflects upon his sudden infatuation. His aria is contained within a single section, a ternary *Moderato* (3/4) with a single lyric form, which can be schematized as follows:

Romanza n.3

Moderato (3/4) Gb major
A a8 (4+4)
a'8 (4+4)
b8 (4+4)
b'8 (4+4)+1
Ripresa of a'8 (4+4)
c 8 (4+4) + 6

The second act of *Il Bagno freddo* opens with a Duettino for mezzo-soprano and tenor, followed by a Duet for soprano and tenor. As previously noted, the analysis of these duets allows us to assess de Nardis's relationship with the *solita forma*, the conventional framework for the expression of musical emotions in nineteenth-century opera. If we attempt to interpret the structure of the two numbers according to the scheme of the *solita forma*, we obtain the following:

Duettino II,5 (Barbara, Cesare)
SCENA: E portan via la chiave (bb. 1–65)
TEMPO D'ATTACCO: *Io sono un disperato* (J, bb. 66–162)

ADAGIO: *Se cortese appagherai* (Moderato, N, bb. 163–188).
CABALETTA: *Sono schietta, una figliuola* (Animato, O, bb.189–230).

Here, the *Tempo di mezzo* is absent, and the *Adagio* – brief yet exhibiting melodic and poetic correspondence – connects directly to the *cabaletta*, almost forming a single slow-fast movement.

The second duet, by contrast, contains all the sections typical of the *solita forma*:

Duetto II,5 (Cesare, Adele, with pertichino: Barbara)
SCENA: *Da brava* (Recitativo, bb. 1–32)
TEMPO D'ATTACCO: *Nella polvere* (A, Allegro, bb. 33–108)[52]
ADAGIO: *Son lo studente Cesare* (D, [Moderato], bb. 109–179)[53]
TEMPO DI MEZZO: *Passato è il tempo* (G, Allegro, bb. 180–252)[54]
CABALETTA, *Sì, io t'amo* (I, Allegro, bb. 252–272)[55]

Upon closer examination of the manuscript, we see the composer designate number 5 as a "duettino" and the subsequent piece as a "duetto", demonstrating a thorough understanding of the formal characteristics typical of nineteenth-century operatic forms. Indeed, unlike the duet, the duettino is composed in a single tempo or abbreviated form – in this case, lacking a *tempo di mezzo*, with the *adagio* and *cabaletta* effectively merged. The diminutive designation is further justified not only by the formal structure but also by the presence of a second part (Barbara); in contrast, the duet features only principal parts (Adele and Cesare).

6 Conclusions

This brief analysis of the two romances and two duets reveals that de Nardis, although a very young emerging composer, already possessed a solid grounding and a deep knowledge of the structures and forms of nineteenth-century Italian opera, and was able to skilfully manipulate and shape them with ease. It was this robust training – primarily received from Nicola D'Arienzo – that would ultimately earn

52 It is noteworthy that on c 31r of the manuscript there is an indication marked "Tempo", which I believe precisely denotes the point of commencement of the *tempo d'attacco*. Within the *tempo d'attacco*, from letter B (*Moderato*), there is also a *cantabile* in F minor for tenor (*No, dirti pria concedimi*) featuring a lyric form structured as: A8–A'8–B8–C8 (4+4)+7.
53 In the *Adagio*, one observes the classic alternation between poetic and melodic elements, culminating in a final two-part cadence or coda.
54 The *Tempo di mezzo* recalls the orchestral motif introduced in the *tempo d'attacco*.
55 The *cabaletta* is notably brief and ends with a two-part cadence.

him recognition among the leading opera composers of the late nineteenth with his major verismo opera *Stella* in Chieti in the spring of 1898.

The orchestration here, although occasionally reflecting de Nardis's youthful affinity for band repertoire, is very well structured and meticulously underscores the character of the figures and the situations that unfolding in the plot. The "light" character of the operetta is never compromised and, despite its brevity, it clearly highlights the qualities of de Nardis, which Michele Caputo succinctly noted on the evening of the reopening of the Conservatory's small theatre: "a student who is already a master".[56] Today, as in the past, *Un bagno freddo* is regarded as "a work rich in melody and full of spirit", as Alessandro Longo observed.[57] This composition fully engages with the contemporary debate on the increasing foreign influence in Italian opera and offers a pertinent example of the choice between the traditional Italian recitatives and the spoken prose recitatives increasingly favoured by the French model. Although critics of the time endeavoured to maintain a strict distinction between operetta and comic opera,[58] it is undeniable that the tastes and demands of the public significantly influenced the decisions of young composers during the final two decades of the nineteenth century. Thus, *Un bagno freddo* presents itself as a well-crafted Offenbachian "subject" that de Nardis decided to set musically within a decidedly classical framework, incorporating recitatives, arias, and ensemble pieces.

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Gaetano Stella

Pietro Platania's *Spartaco*: A Forgotten Success Between Erudition and *Verismo*

Abstract: This essay aims to shed light on a virtually unknown opera: Pietro Platania's *Spartaco*. This was the last opera of the Sicilian composer, who, as a student of Pietro Raimondi and a late adherent of the so-called *Leista* school, was a prolific creator of operas, instrumental, and sacred music. *Spartaco*, with a libretto by Antonio Ghislanzoni, premiered at the Teatro San Carlo in Naples on March 29, 1891, where it was met with great acclaim. The enthusiastic reception from the audience, as widely reported by contemporary press, was replicated in subsequent performances at the Teatro Costanzi in Rome (May 29) and the Dal Verme in Milan (May 13, 1893). Although the libretto adhered to traditional norms, Platania pushed for broader dramaturgical sections to align with the tastes of the era. Unfortunately, the opera suffered from the overwhelming success of Mascagni's *Cavalleria Rusticana* (backed by the same publisher), which premiered around the same time and gained increasing popularity both in Italy and abroad. The essay explores the historical context surrounding the composition and performances of *Spartaco*, including planned stagings in Berlin and Vienna. The second part focuses on selected passages of the score, analyzing them from dramaturgical, formal, and harmonic-contrapuntal perspectives. It aims to highlight its alignment with emerging *verismo* trends and the distinctive dialogue Platania established between the illustrious Neapolitan contrapuntal tradition and late Romantic harmony.

Keywords: Pietro Platania; *Spartaco*; Pietro Mascagni; *Cavalleria Rusticana*; Verismo.

1 Introduction

The subject of this essay is a mature and now forgotten work by the Catanese composer and theorist Pietro Platania (1828–1907). A student of Pietro Raimondi and therefore a late proponent of the so-called *scuola Leista*, Platania was a prolific composer of operas, instrumental and sacred music, director of the Regio Collegio del Buon Pastore in Palermo and of the Naples Conservatory, Maestro di cappella at the Milan Cathedral, and a respected teacher and contrapuntist. He was also the

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youngest of the composers chosen by Verdi to contribute to the *Messa per Rossini*.[1] This essay examines his final opera, *Spartaco*: in the first part, I retrace the historical circumstances of its composition and early performances – which, as we shall see, intersected with the creation and overwhelming success of *Cavalleria rusticana* by Pietro Mascagni – and in the second, I offer an analytical reading of selected passages, representative of Platania's style and compositional intentions.

2 Genesis of the Opera

Platania began composing an opera based on the story of the gladiator Spartaco in the first half of the 1880s.[2] Antonio Ghislanzoni based his libretto on the outline sent to him by Platania,[3] which was in turn based on the eponymous novel written by Raffaello Giovagnoli and published in 1873.[4] The novel was having a huge success and diffusion; translated in many countries until the first decades of the 20th century, it was also appreciated by notable figures such as Giuseppe Garibaldi and, more recently, Antonio Gramsci.[5] Ghislanzoni, already in the contract, committed himself to "write the libretto for *Spartaco* according to the outline presented and delivered by Comm.[endatore] Platania".[6] Platania reserved the right to request changes to better suit the musical composition. He exercised this right, as confirmed in a letter from

1 For an in-depth investigation of Pietro Platania, his theoretical production and his compositions, see Stella 2008.

2 Ghislanzoni, 01.05.1884: declaration of assignment of rights for the libretto of Spartaco; Ghislanzoni, 31.12.1883: private agreement between Edoardo Sonzogno and Pietro Platania for *Spartaco*. According to the contract, Platania would have had one year to compose. Platania also agreed to cede ownership of the music and the libretto, to attend the rehearsals and the first performances. The agreed fee was £3,500. Sonzogno agreed to have it performed in an important Italian theatre at his own expense with artists chosen by the composer and to ensure 50% of all rentals. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are the author's own.

3 [Pietro Platania?], s.d. Manuscript libretto.

4 Giovagnoli 1873.

5 A letter of praise from Giuseppe Garibaldi was added beginning with the second edition in 1874. Giovagnoli, a native of the Papal State, took an active part in the *Risorgimento*, becoming, after Italy's unification, a left deputy in the new Kingdom of Italy. The novel was deeply influenced by his political ideas and his readings (i.e. of many latin authors as well as Mazzini), For a general overview of Giovagnoli and his *Spartacus* see Pinto 2014.

6 *Commendatore* is a civilian honorific in Italy. Pietro Platania [but another hand] 05.07.1881. Draft contract between Platania and Ghislanzoni for the writing of *Spartaco*. The agreed fee was £1,000.

Amintore Galli, who wrote that "Ghislanzoni has sent the libretto for *Spartaco* and has already made all the suggested modifications".[7]

G. R. Abate, a childhood friend of the composer, was quite offended by what he considered a case of plagiarism. Years earlier, his wife had submitted a libretto on the same subject to Platania without ever receiving a response. It is unclear whether Platania used the same outline to provide Ghislanzoni with the sketch, but the relationship between the two men remained strained for some time.[8]

The score was completed as early as 1888.[9] Galli, writing to Platania, mentioned an upcoming meeting in Milan during which he hoped to hear excerpts from *Spartaco* played by the composer himself. In the same letter, he added: "I believe that Mr. Edoardo wants to stage the opera as soon as possible".[10] Around the same time, Platania began preparing the vocal and piano reduction[11] and wrote to Amintore Galli: "I agree about Act I of *Spartaco*; but in the meantime, what is the status of the score copy? As I told you, I do not have it, and it is urgently needed for one reason or another. Please send the copy. Warmest regards".[12] In 1889, he decided to make several revisions to the opera. Concerning these revisions, his student Carlo Del Signore stated: "Romanzas, in general, slow down the action. Their time has passed. To

7 Galli for Sonzogno undated (I-Nc Rari 20.11 n°310).

8 Abate June 13, 1891. The friend complained that 'Pietrino' had preferred another libretto for *Spartaco* to that of his wife, already praised by Lauro Rossi and Coppola. He therefore offered him the opportunity to make amends by proposing to set to music the libretto of *Marinella* (a romantic love story based on Romeo and Juliet). This second libretto for *Spartaco* must have been set to music by another composer since Antonio De Gregorio, as he recounts in a letter, bought the other *Spartaco* by mistake and was disappointed by the score when he read it, only then did he realize the misunderstanding. Gregorio, 29.10.1896; Sapio 25.07.1887 [?]. Platania P. s.d. but 1881. In this draft of the reply to Sapio, Platania complained about the episode but said that the opera had been proposed to him with that libretto. At the time, Platania also did not remember having seen another libretto with the same subject. He then underlined that often the same subject had been set to music more than once, since the subjects were universal property and only the use made of them was individual property. While apologizing for the incident, he claimed that the choice of the libretto and the librettist was due to the artist's nature.

9 Platania P., undated but May 1888 I-Nc Rari 20.11 n. 297b. Draft of reply to I-Nc Rari 20.11 n°297. See also: [Galli] for Sonzogno December 26, 1889. In reply to letter of 18. Receipt of the 2nd act of *Spartaco* is acknowledged and £875 is paid for the balance.

10 Galli for Sonzogno [illegible] September 1888 [?].

11 In May 1888 the proofs of the 1st act were already ready. Galli for Sonzogno 02.05.1888. See also Galli 19.06.1888. In the same letter he also asks for news of "public interest for the publication of an article on: Il teatro Musicale".

12 Platania P., undated but May 1888 I-Nc Rari 20.11 n. 297b.

give them vitality, librettists must necessarily interrupt them with reminiscences from the opera or with effective episodes so that the reprise remains interesting".[13]

Del Signore finally advised that if the renowned tenor Francesco Tamagno could not be engaged, Giovan Battista De Negri would constitute a suitable alternative. The tenor question resurfaced several times. In 1890, when it seemed that Fernando De Lucia would take the part, Platania again proposed De Negri, fearing that De Lucia – renowned as a *tenore di grazia* – would not be able to sustain the role of Spartaco.[14] However, Platania did not abandon the idea of securing Tamagno and urged Sonzogno further in this regard.[15] During the same period, Platania had to cope with serious family difficulties due to his daughter Rosina's illness, which would eventually lead to her death.[16] There was also the growing competition with Mascagni and his *Cavalleria rusticana*. As Platania wrote in a draft letter to Sonzogno:

> And then there's the opera by a certain young man who has managed to gather a large following here, creating a tremendous stir with his friends to promote his interests, backed by a publisher you know well. There will be Cavalleria, preceded by reports of enthusiastic success and the sympathy for the young author who rose to fame so unexpectedly [Subsequent content illegible due to erasure].[17]

Preparations for the performance of the opera were very long, and the choice of the theatre was carefully considered. The Teatro San Carlo was already being considered around 1888 as the most appropriate venue,[18] and eventually, as Platania tells us, Sonzogno pressured the theatre's *impresario* to stage the opera, confirming his personal investment.[19]

In the autumn of 1890, the opera was reviewed by Leopoldo Mugnone. Galli, reporting Mugnone's reactions, wrote to Platania: "Mugnone wrote to Mr. Sonzogno about the excellent effect of the orchestration of *Spartaco* … but I already knew that: Platania knows what he's doing […]".[20] Mugnone, who would later conduct the

13 Del Signore 26.09.1889.

14 Platania P., 16.08.1890. Draft of a letter to Amintore Galli. "I know that the absolute tenor will be De Lucia. But […] is he capable of playing the part of Spartacus? It seems to me not".

15 Platania P., 30.08.1890. Draft of a letter to Edoardo Sonzogno.

16 Platania P., 30.08.1890: "If I were not here tied to my poor daughter suffering in a very grave way".

17 Platania P., s.d. but 1890.

18 Galli, 30 [illegible] 1888. Galli reports that Sonzogno proposes the Teatro San Carlo as the best location for the debut of Spartaco.

19 Platania P., s.d. to Sonzogno. (I-Nc Rari 20.11 n°714): "Having imposed the opera on the impresario is a clear proof of interest on your part, and it is not the first for me".

20 Galli for Sonzogno (29.11.1890).

Milan premiere of the opera, became a passionate advocate of *Spartaco*, promoting numerous performances of its *Proemio sinfonico*.

3 *Spartaco* at the Teatro San Carlo in Naples

On March 26, the general rehearsal of the opera took place, attended by critics and guests. According to the critic of the "Corriere di Napoli", the reactions were unanimously favorable.[21] The premiere, scheduled for the 28th, was postponed by one day due to the sudden illness of the tenor, and *Spartaco* had to be replaced at the last minute by Ponchielli's *Gioconda*. However, on the evening of March 29, Easter Sunday of 1891, *Spartaco* was finally staged, receiving an enthusiastic reception from the Neapolitan audience.[22]

Oreste Bimboni conducted the orchestra. The vocal cast included tenor Francesco Marconi as Spartaco, baritone Eugenio Dufriche as Ocnomaro, mezzo-soprano Giulia Novelli as Eutibide, soprano Aurelia Cataneo Caruson as Valeria Messala, bass Giulio Rossi as Metrobio and soprano Ines Palatano as Mirza. The stage sets were by Ernesto Fania.

At the end of the opera, the orchestra stood and applauded. "They shouted loudly, calling out the names of the composer, the conductor, and the performers. It was evident – and deeply moving – the joy on the face of that man, with nearly white hair, who, surrounded by his collaborators, took on an aspect of renewed youth and serene artistic modesty".[23]

Among the many reviews in the national and international press, the following excerpt from the article in "Il Secolo illustrato" stands out:

> This is not the revelation of a young talent heading for their first artistic triumphs that reaches us from Naples, but the recognition of a strong and powerful genius, a serene and brilliant composer celebrated by the enthusiasm of the public. Pietro Platania is Italy's foremost contrapuntist; and now this merit has been unanimously recognized by an intelligent and emotional audience that applauded his Spartaco at the Teatro San Carlo.[24]

21 "Spartaco at the San Carlo", *Corriere di Napoli*, Naples, 27–28.03.1891. The complete press review relating to *Spartaco* is contained in: I-Nc Rari 20.11 n°507. As these are hand-written copies of the originals, information about the author of the article and the page number is missing.

22 See Platania P., s.d., *Riassunto di giudizi* […]; Platania P., s.d., *Doni ed onorificenze* […].

23 *Corriere di Napoli*, 30–31.03.1891.

24 *Il Secolo Illustrato*, Milan, 12.04.1891.

Applause interrupted the performance several times during the four-hour show, after the *Proemio sinfonico* and at various moments throughout the opera. Several pieces were encored. In the days that followed, Platania received many letters and telegrams of congratulations; among those who wrote to him were Paolo Serrao,[25] Ignazio Florio,[26] Antonio Scontrino,[27] Carlo Graffeo,[28] and Francesco di Bartolo.[29] Some of them also referred to the recent death of his daughter Rosina.[30]

On May 6, a formal ceremony was held at the Conservatory to celebrate *Spartaco*'s triumph. Lawyer Giuseppe Lojacono delivered an official speech, and Platania was presented with a parchment, a laurel wreath, a collection of signatures, and a volume of tributes.[31]

4 *Spartaco* at the Costanzi in Rome

Talk of *Spartaco* in Rome began in the second half of the 1880s. The opera had initially been proposed to the impresario of Argentina, but problems had arisen, among other things, with the performers. Galli wrote to Platania informing him that it would be possible to have the Teatro Argentina in Rome for *Spartaco* provided that Platania accepted the mezzo-soprano Giulia Tavagli, "who is now enjoying so much success at the [Teatro] Costanzi as Orfeo [...] other mezzo-sopranos are not known where to find".[32] But nothing more was done about the opera at the Argentina. In 1890 there was talk of the opera at the Costanzi again, but this had to wait until the following year, after the opera's Neapolitan premiere.[33] Among the behind-the-scenes details of the Roman staging, we know that Scontrino offered to be the

25 Serrao, s.d. but 1891. Transcription of the telegram. Serrao proposed to the Conservatory teachers to celebrate with a lunch. The proposal was accepted unanimously.

26 Florio (I-Nc Rari 20.11 n°747). Business card with congratulations.

27 Scontrino, 19.04.1891.

28 Graffeo, 09.04.1891.

29 Di Bartolo, 01.07.1891. As President of the *Circolo Artistico di Catania* he also transmitted the nomination as honorary member.

30 Grasso (student of Platania and music leader 10th infantry regiment) 08.04.1891. Congratulations for the triumph of *Spartaco*. Thus in the letter: "among the many family misfortunes, here is that God finally gives you an unrivaled joy".

31 Lojacono, 1891. See also I-Nc Rari 20.11 n°507/257bis.

32 Galli for Sonzogno s.d. (I-Nc Rari 20.11 n°319).

33 Galli, 16.09.1889. In the letter Galli informed Platania that *Spartaco* would be performed at the Costanzi in Rome in December 1890.

maestro accompanist for the opera of the now elderly maestro, but that this was prevented by the impresario of the Teatro Costanzi.[34]

The Roman premiere of the opera was staged on the evening of May 29, with only one performance repeat the following evening. The cast of singers was composed of the tenor Francesco Marconi, in the role of Spartaco, the soprano Aurelia Cataneo, in the role of Valeria Messalla, the mezzo-soprano Giulia Novelli, in the role of Eutibide, the baritone Gaudenzio Salassa, in the role of Ocnomaro; the orchestra was conducted by Leopoldo Mugnone.

The opera was very well received by the audience, who made more than 20 calls to the stage and requested an encore, which they obtained, of several pieces of the opera. The critics, while unanimously highlighting the masterly workmanship of the opera, the technical perfection and the extreme classicism of the means used by Platania, also underlined, quite markedly, the extreme fragmentariness and prolixity of a work whose original sin was that of having employed an excessive quantity of means.[35]

I report below some fragments of the very rich press review that followed the performance that give the general tone of the criticism:

> Ghislanzoni certainly found too many passions and situations for his libretto that were undoubtedly theatrical, but he failed to coordinate them and give them the right emphasis [...] The figure of Spartaco does not stand out enough from the others. [...] This consequently hampered the composer's inspiration, making his output not always lyrical, and instead imbuing it with a restless and nervous drive.[36]

> The name of Platania produces, in itself, great trepidation; since it is that of a man who for many years has personified in Italy the most tireless apostolate, the most passionate worship, the most profound knowledge of the art of music. There is no doubt that these qualities all shine in the new work of the illustrious Director of the Conservatory of S. Pietro a Majella. Indeed, it seemed to many that in Spartaco they overpowered inspiration and that genius was overwhelmed by science. [...] In this work there is material for two pieces of music: just as there are two facts that give life to the action: love, that is, and the heroism of the Roman gladiator.[37]

I quote in full only the article that appeared in the *Capitan Fracassa* of Rome, because better than others it summarizes all the themes touched upon by the critics:

34 Scontrino, 24.09.1889.

35 Among the criticisms see "Spartaco del Maestro Platania", *Il Fanfullà*, Rome, 29–30.05.1891.

36 "Spartaco del Maestro Pietro Platania", *Il Popolo Romano*, Rome, 01.06.1891.

37 *L'Opinione,* Rome, 30.05.1891.

It happened in Rome as in Naples.
An initial and almost invincible feeling of tiredness for about half of the Opera; then a moment of sympathy that is determined at the Symphonic Intermezzo, which is a musical page of masterly purity, and cooled a little by the Conspiracy, gradually grows so as to change, at the great Third Finale, into an outburst of true and sincere enthusiasm; and when the curtain falls, a leveling judgment.
Everyone, at that point, persuades himself that he did well to pay homage to the good old man, whom he greets with such affectionate modesty, and who has written music worthy of Pietro Platania's reputation as a contrapuntist; a music from which the students of the Conservatory of S. Pietro a Majella can only draw good examples, and I would say beautiful writing [...] at seventy years of age, Maestro Platania proves with the fact that music is in many respects, a language like the others, and how of this language it is necessary, first of all, to know the secrets, the rules, the subtleties, and the most hidden teachings before trying to put together a speech: and the speeches or better said the pieces of this Spartaco, are almost all of an admirable perfection, some may tire you because they go on for a long time, [...] but the period is always of noble structure, the sentence is always conducted with love; so much so that I would be tempted to assign to Maestro Platania the same office and mission that Basilio Puoti had; and to greet him as Puoti was greeted by Francesco de Sanctis: the last of the purists.
The Maestro took about forty curtain calls; many pieces were repeated, and the repetition became a calamity for the artists, forced to sing an opera that is supposed to have four acts and in fact is eight. [...]
Such boundless proportions are, without doubt, detrimental to the overall effect. Equally damaging is the almost constant portrayal of a Spartaco who, as a revolutionary and a man of action, leaves much to be desired. Anything could happen in this world, except that the Spartaco of Platania excites anarchic feelings. [...]
But even with this, Platania's music will be able to survive. Every now and then a chosen musical thought will nail you and all that noble breadth of style will conquer you. Considering, and for this Mr. Sonzogno deserves praise, how he brought Spartaco to light, and how magnificently he has atoned for the sins he committed and the penalties inflicted upon the public, forcing them to endure those terrible *Cids*, those horrible *Roy d'Xs*, those grotesque *Fatherlands*, with which he afflicted us! What a distance separates Spartaco from all that unfortunate, botched, counterfeit stuff of Wagner's music and the most beautiful motifs of Marchetti, Ponchielli, and our last best!
Between Spartaco and those works there is the difference that intercedes between art and artifice, between good taste and bad taste, between the original work and manipulation; so that, even considered from this point of view, Spartaco is worthy of the favor that the Italian public is granting it.
And since it has begun in Naples and Rome, the other cities will follow.[38]

38 "Teatro Costanzi - Spartaco, tragedia lirica in quattro atti di Antonio Ghislanzoni, musica del Maestro Pietro Platania", *Capitan Fracassa*, Rome, 29.05.1891. It is perhaps worth quoting what Julian Budden wrote on the subject: "There is very little similarity between Cagnoni's *Michele Perrin* (Milan, 1864), Lauro Rossi's *Contessa di Mons* (Turin, 1874), and Platania's *Spartaco* (Naples, 1891).

5 Attempts at other Performances of *Spartaco*

In June of the same year, in the wake of the Neapolitan success, there was talk of a production of *Spartaco* in Palermo.[39] The tenor Marconi, who had previously performed the opera in Rome, expressed his willingness to participate.[40] In July, at the suggestion of the vice-president of the National Exhibition of Palermo, Antonio Scuderi (a former student of Platania), a festival in honor of the composer was decided. Platania received a letter inviting him to assume directorship of the festival and to travel to Palermo for the occasion.[41] The composer, due to too many commitments and perhaps due to the recent mourning, declined this invitation.[42]

At the end of August Platania went to Palermo where he was welcomed with great warmth. All the main newspapers of Palermo reported the news of his presence in the city.[43] The question of the festival was discussed again and Platania was offered the direction of a concert of his music.[44]

There was then pressure to finally include the staging of *Spartaco* in the theatrical season being defined by the impresario Di Giorgi.[45] In the same days some friends and admirers of the composer organized a serenade under the windows of his home in Palermo. The municipal band performed the Vespers Hymn and the symphony of *Giulio Sabino*. The composer, moved, went down into the street to personally thank those present.[46]

All three works are the fruit of attempts, more or less successful, to experiment, to adapt to the level of sophistication that prevailed in music from beyond the Alps" (Budden 1988, 103).

39 Di Napoli, 16.06.1891. To Michele Platania; Di Napoli, 24.08.1891. Also in the same period, talk began of a possible staging of the opera in Berlin. See I-Nc Rari 20.11 n°507/274 and 275. This seems to be confirmed by the fact that Sonzogno published a German translation of the opera. In this regard, see Ghislanzoni s.d. but after 1891.

40 Marconi, 09.07.1891. Marconi took the opportunity to apologize for the Roman performance: he was ill but Sonzogno had insisted that he sang. A few years later Alberto Favara conducted a performance of the *Proemio sinfonico* in Palermo. Favara 30.06. s.d. but after 1891: "Spartacus Symphony performed admirably by the orchestral association, artistic circle, thunderously repeated. Warmest congratulations. President of the Orchestral Association [...] conductor Favara".

41 Scuderi, 10.07.1891.

42 Platania P., 19.07.1891. Reply to I-Nc Rari 20.11 n°663. "so that nothing in the least disturbs the simple spontaneity of thought and action that so honors me".

43 "Ospite illustre", *L'amico del popolo*, Palermo, 31.08.1891; Adespota, August 1891.

44 "La musica all'esposizione", *Giornale di Sicilia*, Palermo, 5–6.09.1891.

45 "Pietro Platania", *Il Corporale terribile*, Palermo, 06.09.1891.

46 "Serenata al Maestro Platania", *Giornale di Sicilia*, Palermo, 6–7.09.1891; "Onori al Maestro Platania", *Il Corriere di Palermo*, 07.09.1891; *Il Pungolo*, Naples, 15–16.09.1891

A few days later, on the evening of September 14, a similar event was repeated in Catania.[47] A real procession, organized by the *Associazione Costituzionale Umberto I*, traveled a long stretch of the center of Catania, by torchlight, to arrive at the home of Platania's brother where the composer was staying.[48] For the occasion, the *Proemio sinfonico* of *Spartaco* was performed. Platania addressed a heartfelt letter of thanks to his fellow citizens, which was later published in the *Gazzetta di Catania*.[49] Subsequently, the *Proemio sinfonico* received further performances. These occurred not only in Naples,[50] where Platania directed the Conservatory, but also, facilitated by Leopoldo Mugnone's promotional activities for the opera, across Europe and, potentially, in the United States.[51]

In February 1892, there was talk again of the planned Berlin performance of *Spartaco*. Thus his friend Dürer wrote to Platania:

> Sonzogno refused to listen to reason and sent no one to Paris. What, I ask you, could Mugnone possibly achieve in Paris – a man who only knows his own musical part and doesn't even speak enough French to explain himself to the professors [there]? Because of this carelessness, it was preferred to stage Cavalleria which had the success in Paris [...] that is now known throughout the world. I fear that a similar thing could happen in Berlin if no one goes. I certainly won't put myself at Sonzogno's disposal [...].[52]

The negotiations must have proceeded in some way if Amintore Galli, in September 1892, informed Platania that Sonzogno had proposed *Spartaco* in Vienna and Berlin.[53]

However, the successes of the performances in Naples and Rome were subsequently overshadowed by numerous disappointments. Between 1892 and 1895, negotiations continued for the opera's staging in Berlin and Vienna; nevertheless,

47 Platania had arrived in Catania on the 13th or 14th. See *L'Amico del popolo*, Catania, s.d. but 14.'9.1891; "Pietro Platania", *Gazzetta di Catania*, Catania, 12.09.1891.

48 "Per il Maestro Platania", *Il Corriere di Catania*, Catania, 14.09.1891; "La dimostrazione di ieri sera pel Maestro Platania", *Gazzetta di Catania*, Catania, 15.09.1891; "Per il Maestro Platania", *Il corriere di Catania*, 15.09.1891; *La tribuna*, Rome, 16.09.1891*; Il Pungolo*, Naples, 16–17.09.1891; "Catania a Platania", *Il Zuavo*, Catania, 19–20.09.1891.

49 "Una lettera di Platania", *Gazzetta di Catania*, Catania, 20.09.1891.

50 The *Proemio* was performed again for the study essays of 1895. See "Cronaca Napoletana", *Il Fortunio*, Naples, 20.07.1895; *Il Pungolo*, Naples, 19–20.07.1895; "Arte ed artisti", *Il Pungolo parlamentare,* Naples, 21–22.07.1895.

51 I-Nc Rari 20.11 n°330; Adespota, 18.07.1895; Gracia, 12.12.1894. It is anticipated that, in the following season that will begin in January, the *Proemio sinfonico* of *Spartaco* will be performed under the direction of Mugnone; Platania P., draft of a letter to Lorenzo Camilieri. In response to a letter of the 22nd. He thanks him for the performance of the *Proemio*.

52 Dürer, 09.02.1892.

53 Galli, 01.09 [illegible] 1892.

these endeavors ultimately yielded no tangible results.[54] Michele Platania wrote in those years to Edoardo Sonzogno:

> Remembering your courtesies towards me, I take the liberty of writing you this letter without my father's knowledge, with the hope of having some news about Spartaco. [...] because I am embittered to see a man like my father so displeased, who for the value of his work, [...] had placed great trust in a triumphal tour of the work after the two successes in Rome and Naples.[55]

We also know that Platania, at Sonzogno's own request, prepared cuts to the opera for subsequent performances:

> Here are the cuts that I have already made in the 1st act. They are the following: In the introductory chorus on page 30 after the second measure, it goes to the third measure on page 35. In the dance on page 45, after the twelfth measure it falls to F and goes to the blast of internal trumpets that announce the procession and enter with the C instead of the E; like this: [example follows]. [Etc.]. [...] Thus, I believe I have obtained all the possible brevity desired by Mr. Edoardo and perhaps even a little more! [...] P.S. All these cuts that I have told you about must be carefully marked in the parts with the usual signs, without removing what is written.[56]

A few years later Platania revised the opera to lighten the overall structure. Michele Platania, in a letter sent to Sonzogno in 1902, asked for support for a possible revival of the opera at the Massimo in Palermo with Laganà's company. Michele Platania wrote that his father was already working to lighten the opera and had found a poet to revise the libretto: "He has already conferred with a talented poet, who has conceived and proposed some changes to the libretto, which will certainly make it more sober, more concise, more interesting and easier to stage".[57]

54 Scaduti, 09.04.1892. There was still talk of a revival of the opera at the Teatro Bellini in Catania. In this regard see "Una lettera di Pietro Platania", *Corriere di Catania,* Catania, 27.03.1892. Reproduces a letter of 21.03.1892 from Platania to Romeo Taverni thanking him for having publicly pleaded the cause of *Spartaco* in Catania.

55 Platania M. s.d.. Draft of a letter to Edoardo Sonzogno.

56 Platania P., Naples, s.d. Draft of a letter to Amintore Galli. (I-Nc Rari 20.11 n°722).

57 Platania, M., 10.09.1902. To Edoardo Sonzogno.

6 *Spartaco* at the Dal Verme in Milan

In the spring of 1893, everything was ready for the Milan premiere of *Spartaco*. In April, the parts for the opera had already been distributed; on May 4, Platania went to Milan to attend, as agreed with Sonzogno, the rehearsals of the opera.[58]

Spartaco was performed at the Teatro Dal Verme on the evening of May 13th, with "immense" success.[59] Platania was called to the stage about 20 times, and many parts of the opera were applauded, some of which were then repeated. This time, Sonzogno had called Leopoldo Mugnone to conduct the orchestra, who in 1890 had conducted the premiere of *Cavalleria Rusticana*. Together with Mugnone, the vocal cast consisted of Concetta Bordalba (Valeria), Elisa Persini (Eutibide), Augusto Brogi (Spartaco), Ottorino Beltrami (Ocnomaro) and Giulio Paoletti (Metrobio). The choirs were directed by Torquato Bonazzi.[60] This is what the critic of the "Gazzetta dei Teatri" wrote:

> Spartaco is certainly not an opera – let it be said without the slightest intention of diminishing the merit of our friend Mascagni – for those who see nothing beyond *Cavalleria Rusticana*. Instead, all those who a few nights earlier were in ecstasy over the Damnation of Faust will find themselves at ease in it. Spartaco is an opera, in terms of concepts and form, belonging to the classical genre. It is not the tickling of the ears, but the feeding of the mind, that one should seek in this work so elevated, so severe, so grandiose. The score is worthy of its author, and one could not, I believe, give more or better. There are pages in it that I would willingly call monumental. The success it had was a success of profound conviction. The illustrious maestro must have been, I believe, very satisfied, and can boast of one more triumph in his glorious career as a composer.[61]

Following the success obtained, Platania received many congratulatory telegrams. Among them, one from the mayor of Catania.[62]

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58 Galli, 24.04.1893; *Corriere di Catania*, 08.05.1893. Platania stayed at the Hotel du Globe.

59 "Spartaco", *Il Secolo*, Milan, 14–15.05.1893; "Spartacus a Milano", *Corriere di Catania*, Catania, 15.05.1893; "Spartacus a Milano", *Corriere di Napoli*, 14–15.05.1893; *Il Secolo*, Milan, 16-17.05.1893; *Il Secolo* Milan, 19–20.05.1893; "Pietro Platania and Al dal verme. Spartacus", *Gazzetta dei teatri*, Milan, 18.05.1893. The opera met with the same success in the two subsequent performances. However, traces of a controversy can be found in Spetrino, 27.05.1893: "in Milan the indignation raised by the barbaric attack by Mr. Noseda is [illegible]. I sent you the issue of the Lanterna, the newspaper of Cav. Pessina, which gives him a proper slap; […] and in the meantime she remains outside of any controversy, as befits the loftiness of her position."

60 "Spartaco", *Il Secolo*, Milan, 14–15.05.1893.

61 "Al Dal Verme. Spartaco", *Gazzetta dei teatri*, Milan, 18.05.1893.

62 "Per un nostro concittadino", *Gazzetta di Catania*, Catania, 18.05.1893.

The following year, some parts of *Spartaco* had to be performed for the events of the Milan Exposition; Paolo Grasso wrote to the composer and Sonzogno to receive authorization.[63]

7 An Overview of the Opera

The relationship that tied Platania to the opera house was long and more closely linked than others to the external circumstances of his life. If it was precisely the opera house that gave fame and success to the young Platania between the 1850s and 1860s, later the composer seemed to be more discontinuously interested in the theatre. Today we know that this is a mistaken impression; Platania tried several times to get closer to the opera house by purchasing the rights to librettos that were never set to music, or only partially set to music (such as Il *Gladiatore di Ravenna*), or by composing works that however did not have the honour of the stage (such as *Francesca di Soranzo* and *Giulio Sabino*).[64] Nevertheless, an interval of 24 years separates the Roman performance of *Vendetta Slava*, his last opera staged, from the premiere of *Spartaco*, his last opera. Finally, I would like to add that Platania, from a stylistic and chronological point of view, covered most of the chronological range of nineteenth-century Italian opera. If *Matilde Bentivoglio*, his first dramatic work, still reflects the influence of Bellini and Donizetti's *bel canto*, *Spartaco* engages, in its expressive qualities, and in its harmonic and dramatic language as well, with the contemporary *verismo*. In *Spartaco*, Platania contrasts the easy effect and the 'crude' themes typical of *verismo* theatre with a concept of high, committed theatre, whose roots lie in the origins of Italian opera for music. I will now discuss some parts of this last work.

7.1 An Overview

Spartaco is an opera in a symphonic *Proemio* and four acts with a libretto by Antonio Ghislanzoni. Platania, as we have seen, worked on it for a long time, seeing it,

63 Grasso, 16.05.1894; Grasso, 24.05.1894. Sonzogno granted Grasso permission to perform parts of *Spartaco* with the band of the 10th Infantry Regiment, of which he was director.

64 The libretto of *Giulio Sabino* contains the following wording: "To be performed in the real Bellini Theatre for the theatrical year 1874–75". See Ramirez 1875, frontispiece. Of *Corte di Enrico IIII*, given as complete by Platania, only a few drafts remain. See in this regard Platania s.d., *Titoli e documenti* 34.

in some way, as the *summa* of his work and his doctrine. As often happened in those years, established composers, after a long absence from the stage, entrusted their final works as a kind of artistic and human 'testament'. Consider, with the necessary distinctions, Verdi's *Otello*. Unlike the novel, in the libretto the story revolves around the intersection of three loves: Valeria's mutual love for Spartaco, and the two unrequited loves of Eutibide (for Spartaco) and Ocnomaro (for Eutibide). The historical and political story is present here only in the background, as a pretext for instrumental elements (such as the extensive use of trumpets and brass instruments) and for large mass scenes with choirs, supporting actors and off-stage instruments.[65]

7.2 *Spartaco*: The Plot

Set in 1st century BC Rome and Capua during Silla's time, the *libretto* of *Spartaco* simplifies a lot Giovagnoli's novel. Spartaco, a Thracian king turned Roman slave and gladiator, plots a revolt with his loyal friend Ocnomaro.

Act I opens with Roman festivities. Spartaco, seeing his enslaved sister Mirza, laments her fate. He learns his beloved Valeria, Silla's wife, has summoned him. He confesses his love to Valeria, revealing its impossibility, then leaves for Capua to gather rebels.

Act II sees Eutibide, secretly in love with Spartaco, heartbroken by news of his love for Valeria. She seduces Ocnomaro, who is then tricked. Spartaco returns, understands Eutibide's deception, but forgives Ocnomaro. They reunite with their betrayed gladiators, inspiring them for war.

Act III is in the gladiator camp. Ocnomaro sings of Eutibide, while Spartaco plans to meet Valeria. A jealous Eutibide, overhearing, convinces Ocnomaro that Spartaco is a traitor. Gladiators interrupt Spartaco and Valeria's meeting. Eutibide saves Spartaco, who is then carried triumphantly towards Rome.

Act IV finds Valeria and Mirza mourning Spartaco. Eutibide arrives, seeking help for him. Spartaco, wounded, hides with Ocnomaro in a cave. As the slaves lose the battle, Valeria finds a dying Spartaco. Ocnomaro and Eutibide, with the defeated gladiators, face their grim destiny.

Ghislanzoni's libretto is decidedly traditional, with its rigid division into scenes and the usual alternation of blank verse and rhyming verse to divide the scene from the aria. Platania felt this structure as a limitation and therefore decided to add to the division into scenes, operated by Ghislanzoni, some groupings into dramaturgical

65 See in this regard Pinto 2014, 227–232.

units of a higher order. You can get an idea of these groupings by reading the work's index provided below:

ATTO PRIMO
QUADRO I
Baccanale e Danze
Intermezzo di Mimi e Suonatori e seguito del Baccanale e Danze
Corteo e Coro sacerdotale
Romanza di Spartaco
Coro. Danze e Ridda
QUADRO II
Il Conclave di Valeria
Duetto

ATTO SECONDO
QUADRO I
Canzona e Duetto
Recitativo e Duetto
Intermezzo
QUADRO II
Congiura

ATTO TERZO
QUADRO I
Introduzione e Romanza di Ocnomaro
Dialogo ed Arioso drammatico
QUADRO II
Duetto Valerla e Spartaco
Concertato e Mirza guerresca

ATTO QUARTO
QUADRO I
Duetto Valeria ed Eutibide
QUADRO II
Episodio orchestrale- Scena e Coro
Duetto Valeria e Spartaco e Finale

The opera, with elements that clearly refer to the Grand Opéra and, more specifically, to *Aida*, is grandiose, conceived for large masses and with a material and conceptual density that put considerable strain on the listeners of the Neapolitan premiere. In addition to inserting symphonic pieces into the opera (*Proemio sinfonico*, *Intermezzo*, *Episodio orchestrale*), Platania also worked on a fusion of the different moments of the opera into a continuous musical organism, in accordance with the taste of the time. There are therefore few closed pieces, and I intend to focus on the two main ones contained therein: the *Romanza di Spartaco* and the *Romanza di*

Ocnomaro; these, together with the *Proemio sinfonico*, were the pieces of the opera that had the greatest success.[66]

7.3 The Romanza di Spartaco

As I wrote before, the fifth scene opens after the dialogue between Spartaco and his sister Mirza. She is a slave of Valeria, wife of Silla with whom Spartaco is in love. She has come to warn her brother that Valeria wants to see him. Here is the text of scene V:

Atto I. Scena V
Spartaco:
Valeria a sé mi chiama; è un sogno il mio?
Di qual splendida aurora
La mia notte rifulge! Un mar di sangue
Di là m'incalza, mentre
Un puro astro radiante
Mi sorride… mi invita…
Ah! Sulla soglia dei sognati cieli
Tutti risento di mia infausta vita
Gli spasimi crudeli!
(breve pausa)
Odio ed amor; due palpiti
Sento alternarsi in core;
Fuoco d'averno è l'odio,
Luce di ciel l'amore…
Sogno vendette orribili,
Sogno cimenti audaci,
Poi… fra carezze e baci
Anelo di morir.
(con entusiasmo)
A lei si voli- si ritempri il core
Nel raggio ardente della sua beltà;
E la luce d'amore
Le vittorie dell'odio affretterà.

The scene opens with an *Andante cantabile*, in D major 4/4, over the words of the first verse. This is followed by a change of meter (3/4, b. 4, ex. 1). Here a first melodic phrase is proposed, of 6 bars, over the words "Di qual splendent aurora la mia notte

66 The vocal score of the opera is fully accessible at the following link: https://imslp.org/wiki/Spartaco_(Platania%2C_Pietro).

rifulge!", characterized by the lower appoggiatura of the fifth of the chord (both tonic and dominant, b. 4, 5, 8). A new change of meter and tempo follows (*Moderato mosso*, 4/4, b. 10, ex. 1). The climate immediately becomes more agitated on the words "Un mar di sangue di là m'incalza", to suddenly change at bar 15. Here a new section opens (*Moderato*), initially in F major ("mentre un puro astro radiante mi sorriso"), then concluded with a dominant seventh of B flat major (b. 23). The scene gives way to the *Romanza*, in the key of B flat major in 3/4. This opens with two introductory bars characterized by a double cadence, perfect and plagal, where both the V and the IV degrees are presented with the minor third (bb. 1–2 ex. 2).[67] The tenor then enters with two four-bar phrases, the second of which first tonicizes D minor and then F major (bb. 3–10, ex. 2).

A transitional modulation, using the G of the dominant chord of F major, leads into the key of E flat minor ("Sogno vendette orribili", bar. 11), with a two-bar fragment repeated over two consecutive lines (bars. 11–14). A harmonic variation at the end of the repetition leads back into the key of B flat major, where the central phrase of the piece begins; a 'broad' melody built over three three-bar elements (bars. 15–24, ex. 3).

The second of the three elements is built over a parody motif of the first but with changed harmonies: the second element prepares a modulation to D minor, a key rejected by the third element which instead bends back towards the key of B flat major.

67 In my issue, roman numerals are indicated according to the Italian tradition of sensible bass.

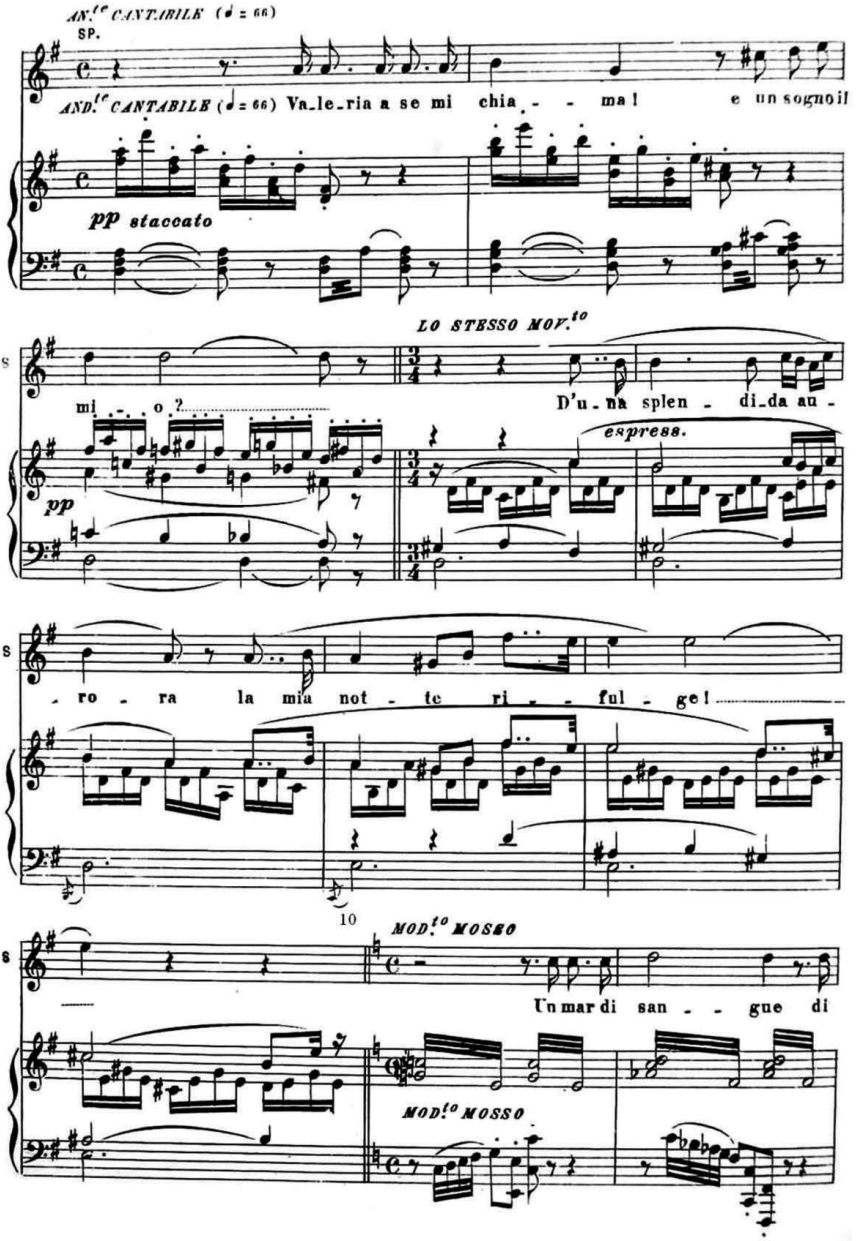

Fig. 1: Scene, bars 1–11. *Spartaco*: tragedia lirica in quattro atti e otto quadri / di Antonio Ghislanzoni; musica di Pietro Platania; riduzione per canto e pianoforte di Nicolò Celega. Milano. Edoardo Sonzogno, 1891.

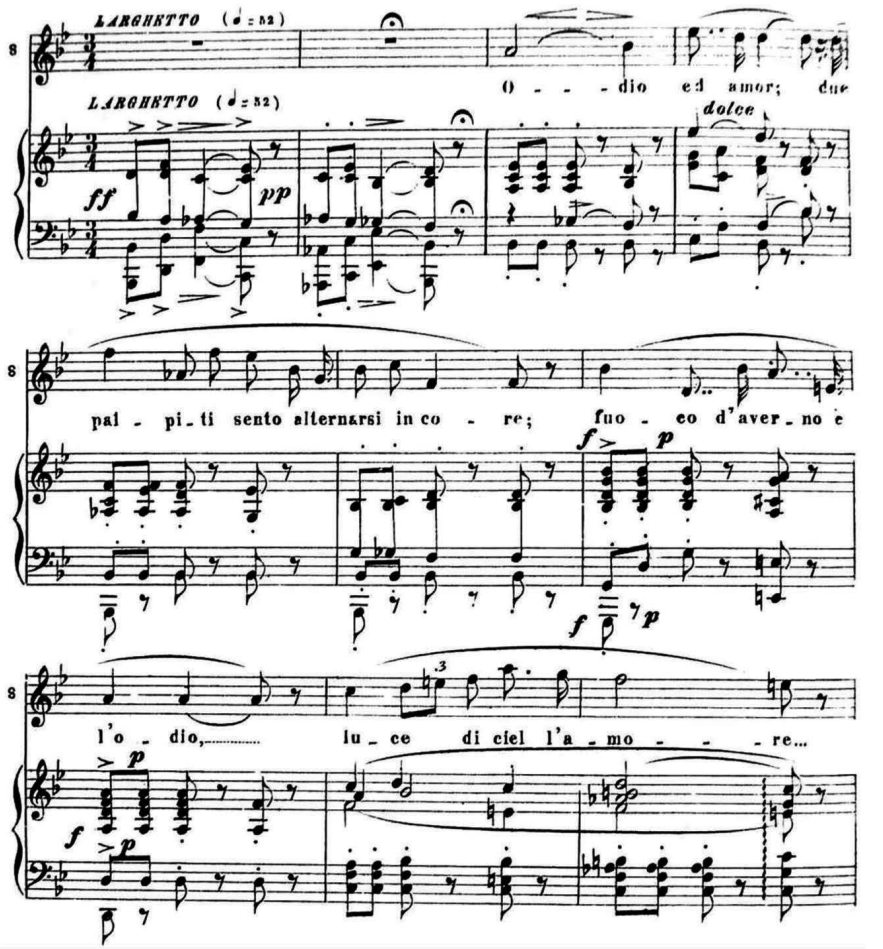

Fig. 2: *Romanza di Spartaco*, bars 1–10. *Spartaco*: tragedia lirica in quattro atti e otto quadri / di Antonio Ghislanzoni; musica di Pietro Platania; riduzione per canto e pianoforte di Nicolò Celega. Milano. Edoardo Sonzogno, 1891.

The phrase is repeated with rhythmically different accompaniments (bars 25–29), but at the third bar of the second element a new fragment is inserted, in D minor (*affrettato* bar 31), consisting of a repeated two-bar module and followed by a four-bar melodic expansion that closes in the key of B flat major. A six-bar coda follows, above the repetition of the last line, with the tenor closing on a high B flat.

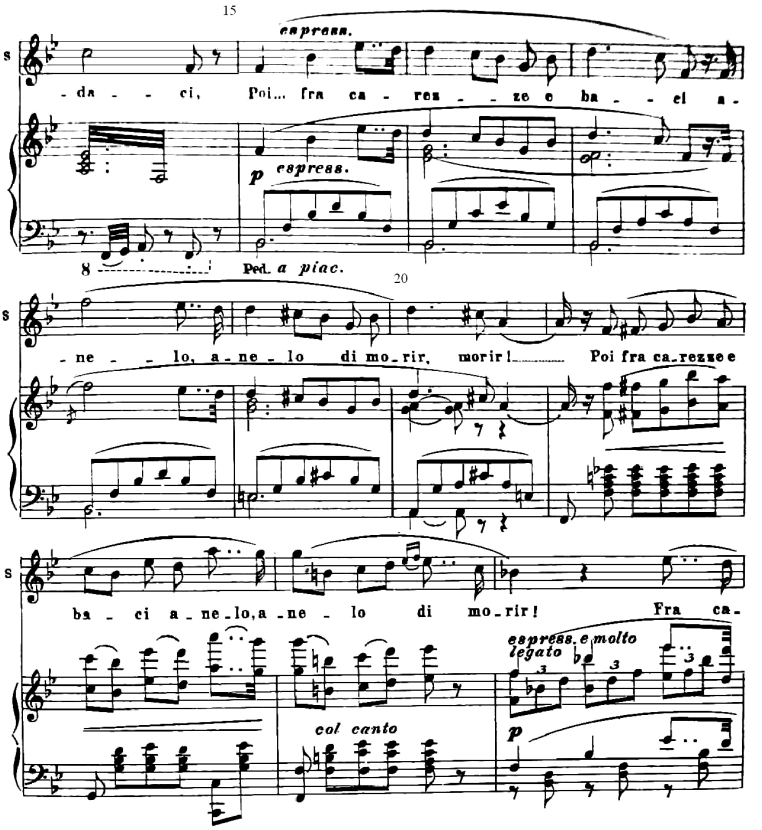

Fig. 3: *Romanza di Spartaco*, bars 14–24. *Spartaco*: tragedia lirica in quattro atti e otto quadri / di Antonio Ghislanzoni; musica di Pietro Platania; riduzione per canto e pianoforte di Nicolò Celega. Milano. Edoardo Sonzogno, 1891.

7.4 The Romanza di Ocnomaro

Ocnomaro, Spartaco's faithful companion, is in love with Eutibide, a Greek slave. She, in turn, is in love with Spartaco but has discovered his love for Valeria and is plotting revenge. It is sunset at the camp, and Spartaco, who is going to Valeria for a romantic rendezvous, leaves Ocnomaro in command of the rebel gladiators. Here is the text of the scene.

Atto III. Scena I.
The gladiator camp near Tusculum. As the curtain rises.
Trumpet calls are heard in the distance. It is sunset.

Ocnomaro (leaves the tent):
Alle tende ricovrano le schiere...
Tace il clangore delle trombe. – Dove,
Dove ne andaste, o fieri
Entusiasmi di guerra? Ov'è la forte
Anima mia, cui tanto bella in campo
E gloriosa sorridea la morte?
Dunque... un vile son io?...
Dall'insano desio che mi divora
Ogni senso d'onor vinto sarebbe?...
Eutibide celeste,
Dea luminosa di mie tetre notti,
Ove ti aggiri?... Apprendimi la via
Che al dolce amplesso tuo mi ricongiunga...
E tu mia diverrai, per sempre mia.

Lontan... pel vasto oceano...
Vorrei rapirti meco...
Dirti mia sposa ai talami
D'un ignorato speco;
Gioire il ciel, mirandoti
Sovra il mio cor sopita,
Coi baci miei la vita
Ridarti in sul mattin.

Vorrei, spirando l'etere
Dei tuoi celesti aromi,
Chiamarti mia col fascino
Dei più soavi nomi,
E inebbriata l'anima
De' tuoi divini accenti
Spegner le labbra ardenti
Nell'onda del tuo crin.

The scene opens with an instrumental introduction (*Allegro*, D major, 4/4) based on two contrasting motifs. A motif in semiquavers, entrusted to the strings in unison, is contrasted with a series of chords of the wind instruments and strings that close on a dominant chord of D major (bar 7, ex. 4).

In this key the trumpets, on stage, intone a solemn motif immediately contrasted with the two elements heard before (bars 8–10, ex. 4), even if the second element is here contracted in just two bars to re-propose the motif entrusted to the trumpets (bars 8–14). This is repeated with slight modifications, above a D pedal of the strings, once by the trumpets and then by the woodwinds (bars 15–20). A new section begins (*Andante*), opened by a new phrase of the cellos that tonicizes the

key of G minor followed by a strange cadence that ends with a bare fifth, leaving the G mode intentionally unexpressed (bar 26, ex. 5). The bassoon repeats the pattern of the cellos, first 'suggesting' the key of C minor (bb. 26–27), then E flat major and finally modulating to G major, the key signature of the introduction (bb. 29–32).

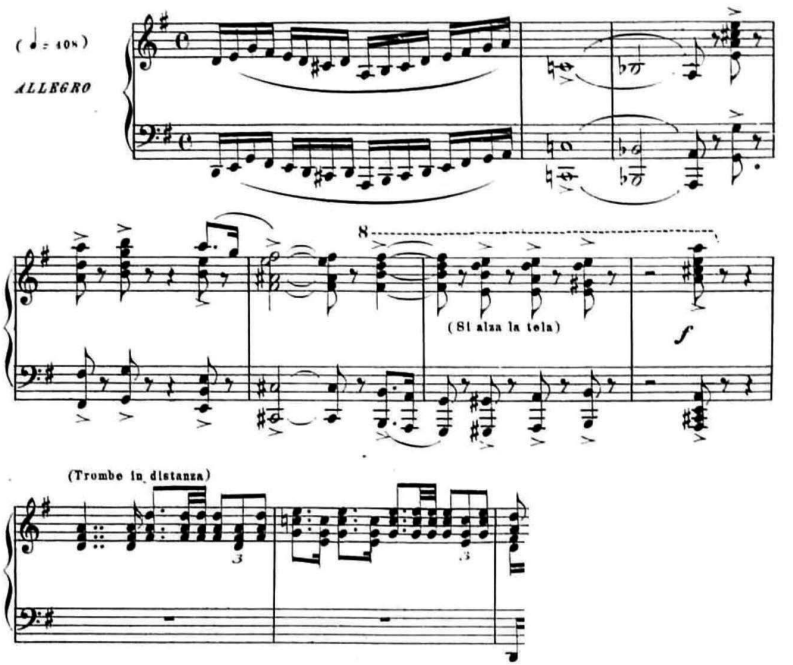

Fig. 4: Scene, bars 1–10. *Spartaco*: tragedia lirica in quattro atti e otto quadri / di Antonio Ghislanzoni; musica di Pietro Platania; riduzione per canto e pianoforte di Nicolò Celega. Milano. Edoardo Sonzogno, 1891.

This is an interesting aspect of this scene; the key signature is G major from the beginning, but this key is not actually confirmed until the end of the orchestral introduction (bar 32); only in bar 21 do we have a passage in G minor (which is not confirmed), which retrospectively makes the first 20 bars a long cadence in G major and/or minor. In bar 32 the baritone enters with a few bars that tone up the key of C major. These bars of melodic declamation are followed by an *Andante appassionato* (bars 39–42) that passes through the key of D major, C# minor, F# minor. Two bars of *Allegro* again (bars 43–44) lead into the key (or rather the area) of A minor, the key in which another short recitative takes place (bars 45–47), immediately abandoned for the key of C major (Allegro, bar 48). Here begins a new section

("Dunque un vile son io?") progressively more agitated that concludes, with three bars of *Andante* (bars 56–58), the scene. Everything would suggest a confirmation of C major, but right at the end Platania, through the use of altered chords, modulates to the key of E major, the key in which the *Romanza* begins.

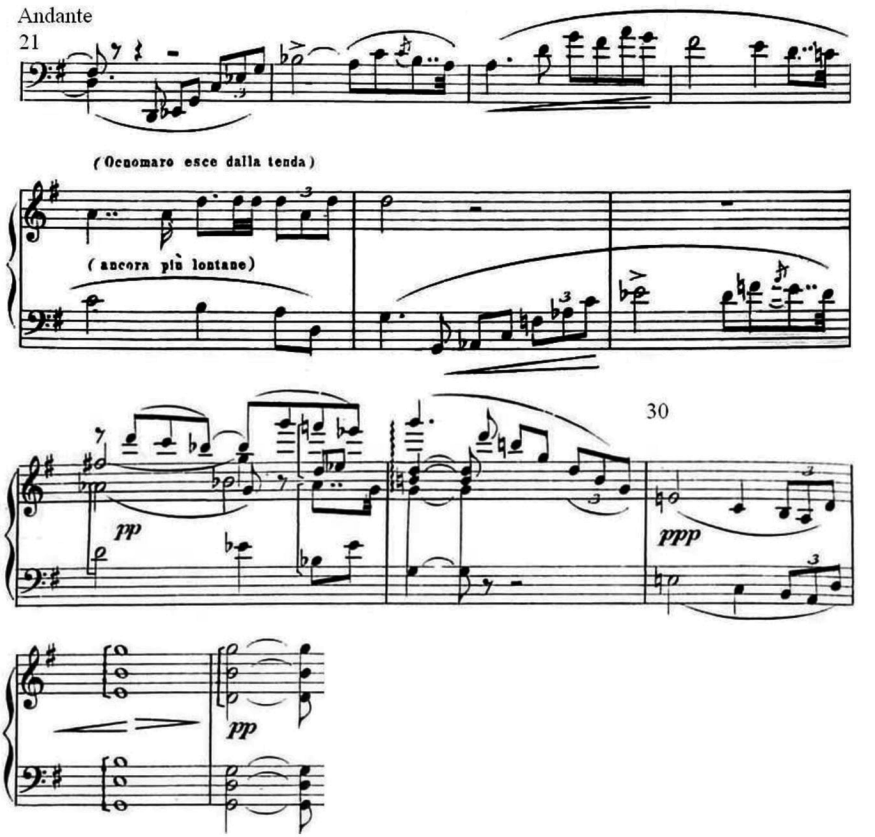

Fig. 5: Scene, bars 21–32. *Spartaco*: tragedia lirica in quattro atti e otto quadri / di Antonio Ghislanzoni; musica di Pietro Platania; riduzione per canto e pianoforte di Nicolò Celega. Milano. Edoardo Sonzogno, 1891.

This (*Larghetto mosso*, 3/4) is built on a series of four-bar units. The first two (bars 1–8, ex. 6) confirm the home key, the second two are tonally more mobile and arrive, after eight bars, at the key of B major (bar 17, ex. 6).

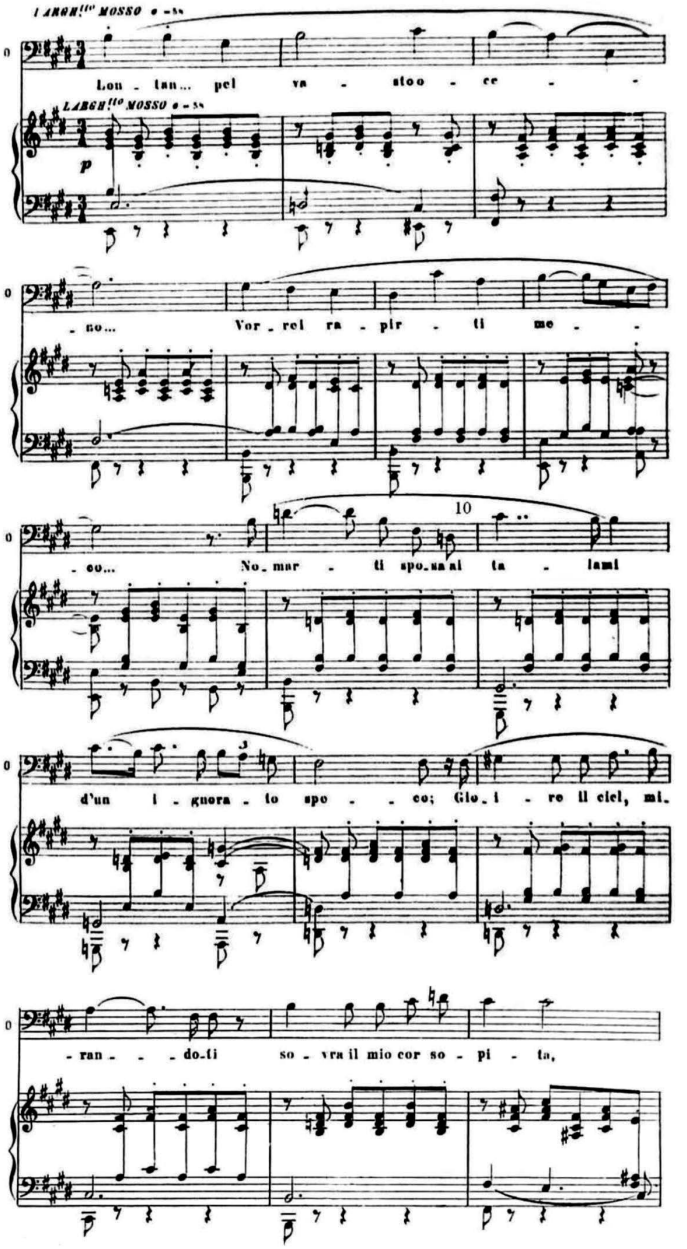

Fig. 6: *Romanza di Ocnomaro*, bars 1–16. *Spartaco*: tragedia lirica in quattro atti e otto quadri / di Antonio Ghislanzoni; musica di Pietro Platania; riduzione per canto e pianoforte di Nicolò Celega. Milano. Edoardo Sonzogno, 1891.

Here, the new key and a new accompanying figuration underline the lines "coi baci miei la vita ridarti in sul mattin". This part, square in the succession of bars and marked by an open and serene expressive climate, is followed by the melodic and harmonic 'push' of the following bars (bars 25–39). These are organized in a series of incisions according to the following scheme:

[2+2+2+3] bb. 25–32 **Modulating** **«Vorrei spirando l'etere»**	**+**	**[2+2+3] bb. 33–39** **E major** **«spegner le labra ardenti»**

Fig. 7: Scheme from *Spartaco*: tragedia lirica in quattro atti e otto quadri / di Antonio Ghislanzoni; musica di Pietro Platania; riduzione per canto e pianoforte di Nicolò Celega. Milano. Edoardo Sonzogno, 1891.

At the center of the second group the cadencial six-four brings us firmly back to the key of E major, the basic key. A coda follows (bb. 40–46) marked by a seventh chord on the VII with a minor third and diminished seventh above a tonic pedal and by a progressive harmonic and dynamic 'transcoloration' towards the conclusion, high and in *pp*, of the *Romanza*.

8 Analytical Considerations and Conclusions

Even from these two excerpts of the work we can grasp aspects that characterize the entire work *Spartaco*. Here Platania takes to extreme consequences elements already present in the previous collection of poems *I Tramonti*.[68] A central aspect, for the repercussions it has on various aspects of writing, is the very particular use that Platania makes of harmony. From a purely 'local' perspective we can observe how harmony is often evasive and that only in certain points does it clarify its directionality. Just look, for example, at the beginning of the *Romanza di Spartaco* and note how that attack of the tenor above a 7–8 suspension accompanied by a triple suspension (2–3/4–3 and a 6b that resolves on the fifth) causes a forward slide waiting for a confirmation that arrives only 4 bars later and with a fifth in the high note, that is to say with the weakest of the confirmations considered by traditional harmony. This way of proceeding, very often used by Platania, causes a general lengthening of the breath, which, although it finds support in the structure of phrases that sometimes resemble, in their internal dynamics, the old closed pieces

68 See Stella 2008, 242–258.

of Italian opera, no longer knows that segmentation made up entirely of strong cadences that interrupt the melodic and harmonic flow.

In this sense, the tonal construction sometimes becomes complex, as in the case of the introduction of the *Romanza di Ocnomaro*, where, as we have seen, the entire introduction ends up playing the role of an extension of the dominant, but only at its conclusion. In many places it is impossible to establish with certainty which key we are in. But the chromatic movements are always perfectly coherent if observed from a 'horizontal', contrapuntal point of view.[69] The key is often only suggested, not affirmed, and this often with an evident coloristic function. This last aspect is to be put not only in relation to purely musical factors but also in relation to the text. Transitions, modulations to distant keys, unresolved dissonances, demonstrate a harmonic language that was rather up to date for the time, which allows the author great flexibility in adhering to the individual dramatic situation. Platania moves on two axes of a more liquid versus a more schematic use of harmony, also in relation to the different moments of a text that he tries to follow closely by all means.

In the modulations, it is worth noting the wide range of possibilities Platania derives from pivot chord modulations. These allow him continuous tonal inflections with tonalities only suggested and immediately abandoned to move in other directions. The old predilection for modulations to third related keys intervals of thirds, superior and inferior, a typical trait of 19th century Italian music, is here integrated by a predilection for what I can call the 'anti-relative', that is, the key of the third major degree.

All these elements are certainly the fruit of a profound knowledge that Platania had of harmonic science and of the territories that had been conquered in those years. However, this profound erudition never becomes an end in itself, but is always put at the service of a musical or dramatic ideal. The only risk, and this is something Platania had to be aware of if he had decided on a series of cuts and modifications for the planned revival of the opera, is a certain prolixity, a certain 'demonstrative' sense, almost as if wanting to show off the composer's abilities, which in some places weighs down the opera.

To conclude: as this essay has aimed to demonstrate, despite its weaknesses, *Spartaco* contains many beautiful pages of music very much in the vein of the veristic style, particularly Mascagni's *Cavalleria*, but also other works that would follow in the years to come. This was likely a key reason for the greater success of the

69 Platania fits, also in this respect, into the wake of the Neapolitan tradition that had cultivated the idea of a counterpoint of diminution whose basis, in the multiform 'materializations' that it could assume, was always the counterpoint of the first species. See Van Tour 2015.

aforementioned part of the opera, alongside the *Proemio sinfonico*. In this regard, just for the sake of curiosity, I include, at the end of my essay, the last bars of the opera:

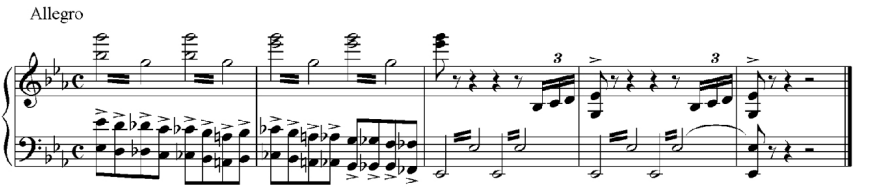

Fig. 8: Last bars of *Spartaco*: tragedia lirica in quattro atti e otto quadri / di Antonio Ghislanzoni; musica di Pietro Platania; riduzione per canto e pianoforte di Nicolò Celega. Milano. Edoardo Sonzogno, 1891.

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Spartacus 2.0: Rewriting and Remediation of a Forgotten Opera from the Late 19th-Century Neapolitan School

Abstract: This article presents a contemporary reworking of *Spartaco*, a virtually forgotten nineteenth-century Italian opera composed by Pietro Platania in 1892. The project stems from the musicological research of Gaetano Stella, whose critical rediscovery of the original score provided the foundation for a creative reinterpretation. Through a dramaturgical and musical transformation – integrated within a digital ecosystem including real-time audience interaction, mobile-web technologies, and visual/audio processing platforms – the project seeks to reclaim and activate the opera's symbolic and artistic potential in a contemporary context. The case study explores new models of operatic remediation and audience engagement, combining educational collaboration (with conservatory and fine arts students), participatory dramaturgy, and modular compositional strategies. This approach contributes to the valorization of lesser-known musical heritage and the redefinition of opera as a participatory, hybrid, and inclusive form. The Spartacus prototype ultimately proposes a replicable methodology for expanded opera-making in the digital age.

Keywords: *Spartaco*; Pietro Platania; Digital Opera; Community Opera; Authorship.

1 Introduction: Rethinking Opera through Remediation and Participation

The ongoing crisis in opera audiences and funding, especially in Italy, has generated a surge of experimental projects aimed at rethinking operatic forms, dramaturgies, and performance contexts. Against this backdrop, *Spartacus*, composed in 1892 by Pietro Platania (1828–1907), offers a compelling opportunity to revisit and recontextualize an overlooked work through the lens of digital remediation and participatory art. This initiative stems directly from the scholarly research of Gaetano Stella, whose critical investigation of Platania's opera – presented in his contribution *"Pietro Platania's* Spartaco: *A Forgotten Success Between Erudition and Verismo"* – has been instrumental in catalyzing this creative reinterpretation.

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Thanks to his work, this expanded project was able to take shape, transforming a historical opera into a living experimental platform.

Our aim is twofold: to recover a neglected chapter in Italian music history and to propose an operatic model that embraces interactivity, mobility, and co-creation. By repositioning *Spartaco* within a contemporary artistic and technological framework, we seek to establish a dialogue between the historical archive and present-day audiences, developing what we call a model of "expanded opera".

2 Platania's *Spartaco* in Historical and Cultural Context

Despite his prestige as a conductor, theorist, and director of the Naples Conservatory, Pietro Platania remains a marginal figure in standard operatic historiography. *Spartaco*, a late work composed in 1892, was never widely staged or recorded. The libretto, based only loosely on Roman sources, presents a narrative structure quite distant from the revolutionary or heroic portrayals common in later interpretations.

Rather than emphasizing Spartacus as a champion of resistance or as a proto-revolutionary symbol, Platania's opera portrays him as a Romantic figure, tormented, introspective, and enmeshed in emotional entanglements. The libretto focuses on love triangles and interpersonal tensions, relegating the slave revolt to a narrative backdrop. This dramaturgical choice aligns with late-nineteenth-century operatic conventions, privileging personal sentiment and melodrama over collective struggle or political allegory.

Yet, this decision contrasts sharply with the trajectory that the figure of Spartacus would follow in the broader cultural imagination. By the end of the nineteenth century, Spartacus was already emerging as a mythic figure, increasingly shaped by literature, painting, and sculpture. As the rebellious slave who dared to challenge the Roman Empire, he embodied a powerful – and increasingly symbolic – archetype of liberation. However, in Platania's treatment, this symbolic dimension remains underdeveloped. While Spartacus's moral strength and personal dignity are present, the opera does not fully engage with his broader political resonance.

This absence is all the more striking given the historical context. The late 1800s saw the rise of nationalist movements and the growing articulation of the idea of popular self-determination. In this light, Platania's *Spartacus* – although not explicitly political – nonetheless presents its protagonist as a figure of emancipation, echoing the spirit of an era marked by aspirations to freedom and collective identity. Our rewriting builds upon this latent theme, elevating it to the foreground: rather

than treating the uprising as a scenic backdrop to individual drama, we emphasize Spartacus as a symbol of collective liberation, resisting systems of oppression that continue to resonate in our time.

The twentieth century would witness a significant evolution in the symbolic life of Spartacus. His name and story became touchstones of socialist and Marxist iconography, particularly through the appropriation of his legacy by the Spartacist League in early Weimar Germany, which stood in open opposition to rising nationalist and fascist ideologies. The figure of Spartacus would go on to inspire partisan fighters across Europe, serving as a *nom de guerre* for various resistance movements. By the mid-century, Spartacus emerged again – this time in Hollywood – as a popular antihero. The 1960 film *Spartacus*, directed by Stanley Kubrick and starring Kirk Douglas, reimagined him as a cinematic counterpoint to Christian martyrdom narratives like Ben-Hur, recasting the rebel slave as a universal symbol of dignity, resistance, and moral defiance.

In this long arc, Platania's opera occupies a transitional moment: a Romantic Spartacus, emotionally potent but ideologically neutralized, poised between personal suffering and emerging historical force. Our work engages critically with this moment, reactivating the symbolic potential of Spartacus for contemporary audiences. Through performance, participatory rewriting, and dramaturgical intervention, we aim to restore the revolutionary energy and collective aspiration embedded in the figure, a voice not only of the past, but of the possible.

3 Project Objectives and Methodology

Our project unfolds along several axes:

1. Historical Recovery: Transcription, study, and selective reuse of Platania's score and libretto.
2. Dramaturgical Rewriting: Development of a modular libretto with multiple scenic branches.
3. Technological Mediation: Use of Max/MSP, TouchDesigner, OSC protocols, and mobile-web interaction.
4. Community Engagement: Involvement of local conservatory and art students, as well as audiences.
5. Site-specific restaging: the show is designed to be performed also in disused cultural buildings, schools and spaces not intended for opera performances.

These elements are not sequential but integrated within a unified compositional and curatorial approach. They reflect our commitment to a “third-stage” operatic thinking, one that transcends the traditional division between stage, audience, and media.

4 Audience Interaction: Mobile-Web Interfaces and Live Decision-Making

A particular approach of audience interaction has been chosen, with spectators being invited to influence the live opera performance by scanning a QR code with their mobile phones. This leads to a voting interface where each participant can select: scenic backdrops (e.g., dawn, sunset, starry night, etc.), for each scene.

Votes are displayed in real time as percentages in the webpage shown on each mobile phone, and the most-voted options are enacted during the live performance. The first voting session takes place during the opening symphony, determining the initial scene. Subsequent votes occur during each preceding scene, giving the audience a two-minute window to influence what follows.

Up to three overlapped ambient sound textures from a wide choice of soundscapes (e.g., nature, city, voices, airport soundscape, etc.), can be chosen.

The technical implementation relies on lightweight mobile-web technology using HTML, JavaScript, and WebSocket or polling-based communication. The vote data is transmitted as JSON to a central server and redistributed to all connected devices in real time. This allows the audience to monitor collective voting behavior and see live updates as percentages next to each choice on their mobile screens. Interface constraints ensure that users can select only one scenic option and up to three Foley layers.

This system enables a responsive and participatory dramaturgy, in which the scenic and sonic environments of the opera evolve in real time according to the audience’s collective decisions. Figure 1 shows the display of a mobile phone during a voting session within a scene, where users are prompted to select the next scenographic setting and ambient Foley sounds. A green progress bar indicates the percentage of votes received for each option, and is updated every three seconds.

Once an individual user submits their vote, the selection interface is disabled for that user, while the overall voting percentages continue to update until the voting window closes.

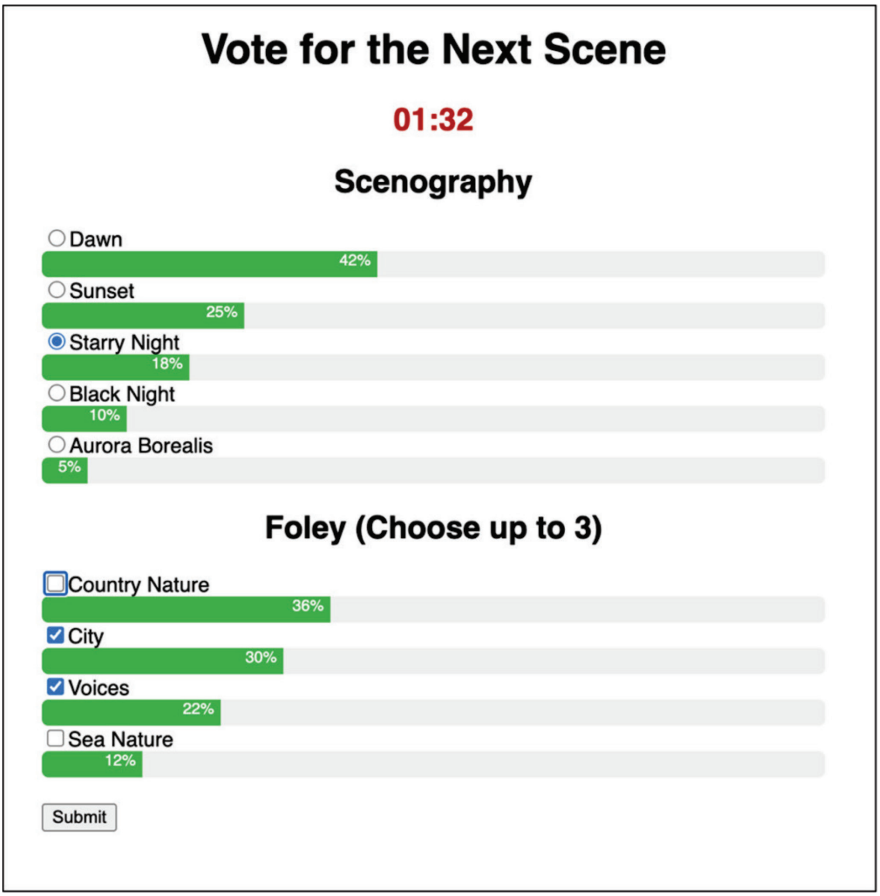

Fig. 1: Example of the smartphone interface displayed during each scene's voting session. Screenshot from the authors' phones.

Figure 2 illustrates the network architecture supporting real-time audience interaction. After participants submit their votes through the lightweight web interface, the data are transmitted in JSON format to a central server. This server then communicates with Max/MSP (for audio processing) and TouchDesigner (for real-time visual rendering), enabling the live performance to adapt dynamically to the audience's collective input.

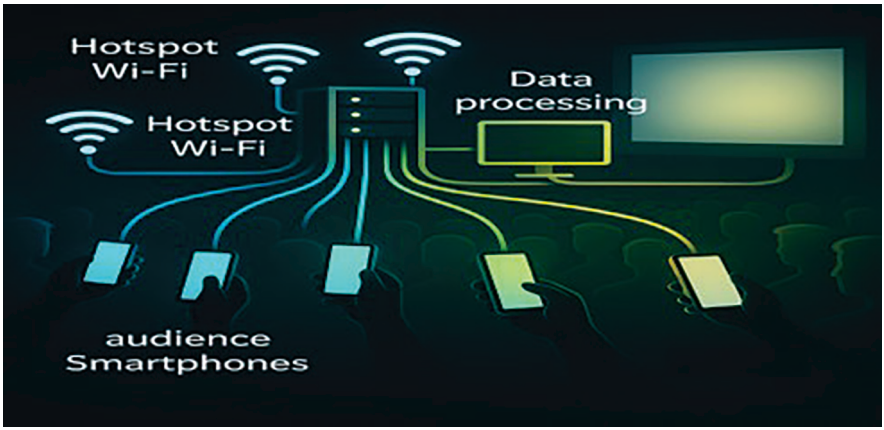

Fig. 2: Diagram of the technical infrastructure enabling real-time audience interaction. Screenshot from the authors' phones.

In a later phase of the project, an even more advanced level of interactivity is planned: the audience will be able to choose between two different narrative endings: Spartacus defeated or Spartacus triumphant. Each ending corresponds to a different musical and dramaturgical resolution. Once the votes are counted, the performers' tablets will automatically receive the appropriate music score, allowing a seamless and immediate shift to the chosen finale. To make this possible, the composers have conceived multiple musical outcomes that can be dynamically selected during the performance.

This model of digital interactivity transforms the audience from passive observers into co-creators of the event, aligning with broader trends in participatory art and immersive storytelling.

5 Technology as Compositional Tool

The use of technology is not ornamental but constitutive. Max/MSP handles the spatialization of live and pre-recorded audio, while TouchDesigner manages real-time visual rendering across multiple projection surfaces. The interactivity model is based on state machines and conditional logic: audience input determines which audiovisual branches are executed, thus affecting timing, layering, and narrative structure.

This approach aligns with contemporary developments in procedural art and dynamic composition. The score is conceived as an almost open structure, including

pre-composed fragments, aleatoric instructions, and live signal processing. Each performance becomes a re-composition, with some predetermined constraints, an events-based opera rather than a fixed text.

This model draws an intriguing parallel with the tradition of *commedia dell'arte*, in which a predefined plot (canovaccio) serves as the structural foundation, while the specific actions, dialogues, and character developments are elaborated through improvisation. Similarly, in this opera, while the macrostructure is set, the audience's real-time decisions – facilitated through mobile-web interfaces – introduce variability into the sonic and visual details of the performance. The music itself incorporates improvisational and generative components, making each instantiation of the score unique.

The addition of multiple narrative outcomes, such as a victorious or defeated Spartacus, pushes this analogy even further. It transforms the opera into a modular, expandable system rather than a closed dramaturgical entity. In doing so, it not only updates the *commedia dell'arte* paradigm but also redefines the notion of operatic authorship, shifting agency toward performers and audience alike. The result is an opera that is both composed and co-created, scripted and emergent, a hybrid of historical dramaturgy and contemporary participatory practice.

6 Community Opera and Collaborative Creation

Community opera is built on the principle of co-creation, where professional artists and community members work together as equal partners to develop the opera's narrative, music, and staging.

Our collaboration network sees the partnership between the Conservatory of Frosinone and the local Academy of Fine Arts, involving over 30 students as performers, technicians, and designers. Workshops were organized to train students on Max/MSP, stage electronics, and video mapping, while exploring themes of emancipation, resistance, and historical memory. The performance is designed to be staged also in non-theatrical venues, emphasizing accessibility, transversality, and the horizontal transmission of knowledge.

In this framework, the opera becomes not only a collective artistic output but also a vehicle for interdisciplinary education. At the Conservatory, a dedicated ensemble of students performs musical parts that evolve dynamically in response to audience input, exposing young performers to adaptive scores and procedural compositional logic. Students from the Composition Department collaborate directly with Faculty in writing modular, aleatoric, and reactive fragments, gaining experience in authoring music that unfolds in non-linear structures.

Parallel to this, students from the Academy of Fine Arts contribute to the visual and spatial dimensions of the project. They are engaged in the design and realization of costumes, props, and scenic elements, participating in every phase from conceptual planning to fabrication and deployment. They assist in staging and video production, contributing actively to workshops, rehearsals, and technical runs in collaboration with the director, dramaturg, and visual designers.

The project also establishes a wide array of apprenticeship positions, including:

- Assistant set and costume designers;
- Lighting and sound technicians;
- Stage assistants and prop handlers;
- Assistant directors and dramaturgy interns;
- Production aides managing logistics, audience flow, and backstage coordination;
- Ushers and public interface staff ensuring communication and hospitality.

Furthermore, students participate in the storytelling and digital documentation process, contributing to the recording of rehearsals and performances, managing social media, and engaging in the creation of promotional materials. This holistic model of community opera transforms the production into a shared pedagogical space, blurring the lines between creators and learners, and positioning the opera as a living practice of collective authorship.

7 Ethical and Aesthetic Considerations

Working with heritage materials raises ethical questions. Our approach begins with the 1892 opera *Spartacus* by Pietro Platania, not with the aim of mere preservation or replication, but with the intention of fostering a meaningful contemporary reactivation. In our view, the value of this material lies not only in its aesthetic or historical merit, but also in its capacity to function as a provocation: a site of tension between past and present that invites reinterpretation.

The character of Spartacus, in particular, is approached not as a fixed icon but as a dynamic figure whose symbolic resonance evolves across time. From the romantic and sentimental hero of Platania's late-nineteenth-century setting, Spartacus becomes here a catalyst for collective memory and critical reflection. He is reframed through the lens of modern struggles: for freedom, for representation, for the right to resist systemic injustice. Rather than seeking fidelity to a presumed historical or artistic "original", we propose an interventionist model in which historical content is actively questioned, reshaped, and situated within new aesthetic and political frames.

This process resists both the nostalgic preservationism of traditional staging and the iconoclasm of radical deconstruction. It acknowledges that any engagement with heritage is also a negotiation with time, ideology, and identity. The resulting work is not wholly "faithful", nor entirely "new": it is a layered construction, a palimpsest of historical memory, technological mediation, and collective re-imagination. In this sense, our *Spartacus* functions as a dialogic structure: it retains traces of Platania's musical and dramaturgical fabric, while simultaneously opening itself to contemporary languages, codes, and urgencies.

This model of creative reuse reflects a broader shift in operatic practice, away from the reproduction of canonical forms and toward a more fluid, historically aware, and socially engaged performance ethos. Through this lens, heritage becomes not a static archive but a living material, constantly rewritten through the prism of the present.

8 Conclusion: Towards a Digital Opera for the Present

The *Spartacus* project demonstrates how lesser-known operatic works can be meaningfully reinterpreted for contemporary audiences through processes of reworking, digital interactivity, and collective participation. Rather than treating opera as a static cultural artifact, this model embraces fluidity, openness, and adaptability as core principles. By integrating digital technologies not simply as decorative add-ons, but as structural components of both composition and dramaturgy, the project positions the medium of opera within a living continuum, responsive to its historical roots yet attuned to present-day cultural, political, and technological realities.

In this framework, the digital becomes a language of engagement and access. Technologies such as mobile-web interfaces, real-time audio-visual systems, and audience-responsive logic allow for new modes of authorship, where spectators are not passive receivers but active agents in the performative experience. This interactivity – combined with an emphasis on community involvement, educational partnerships, and modular dramaturgy – renders opera more porous, more democratic, and more attuned to the social landscapes it inhabits.

Crucially, the project is not only an exercise in innovation but also an act of recuperation. By revisiting the underexplored score of Pietro Platania's *Spartacus*, the work reactivates a neglected repertoire, offering it renewed relevance through contemporary lenses. The goal is not to supplant historical material, but to reframe it, to provoke new listening, new viewing, and new forms of understanding. In

doing so, *Spartacus* contributes to a broader movement of operatic regeneration that foregrounds experimentation, inclusion, and accessibility.

Ultimately, this project could offer a viable prototype for a twenty-first-century opera: one that is modular rather than monolithic, inclusive rather than exclusive, and open to co-creation rather than anchored solely in authorship. It is an opera with a living form – historically grounded yet dynamically evolving – designed not only to preserve the operatic tradition, but to ensure its continuous transformation.

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Giovanna Buonanno

Italian International Divas in 19th-Century London

Abstract: By the early 19th century, Italian-language opera was firmly established in London and continued to attract audiences with its cosmopolitan prestige, despite the steady rise of English-language opera. As the century progressed, sopranos such as Giuditta Pasta, who performed regularly in London and brought several Rossini and Bellini roles to English audiences, Giulia Grisi and Adelina Patti, all achieved the status of world-famous divas. Their fame was greatly aided by technological advances that facilitated touring, as well as the rise of print culture and the impact of photography, which helped to turn singers into celebrities through advance publicity and the circulation of singers' *cartes de visite*. This article focuses on the reception of Italian female singers in nineteenth-century London and discusses the extent to which they came to define the age of international touring stardom, while also shaping notions of 'Italianità'. On the prestigious London stages they rivalled other foreign opera divas, such as Sweden's Jenny Lind and Spain's Maria Malibran. Like that of the international Italian theatre actresses who defined the 19th-century 'gilded stage', the success of Italian opera in England was largely due to the appeal of seeing famous female singers competing in popular leading roles.

Keywords: London; 19th Century; Italian Divas; Opera; International Touring Circuit.

1 Introduction

From the 17th century onwards, Italian opera was becoming a significant part of the cultural landscape in England, with London serving as a magnet for international composers and singers who performed at His Majesty's Theatre in the Haymarket, founded in 1705 and known as the home of Italian opera. By the early 19th century, Italian opera was firmly established in London, and despite the steady rise of English-language opera, which was usually presented at the Theatre Royals Covent Garden and Drury Lane, it continued to exert its appeal over English audiences. It functioned as a symbol of elite culture and a prestigious form of entertainment that was particularly favoured by royalty and the aristocracy. Conversely, the middle-class public tended to prefer the burgeoning English-language opera.

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The reception of Italian opera was influenced by competing discourses: on the one hand, it was revered by many for its cosmopolitan appeal, on the other, it was viewed by some with disdain and deemed as fundamentally a "foreign and degenerate medium associated with a Catholic and despotic Europe", representing an alien intrusion into British culture.[1] The anti-operatic stance was reflected in the literature of the age, as writers like Fielding, Sheridan and Byron, would satirise its many excesses, ranging from the unruly conduct of singers to its association with vice and dissolution as characteristics of Italian national identity, while they also lamented the unintelligibility of the language.[2] These conflicting perspectives did not, however, limit the influence of Italian opera, which continued to set the standard in singing and music culture in the 19th century and Italian performers were key to opera's enduring appeal, despite facing criticism and a reception that oscillated between unreserved praise and overt disregard.

Throughout the 18th century, Italian female singers performed in London and animated debates in cultural circles: *primadonna* rivalry was duly reported in the press, with ample coverage of the frictions between the two celebrated singers Francesca Cuzzoni and Faustina Bordoni, the so-called "Rival Queens" of the King's Theatre from 1726 to 1728 in London, whereas the early 19th century witnessed the rivalry between the renowned English soprano Elizabeth Billington and the ascending Italian contralto Giuseppina Grassini, as well as between Billington and the Italian soprano Angelica Catalani.[3] Thus, comparisons between performers, as well as curiosity around their offstage personas, was integral to the early Italian opera scene in London and set a precedent for the reception of singers later in the century. One significant difference, however, lay in the fact that the 18th-century operatic scene was not exclusively centred on *primadonnas*, as this was also the epoch of the *primo uomo*, with castrati singers taking major roles in the works of the leading composers of the century.[4] In turn, during the 19th century, Italian female opera singers ascended to the status of divas, a development that aligns with the early operatic usage of the term "diva", as documented by Théophile Gautier.[5] Studies on celebrity culture as well as on transnational mobility in 19th century theatre and opera have emphasized the role played by divas in fuelling the cult and invention of celebrity.[6] The rise to celebrity of singers is paralleled by that of foreign theatre

1 Erman 2023, 211.
2 Saglia 2014, 10.
3 Nigro/Cawelti 2016.
4 Nigro/Cawelti 2016.
5 Davies 2012.
6 See Lilti 2017 and Marshall 2007.

actresses at the time, and London emerges as a pivotal hub within a thriving international touring circuit, showcasing both opera and spoken drama. Following the methodology of comparative cultural studies that has favoured a gender perspective and proved to be effective in documenting the reception of international theatre stars,[7] this essay will retrace the presence of the foremost Italian divas and their reception in 19th century London, with a view to reflecting on how their English careers unfolded against the backdrop of significant socio-cultural changes in Britain. Like those of international actresses in the realm of spoken drama, the London seasons of these singers reveal a web of intense cultural exchanges, and shed light on competing conceptions of national identity, as well as on the potential of opera and drama to cross cultural and linguistic borders. Transnational musical exchanges also shaped ideas of *italianità* and contributed to creating images of Italy, at a time when opera rose to become "a global aesthetic commodity".[8]

2 Italian Divas on the London Stage

Similar patterns underpinned opera and drama in 19th-century London, as both were performed in the summer season, traditionally assigned to touring theatre companies, followed by tours in the provinces. Part of the opera's appeal rested on the lure of seeing famous singers pitted against each other in roles that came to represent Italian opera in the minds of English audiences. Within the realm of drama, Italian international actresses contributed to the creation of what Henry Knepler has defined as the Gilded Stage, that thrived on the competition between English and international actresses.[9] In a comparable vein, Italian divas enlivened the international circuit in their competition with both local singers and celebrated foreign stars, including Jenny Lind from Sweden and Maria Malibran from Spain.

Leading ladies treading the boards of His Majesty's Theatre, and later those of Covent Garden when it was refashioned as the Royal Italian Opera in 1847, had globetrotting careers that even extended as far as the Americas. What was needed to launch an artist's international career was a successful début in Paris: the celebrated opera singers Giuditta Pasta and Giulia Grisi, for example, premiered at the Théâtre Italien in 1815 and 1834 respectively, which functioned as a springboard to secure regular engagements at His Majesty's theatre in London the following

7 See Booth/Stokes/Bassnett 1996; Buonanno 2002.
8 Körner/Kühl 2022, 5.
9 Knepler 1968.

seasons. Similarly, the many years of success that Italian tragedienne Adelaide Ristori enjoyed in London were launched by a successful season in Paris in 1855, where she received numerous invitations to perform in London.[10] The growth and consolidation of Italian divas and more generally of the celebrity culture surrounding them, was sustained by advances in technology that made travelling quicker and easier, as well as by the development of print culture, which allowed the sizeable production and circulation of sheet music that would familiarize audiences with opera and its performers.[11] In this respect, Britain was at the forefront of innovation, as a burgeoning consumer society benefiting from the growth of literacy and leisure time. Furthermore, the popularity of singers and actresses was enhanced by portraits and lithographs, as well as albums and yearly almanacs which contained both engravings and commemorative poems celebrating them. These cultural artifacts functioned as readily available merchandising and helped to transform singers into household figures. Subsequently, the advent of photography and the dissemination of elegant *cartes de visite* ushered in new possibilities for appreciating and "possessing" singers and secured their place within the English imagination of the 19th century.[12]

3 Angelica Catalani

In the early decades of the century, Italian opera in London was a hotbed of "gossip, intrigue, clashing temperaments, and competition between singers".[13] The Regency era was dominated by the figure of Angelica Catalani who first appeared in London in 1807 in Portogallo's *Semiramis* and was the most famous *primadonna* of her generation, projecting the image of a seductive siren. Catalani was also often criticized for her excesses, including the huge sums she was paid, to the extent that interest in her private persona tended to prevail over discussion of her talent.[14] However, despite deprecating her "exorbitant" financial requests, reviewers of the time also praised her "most heroic" acting and even used to compare her style to that of the distinguished 18th-century tragedienne Sarah Siddons.[15] Furthermore, when Catalani performed alongside the English soprano Caroline Dickons in *Figaro* in 1812, reviewers

10 Buonanno 2013, 77–78.

11 On the international touring circuit see Buonanno 2002 and 2013, on print culture and opera see Fuhrmann/Mero 2023.

12 See Cloutier 2018.

13 Nigro/Cawelti 2016.

14 See Cowgill 2012.

15 Fenner 1984, 2012–13.

stressed her superiority over the English singer.[16] However, beyond this rivalry between performers, there is evidence of a kind of intercultural cooperation between divas, a trait that also defines the reception of subsequent international opera singers. As an artist, Catalani navigated a period of geopolitical unrest with the Napoleonic Wars and the Continental Blockade (1806–1814); and while most Italian artists were prevented from travelling to England, she was one of the very few exceptions, which is a testimony to her prestige. Although her last London engagement took place in 1813, she continued to be described in later years as "heavenly, matchless, and irresistible", due to her "impassioned grandeur, and vocal magnificence."[17]

4 Giulia Grisi

As the century progressed, the musical world began to make its way into English drawing rooms, as testified by Jane Austen's novels, especially *Emma* (1815), that pay tribute to music and opera by inserting musically inclined characters that were no longer portrayed merely as objects of criticism or satire.[18] Similarly, tragediennes also inspired writers, as seen, for example, in the fictional tragedienne Vashti in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* (1853), modelled on the French international actress Rachel Félix. The virago-like figure of Angelica Catalani in Regency London, gradually began to be contrasted with the romantic and more intimate figures of succeeding *primadonnas,* such as Giuditta Pasta and Giulia Grisi, whose image seemed more attuned to the ideal of domesticity championed during the reign of Queen Victoria and associated with the Monarch herself. The young princess Victoria's fascination for music and opera emerges in her diaries and albums of sketches. Music held a special place in her life, as both she and Prince Albert were pianists and she also received singing lessons from the renowned Neapolitan baritone Luigi Lablache who performed regularly in London.[19] In Victoria's own writings and drawings, Italian singers feature prominently, including an ample collection of sketches by young Victoria that portray Giulia Grisi, who, along with Giuditta Pasta, was the foremost Italian singer in mid-19th-century Britain. In Victoria's drawings Grisi is portrayed in numerous roles, especially in celebrated works by Donizetti and

16 Fenner 1984, 215.
17 Fenner 1984, 214.
18 Nigro/Cawelti 2016.
19 Hibberd 2019.

Bellini.[20] The seal of approval bestowed on Italian divas by the Queen herself boosted their fame and the interest taken in their private lives. After seeing Grisi in the title role of Donizetti's *Anna Bolena,* in London in 1834, Victoria described her as "a most beautiful singer and actress and [...] likewise very young and pretty". She goes on to praise her singing, especially in the last scene in which Grisi acted "beautifully".[21] Victoria also considered Grisi to be superior to the renowned Spanish soprano Maria Malibran, thanks to her sweet notes, and "exquisite" execution – an indication, as Cloutier suggests, of the "proclivity for the gentle, the domestic, the sweet and the conventionally bounded feminine that is not altogether surprising in the future monarch".[22]

Born in 1811 into a Milanese musical family, Grisi was one of the leading sopranos of mid-19th century London opera, after her international career was launched in 1834, when she left La Scala in Milan to join the Théâtre-Italien in Paris, under Rossini's patronage. This move propelled her into the foremost operatic circles of Europe, and she made her London debut in 1835 at the King's Theatre performing the role of Ninetta in Rossini's *La Gazza Ladra*. Grisi can be considered part of a nascent celebrity culture in the 1830s "that grew with mass consumption of print culture and commodities"[23] and her reception also shows how throughout the century "the spread of the popular press and an obsession with discovering the particularities of private life gave rise to a plethora of details about celebrities that made them accessible in new ways to their public."[24] The contemporary critic Henry Chorley commented on how Grisi would draw attention to her appearance by shunning exaggerated artifice and flirtatious attitudes, in ways that suggested a low-key and domesticated image of singers:

> Never has so beautiful a woman as Madame Grisi been so little coquettish on the stage. I remember no solitary instance of smile or sign which could betray to the closest observer that she was attempting any of those artifices.[25]

One of her most renowned interpretations was as Norma in Bellini's eponymous opera, in which she rivalled other interpreters, such as Giuditta Pasta and later

20 Many of the sketches are available as part of the digital archive of the Royal Collection Trust: https://www.rct.uk/collection/search#/6/collection/816142/scene-from-norma.

21 Esher 1912, 93. See also sketches of Grisi as Anna Bolena https://www.rct.uk/collection/980016-cj/giulia-grisi-as-anna-bolena.

22 Cloutier 2018, 201.

23 Cloutier 2018, 195.

24 Cloutier 2018, 192.

25 Chorley 1862, 110–112.

Jenny Lind. Since her London debut in 1835, the role had become a staple of Grisi's repertoire, with critics hailing it as "her grandest performance", a "true reading" of the character, and even "an improvement on the model" created by Pasta.[26] Further comparisons were drawn with the celebrated Jenny Lind's performance in the same role, but even then, "audiences continued to prefer the more forceful, imperious characterization of Grisi. They were not accustomed to a ladylike Norma".[27] Grisi and Lind also appeared together in a production of *Le Nozze di Figaro*, in 1837, as evidence of the cross-cultural nature of Italian opera and artistic cooperation that extended beyond individual rivalries. However, when Lind appeared again as Norma in 1846, the *Musical World*, though praising the Swedish singer's "perfect" execution and conceding that "her dramatic conception and powers are of the highest order", to the extent that she could be compared to the French tragedienne Rachel, she was nonetheless deemed to be inferior to Grisi, because Lind lacked "the softened, voluptuous tenderness of that inimitable artiste".[28] In conclusion, thanks to her many seasons in London and her unrivalled interpretations of major roles such as Norma, Grisi ascended to the role of "Queen" of the stage, "carrying on the tale of Foreign Opera in England".[29]

Giulia Grisi, Giuditta Pasta and the other leading ladies of the mid-19th century played a key role in popularising the works of Italian composers from that period. Although their repertoire was not exclusively Italian, they were instrumental to the transnational reception of Bellini, Rossini and Donizetti. Another famous role associated with Grisi after Norma, for instance, was Norina, in Donizetti's *Don Pasquale* in which she made a successful debut in her 1843 London season. The role was tailored specifically for her and offered English audiences the opportunity to see her sharing the stage with her long-time partner, the tenor Giovanni Matteo De Candia (known as Mario). Their onstage and offstage partnership made them the most celebrated operatic couple of their generation. They also became popular through private concerts and singing lessons, which introduced them to upper-class circles and made them more accessible to the public.[30] In terms of her public persona, Grisi's fame and popularity can also be assessed within the context of the Italian political turmoil of the 1830s that had brought to London a community of exiles, headed by Giuseppe Mazzini. Grisi and Candia were supporters of Giovine Italia, the political movement founded by Mazzini, as was the baritone Antonio Tamburini, and they

26 Chorley 1862, 113.
27 See Zsovár 2018, 436.
28 *The Musical World*, 1846, 510.
29 Chorley 1862, 116.
30 Cloutier 2018, 195.

frequently appeared in concerts to champion its political cause and local organizations. The success of these events was mainly due to "spectators' desire to see and hear these singers up close", and perhaps especially "to see them outside the fictional frames and costumes of the performance of a complete opera".[31]

5 Giuditta Pasta

Grisi followed in the footsteps of Giuditta Pasta (1797–1865), who is widely regarded as one of the most iconic sopranos of 19th-century Europe, and whose career in London blossomed "in the transition from Rossinian opera to the works of Bellini and Donizetti."[32] Pasta's reception offers a valuable perspective on the perception of Italian singers in England. It is notable that reviewers frequently made observations about her acting skills, to the extent that Rutherford suggests she provides a sophisticated model of an "*attrice cantante*"[33] and in the monumental work *Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, Pasta is described as "one of the first [singers] to unite classic acting to fine singing".[34] Her international trajectory evolved in a similar way to other Italian artists, including Grisi: a successful early season at the Théâtre Italien in Paris in 1815, where she appeared in roles such as Donna Elvira in *Don Giovanni*, led to an engagement at the King's Theatre where she appeared in Cimarosa's *Penelope*, followed also by cross dressing roles, such as Cherubino in *Le Nozze di Figaro.* Her initial reception in London was not overly enthusiastic, however, and her breakthrough only came a few years later in 1821, when she sang Desdemona in Rossini's *Otello* at Paris's Théâtre Italien, where her performance was widely praised for combining vocal brilliance with dramatic engagement. This success in Paris allowed her to return to the London stage in April 1824 as a more mature singer and to much greater acclaim: *Grove's Dictionary* observes that with her interpretation of Desdemona in Rossini's *Otello* she took over London, quickly followed by triumphs in *Tancredi*, *Romeo*, and *Semiramide*, where she was praised by reviewers for her regal presence and vocal depth.[35]

31 Smart 2019, 44.
32 Rutherford 2007, 108.
33 Rutherford 2007, 108.
34 Blom 1954, 235.
35 Blom 1954, 587.

6 Singers and Actresses Recite

As previously noted with reference to Grisi, critics also highlighted the distinct feminine values projected by Pasta. As *Grove's Dictionary* reports: "The dignity of her face, form and natural gestures fitted her eminently for tragedy, for which she was not wanting in the necessary fire and energy."[36] It is evident that dignity and natural gestures were regarded as hallmarks of her talent and they also appear to have been particularly valuable in creating a progressively more ladylike image of her as a foreign singer, that seemed to be more in tune with the spirit of the time. Critics repeatedly emphasized Pasta's forceful stage presence and emotional authenticity in her many roles: Henry Fothergill Chorley wrote that audiences were "held in thrall" from her first note and her "riveting" recitative.[37] In April 1833, Pasta returned for high-profile engagements including *Medea in Corinto*, *Anna Bolena*, *Norma*, and *Il Pirata*. She premiered *Norma* in London in June 1833, under Bellini's guidance and provided a blueprint for the role that, as already discussed, would also be a highlight of Grisi's repertoire. Her last notable visit to London was in 1837 with concerts at Drury Lane and Covent Garden, where despite a weakened voice, she still retained her "unbroken spell" on the audience.[38]

As Rutherford suggests, Pasta was unique in that she "embodied" her voice through her acting: she created striking living pictures, accompanying her singing with great, plastic gestures, that added a further level of interpretation to her roles.[39] Pasta's ability to develop her acting invites comparisons with 19th-century *tragediennes*, especially Adelaide Ristori, who in her international tours favoured tragic queenly roles such as Medea and Maria Stuarda; roles which also featured in Pasta's opera repertoire and brought to foreign audiences the distinct grand manner style of the Italian *grandattore* acting tradition. A comparison between the two performers, albeit only in the form of a fleeting recollection, is tentatively offered by Chorley in his *Musical Recollections* who saw Ristori as Medea and was reminded of Pasta's equally powerful interpretation of the role:

> I never thought of the *Medea* of Madame Pasta with greater enthusiasm of regard, than after enjoying, with sensations no less strong, the *Medea*, in spoken drama, of Madame Ristori. Nothing could be more different than the two performances – than the two plays […] than the

36 Blom 1954, 587.
37 Chorley 1862, 130–131.
38 Chorley 1862, 132.
39 See Rutherford 2007.

> two women – than the two conceptions of the character of the magical enchantress. – But the past delight helped the present one, and the present justified the sincerity of the past.[40]

Interesting parallels between international opera singers and actresses can also be found in the recurring modalities that characterised their performances. These reveal how both singers and actresses succeeded in exerting their authority in the choice of repertoire and the creation of their roles. Pasta, for instance, is renowned for her frequent use of insertion arias in her performances: a particularly notable example of this was her rendition of "Il soave e bel contento" from Giovanni Pacini's *Niobe*, an aria that "was ubiquitous in European theaters".[41] Similarly, Ristori, in what could be a comparable "ostentatious of display",[42] regularly essayed so-called "*parti levate*" as bravura pieces: she selected scenes from plays that were hallmarks of her repertoire and that would best showcase her art. For example, she often performed Lady Macbeth's famous "sleepwalking scene" and even essayed it in English for English audiences in 1873, towards the end of her long international career.[43]

In the case of arias, they were often commissioned especially by singers and were intended as a display of vocal prowess. Within the context of the international operatic circuit, arias became immaterial souvenirs, or "musical gems" in favour with the public and were highlights in concerts performed by singers within communities of expatriates. As Cloutier explains, "the aria is almost analogous to the other physical souvenirs of singers […] such as engraved portraits and commemorative poems, and made its way into the homes of London patrons both as a memory of a performance and as a printed souvenir to be bought and possessed, also almanacs as fashionable commodities and gifts."[44] In addition, as Poriss points out, there were practical reasons for the frequent insertion of arias, and arguably, for the reliance on 'concerts' and *parti levate* by touring singers and actresses, connected to the way "the operatic marketplace worked, affecting "both sellers (performers) and consumers (audiences)".[45] The international touring circuit placed a lot of strain on singers, who were forced to move rapidly from one city or nation to the next, and were required to learn new roles very quickly. Consequently, "a prima donna under pressure to sing well after only a few weeks of rehearsal might ease

40 Chorley 1862, 135.

41 Poriss 2008, 83.

42 Poriss 2008, 75.

43 Buonanno 2013, 84–85. On Ristori's London career see also Villani 2025 which documents in detail the actress's first English tour in 1856.

44 Cloutier 2018, 202.

45 Poriss 2009, 6.

her burden considerably by introducing a familiar aria in place of, or in addition to, music that appeared in the opera she was scheduled to perform".[46] Sopranos used the technique of aria insertion as a creative device to enhance their performances, thereby leaving a lasting impact on 19th-century operatic traditions.

Despite the waning popularity of this practice in the latter half of the century, it was still a vehicle in the artistic practice of Adelina Patti, the most celebrated Italian singer of the time. Patti (1843–1919) was born into a genuinely transnational family and elevated the international touring circuit to a global level, with a dazzling career which spanned continents and lasted several decades. She made her début in England in 1861, at Covent Garden, as Amina in *La Sonnambula* and "reached the highest pinnacle of popularity".[47] She then become a regular star at Covent Garden where she also appeared as the first Aida in 1873, and regularly performed there till 1884. One of her most renowned roles was that of Rosina in *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* and she would often deliver her signature aria in the famous "lesson scene" of this opera as an encore, or, along with other arias, as a kind of 'mini-concert'.[48]

7 Conclusions

Italian divas in 19th-century London perpetuated the allure and mythology of the *primadonna*. The siren-like figure of Angelica Catalani dominated the early years of the century and drew on the archetype depicted in Germaine de Staël's *Corinne, ou l'Italie* (1807), a work that set the tone for fictional portrayals of performers and opera singers. Shifting perceptions then led to a transformation in the image of the Italian *primadonna*, one that was characterised by a move towards domesticity and propriety, as exemplified by Princess Victoria's sketches of Grisi in her key interpretations. At the same time, the ready availability of opera sheet music and the dissemination of material and immaterial objects related to these Divas, engendered novel modes of appreciation and consumption and made audiences more familiar with their favourite stars.

The circulation of lithographs and sketches and the use of signature arias in concerts and benefit performances, reinforced the power and appeal of the *primadonna*, thus allowing singers such as Giulia Grisi and Giuditta Pasta to gain entry into English society. In the latter half of the century, *primadonnas* also became

46 Poriss 2009, 6–7.
47 Cone 1993, 14.
48 Poriss 2009, 160.

choice subjects for photographs, typically composed in the style of elegant *cartes de visite*. Finally, Adelina Patti was one of the last divas of the century and became a truly global phenomenon, thus bringing the international touring circuit initiated by earlier touring stars to its utmost development. Patti was able to present a modern image of herself through numerous photographs depicting her in landmark roles: as a young Rosina, she was photographed in London by the renowned celebrity and royal photographer Camille Silvy. These photographs are part of the collection at the National Portrait Gallery and form a series of six *cartes de visite* photographs, each showing a different role performed by Patti.[49] Furthermore, the advent of early recordings ushered in a new era in terms of how international singers could be 'possessed', as well as providing a rival to live performances. Patti was a pioneering figure in this field and early in the 20th century, she made a series of recordings at her stately Welsh home, Craig-y-Nos, including excerpts from *La Sonnambula* and *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*. Despite being produced when she was in her sixties, these recordings demonstrate her vocal prowess and technical mastery.[50]

Throughout the long 19th century, the appeal of *primadonnas* was enormous, and their role in disseminating Italian operatic culture crucial. As the century drew to a close, new managerial approaches to devising and presenting opera across nations and cultures were introduced which reinforced the authority of composers and, consequently, redefined that of singers. Nevertheless, the luminous English careers of Italian opera divas which have been retraced here, significantly contributed to the vibrant theatrical culture of the 19th century, bequeathing a profound and enduring legacy to both English and international operatic and dramatic traditions.

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Silvia Del Zoppo

L'Antologia di Spoon River a Milano: Actualizations and Reinterpretations of a "Secular Oratorio"

Abstract: The *Spoon River Anthology*, the famous collection by poet Edgar Lee Masters, was published in an Italian translation by Fernanda Pivano through Giulio Einaudi in 1943, while the war was still ongoing. Before it became one of the most successful post-war poetry books, composer Gino Negri adapted and reassembled some epitaphs from the collection into a secular oratorio, composed shortly after April 25, 1945, in a Milan still bearing the marks of destruction and bombing. In June 2024, three Milanese institutions – the Brera Academy of Fine Arts, the State University of Milan, and the Giuseppe Verdi Conservatory – realized the first staged performance of Negri's work. This book chapter aims to delve into the multilayered interpretations of Gino Negri's work and, in particular, to highlight how this approach to the score, far from betraying it, actually enriches the historical perspective with new meanings. In doing so, it ideally continues the composer's own approach to Lee Masters' text, presenting a work open to the audience.

Keywords: Gino Negri; *Spoon River*; Secular Oratorio; Collective Memory; Performing Identity.

1 A "Community" and Its Anniversaries

In 2024, the fruitful collaboration among three Milanese academic institutions – the University of Milan, the Giuseppe Verdi Conservatory, and the Brera Academy of Fine Arts – within the framework of the PNRR-funded Project CHANGES led to the world premiere, in staged form, of *L'Antologia di Spoon River a Milano*, a score composed by Milanese composer Gino Negri.[1]

That same year marked the simultaneous centenaries of both the Brera School of Scenography and the founding of the University of Milan, while the Milan Conservatory was, among other initiatives, engaged in the commemorations marking

1 I am deeply grateful to Prof. Emilio Sala and Prof. Gabriele Giromella for generously providing insightful information regarding this artistic production.

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one hundred years since Puccini's death: a symbolically significant year for the Milanese community and some of its most renowned academic institutions.

Before delving into a discussion of the work itself – whether in terms of genre (the score was categorized as an oratorio, "secular and modern", from the time of its completion in 1945, as noted by Massimo Mila[2]), or in terms of its dramaturgical and directorial conception – it is important to highlight two key premises.

First, as Anthony Cohen remarks,

> 'Community' is one of those words – like 'culture', 'myth', 'ritual', 'symbol' – bandied around in ordinary, everyday speech, apparently readily intelligible to speaker and listener, which, when imported into the discourse of social science, however, causes immense difficulty. Over the years it has proved to be highly resistant to satisfactory definition in anthropology and sociology, perhaps for the simple reason that all definitions contain or imply theories, and the theory of community has been very contentious.[3]

Indeed, in facing the challenge of a definition, one cannot ignore seminal works by scholars such as Durkheim, Weber, Tönnies and Simmel. A theoretical investigation into the meaning of the term falls beyond the scope of this contribution: therefore, in line with Wittgenstein, I will adopt a working definition of the term, as "a group of people [who] (a) have something in common with each other, which (b) distinguishes them in a significant way from the members of other putative groups. […]. The word thus expresses a relational idea" and therefore embodies the concepts of similarity, difference and boundaries.

In this meaning, a second remark has to be pointed out: the première, which took place on 27 June 2024, was entirely realized by students from the three Milanese institutions. This applied not only to the musical dimension (the nine soloists, choir, and instrumental ensemble were drawn from the Conservatory), but also to the technical and creative contributions: scenography and lighting were managed by students from the MA program of Theatre, costumes by students of the MA of Costume Design, the multimedia elements by students of the MA of Cinema and Television, and finally the musical revision, dramaturgy, and stage direction were overseen by students from the University of Milan. Each group operated under the guidance or coordination of faculty members from their respective institutions.

As a result, this production may be understood, *lato sensu*, as engaging with the three semantic and operational domains to which Lee Higgins links the concept of community music – a term whose definition remains contested and not universally accepted among scholars, too: "I suggest three broad perspectives of community

2 Mila 1946, 11.

3 Cohen 1985, 11–12.

music: (1) music of a community, (2) communal music making, and (3) an active intervention between a music leader or facilitator and participants".[4]

In every respect, the production was carried out by a collectivity – namely, the university students from the three Milanese Institutions – coordinated by their instructors, who can be broadly understood as community music facilitators of the project. Yet the most distinctive aspect lies, as we shall see, in the process of cultural transfer and in the appropriation of an artistic expression (i.e. some excerpts from Lee Masters' *Spoon River Anthology*) that may be regarded as *allochthonous*. Through a process of recontextualization – both geographic and semantic – this expression was transformed into an integral component of the Milanese culture, thereby enabling a dynamic of integration and even re-signification of other, *autochthonous*, elements of the local culture and collective memory.

Furthermore, from a methodological viewpoint as well, the Milanese experience was developed according to the principles that Giuseppina La Face considers foundational to community music. Principles which are rooted in the notions of tradition, identity, and repertoire:

> Community music encompasses at least three dimensions: the music cultivated by a given community; the use of a particular musical repertoire; and a group of individuals who recognize themselves in the cult of that specific repertoire. […] People, places, participation, inclusion, and diversity are five key terms that help illuminate the aims of community musicians.[5]

But why can composer Gino Negri be regarded as highly representative of Milanese identity? And, most important, what relationship exists between Edgar Lee Masters' *Spoon River Anthology*, published in the United States in 1914–15, and the Milanese context from the postwar period to the present? In order to address these questions, it is first necessary to revisit Gino Negri's role within the musical and cultural landscape of postwar Milan.

2 Gino Negri in Postwar Milan

Undoubtedly one of the most eclectic musicians of his generation, Gino Negri was, first and foremost, a composer shaped by his Milanese background. Born in Perledo (Province of Como) in 1919, he spent his youth with his family in Montevecchia, in the Brianza region. He completed his schooling in Milan, graduating from the

4 Higgins 2012, 3.

5 La Face 2019, 13. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from Italian are the author's own.

classical high school Liceo Zaccaria, run by the Barnabite Fathers. He studied piano privately and, after earning his secondary diploma, was admitted to the Milan Conservatory, where he obtained diplomas in piano (under Enzo Calace) and composition (under Renzo Bossi).[6]

> Given his profound and unwavering Milanese identity, Gino Negri found in Milan all that shaped his life: home, family, relatives, education, work, recreation, concert life, artistic projects, and friendships. It was in Milan that he wove the vast majority of his personal and professional connections, as nearly all his most significant contacts were rooted in the city.[7]

Despite having excelled in academic contexts, the young Negri displayed a marked impatience with the rigid pedagogical frameworks of his instructors. In the early 1940s, he formed a close friendship with Roberto Lupi, the inventor of the unconventional "Gravitational Theory",[8] whose principles would underpin many of Negri's compositions.

Within the composer's opus, one is immediately struck by the extraordinary breadth and vitality of genres and styles. It is not difficult to name other composers who engaged with gravitational harmony, nor to recall other flamboyant personalities who excelled in the performances of the Piccolo Teatro. There are numerous figures in the Milanese cabaret scene or among the ranks of Italy's singer-songwriters; similarly, many talented composers have worked successfully in advertising jingles and in radio, television, and film. What remains truly remarkable, however, is to encounter a single artist who could apply himself successfully across all these domains at once – a profile that arguably corresponds to none other than Gino Negri.

Following his debut with *I divertimenti di Palazzeschi* in 1942 – two dramatic episodes for voices and instruments inspired by the renowned poem *E lasciatemi divertire* by the Florentine poet, an example of the ironic and irreverent tone that would characterize much of his later work – *Spoon River Anthology* marked Negri's first major success. The piece was admired by figures such as Bruno Maderna and Luigi Dallapiccola, and received performances in Turin, Copenhagen, Amsterdam, and Florence between 1947 and 1949.[9]

6 Del Zoppo 2014.

7 Moiraghi 2011, 13.

8 See *ultra*.

9 Dallapiccola 1947a; 1947b.

3 The Libretto and Musical References of a "Secular Oratorio"

As the title suggests, the subject of Negri's composition is drawn from *Spoon River Anthology*, the celebrated collection of short free verse poems by Edgar Lee Masters, originally published in 1914 in the St. Louis, Missouri, literary journal *Reedy's Mirror*, under the pseudonym Webster Ford.

In Italy, the collection was published by Giulio Einaudi in 1943,[10] while the war was still ongoing. The full Italian translation was entrusted to Fernanda Pivano, although some of the poems had also been translated by Cesare Pavese in 1931.[11]

Before *Spoon River Anthology* became one of the most successful poetry books of the Italian postwar era, composer Gino Negri selected nine epitaphs from the collection and fashioned from them a libretto for his musical composition. This is therefore a case of *Literaturoper*[12] – or, according to Mila's suggestion, we shall coin the neologism *Literaturoratorio*.

It is crucial to highlight that Gino Negri worked on the Italian text in preparing the composition, as evidenced by the manuscript preserved at Suvini Zerboni. However, the published version[13] eventually favoured the original English text. This choice naturally required certain musical adjustments – or more accurately, to use the terminology of musical philology, *variants*.[14]

Moreover, the literary success of Pivano's translation was likely further amplified by Negri's *mise-en-musique*, which was first broadcast on radio in 1946, receiving enthusiastic reviews, particularly from Massimo Mila.[15] It was perhaps this success that would later inspire other musicians – especially within the sphere of Italian *canzone d'autore* – to return to *Spoon River* and set it to music once more. One need only recall Fabrizio De André's *Non al denaro, né all'amore né al cielo* (1971), and the later reinterpretation of the album by Morgan with the same title (2005).

Unlike these later versions, which entered the repertoire of popular music, Negri's work took shape in the immediate aftermath of April 25, 1945, in a Milan still bearing the scars of war and bombardment – both in its human and social

10 Lee Masters 1943.

11 Pavese 1931, 883.

12 Dahlhaus 1983.

13 Negri 1948.

14 It may be considered a borderline case of *contrafactum*, involving no true "retextualization" of the music, but rather the use of a text in a different language than that on which the composer had originally worked.

15 Mila 1947, 13.

fabric and its urban landscape. Perhaps for this reason, the composer chose to engage with a poetic text so intimately connected to life and death, themes that closely resonated with the sensibilities of his fellow citizens, and of much of the Italian population of the time.

It is striking to note that the first electroacoustic work produced in Milan – and in Italy – even preceding the founding of the renowned RAI Studio di Fonologia in Corso Sempione (which would not open until 1955, a full decade after Negri's work, in the midst of the postwar economic boom), was also titled – this time explicitly – *Ritratto di città. Studio di musica concreta ed elettronica* [*Portrait of a City: A Study in Concrete and Electronic Music*]. This composition, likewise intended for radio broadcast, portrayed the city of Milan through sounds (recorded on magnetic tape and manipulated in the studio) that unfold over the course of a hypothetical day, from dawn to dusk. A four-handed work after texts by Roberto Leydi, it emerged from the collaboration between Luciano Berio and Bruno Maderna, the two founding figures and key protagonists of the Studio's activities in the years to come – the latter of whom, incidentally, was an admirer of Negri's *Spoon River Anthology*, too.

Although separated by a decade and by considerable technological developments (Negri, of course, could not yet benefit of magnetic tape or electronic media), both projects share a set of common features: the idea of a collective endeavour; a destination in radio broadcasting; a textual component marked by intense expressionist tones (a rare characteristic for concrete music, later criticized by Leydi); and, above all, a deep rootedness in the specific cultural and urban context of their production. These traits, while only implicit in Negri's work, would become more overt in the Berio-Maderna collaboration.

Therefore, the attempt operated by the 2024 staged version to adds a locative to the Italian title: *a Milano*, is not unwarranted, in order to make the implicit connection more explicit. Without betraying the timeless poetry of Edgar Lee Masters or compromising Negri's personal compositional style, this "explicit locative" becomes the lens through which the entire stage direction is conceived – an interpretive device crucial to unlocking multiple layers of meaning.

As for the question of genre classification, the first to attempt such an attribution was, in fact, the aforementioned Massimo Mila, who believed he recognized in the work a "secular oratorio". To understand Mila's suggestion, it should be emphasized that Negri's composition shares several characteristics with the oratorio genre. First and foremost, it exhibits a dramatic, narrative, and contemplative nature, though without a staged production – given its original conception for radio broadcast. Secondly, the prominent role assigned to the chorus aligns it with oratorio traditions. Thirdly, while the subject matter is not sacred in the strict sense, it

revolves around the triad of life, death, and rebirth, and is thus oriented toward a metaphysical exploration of meaning.

The structure of the piece – divided into nine stations, which can be grouped into three cycles – further invites comparison with a sort of secular *Via Crucis*. Beyond the incidental reference to sacred numerology, the composition can easily be interpreted in this light, as will be discussed later. Moreover, the use of a secular text (in Italian, rather than in Latin) should not be seen as inherently contradictory to the oratorio tradition.

After all, there are notable precedents to Negri's work: Handel's "secular oratorios", although not referred to as such in contemporary England, and Max Bruch's *Arminius* (1877), which the composer himself defined as an oratorio.[16] The most accomplished fusion of *staged oratorio* and *sacred opera*, however, was arguably achieved by Igor Stravinsky in *Oedipus Rex* (1926–27). Although the subject is secular, Stravinsky's treatment is liturgical in tone: the text is sung in Latin, the chorus plays a central role, and the main characters appear masked and stationary. The stylization and distancing effect of the work are further enhanced by the interspersed vernacular commentaries delivered by a narrator in modern evening dress.

Therefore, the definition as "secular oratorio" seems more consistent than "radiodrama" or "radio opera",[17] though the version penned by the composer was originally intended for radio broadcast. Moreover, it is worthy to highlight that although

16 oratorios": *Acis and Galatea*, *Alexander's Feast*, *Ode for St Cecilia's Day*, *L'Allegro*, *Semele*, *Hercules* and *The Choice of Hercules*. Schumann's *Das Paradies und die Per*i (1843–1845) and *Der Rose Pilgerfahrt* (1851), neither of which was called an oratorio by the composer, are closely related to the genre. The oratorio continued to be conceived primarily as a sacred genre in the 19th century, but the term itself was exceptionally applied to a purely secular work: besides Bruch's *Arminius: Oratorium*, three other secular oratorios by Bruch, although not identified as oratorios in their titles, can be mentioned: *Odysseus* (1872), *Achilleus* (1885) and *Gustav Adolf* (1898). Conversely, "staged oratorios", or "sacred operas", continued to be exceptional: Anton Rubinstein's sacred operas, *Sulamith* (1883), *Die Maccabäer* (1872–1874), *Moses* (1887–1889) and *Christus* (1893), are close to the oratorio in conception, despite their composer's intention that they be staged. Politically motivated secularization enabled the oratorio to enjoy a vigorous life in Russia, where oratorios had been rare. The oratorio became a medium for the expression of heroic and at times bombastic patriotic sentiments, as in Kabalevsky's *The Great Homeland* (1941–1942), Myaskovsky's *Kirov is with us* (1942) and Shaporin's *Story of the Battle for the Russian Land* (1943–1944). After World War II the demands of socialist realism produced, throughout eastern Europe, a huge number of oratorios in praise of party leaders or the proletariat. A list of important works could include: Shostakovich's *Song of the Forest* (1949), Prokofiev's *On Guard for Peace* 1950, Sviridov's *Poem in Memory of Sergei Yesenin* 1955–1956 and *Pathetic Oratorio* 1959, and Shnitke's *Nagasaki* 1958.

17 De Benedictis 2004, 44–55.

the work did not foresee a staged performance, staging was implicitly embedded in its structure, as will become clear.

Ultimately, Charles Ives' *The Unanswered Question*, originally composed in 1908 and revised in 1931, may present certain similarities to Negri's work. Nonetheless, since it was not premiered in New York until May 1946, any direct influence must be excluded.

4 The *Mise-en-musique*

Indeed, as Emilio Sala writes, "this is a score that not only permits, but in some respects even requires scenic interpretation".[18] An analysis of its sonic architecture reveals that it is constructed through the superimposition of two entirely independent dimensions. In fact, from the introductory notes to the work, Negri himself outlines a division into two groups: one effectively conducted by a director; the other pre-rehearsed and seemingly autonomous:

I. During the performance, the conductor shall direct the orchestra and the choir; for the soloists and the bell, only the initial cue is to be given.
II. The soloists will be rehearsed in advance by the conductor.
III. The soloists will begin at a predetermined point and then proceed without regard for the rhythmic-harmonic movement of the orchestra.[19]

Accordingly, the instrumental ensemble is divided into two parts:

(i) the orchestral instruments, including 11 (potentially doubled) strings (5 violins, 3 violas, 2 cellos, 1 double bass), for which Negri employs a divisi writing style, and a low bell "without a fixed pitch". Supporting this, a mixed SATB choir declaims, mostly in a muffled voice (Negri, with characteristic irony, calls it a "voce afona" in his notes), the opening collective poem of *Spoon River Anthology*, namely *"The Hill"*. The chorus and orchestra then withdraw in the solo sections;
(ii) the accompanying instruments, associated with the characters featured in the nine selected poems from Masters' *Anthology*, each corresponding to a vocal "ghost-voice":

18 Sala 2019, 55.
19 Negri 1948.

1. Lucinda Matlock (mezzo-soprano) is accompanied by harpsichord (or piano);
2. William and Emily (baritone and contralto) are paired with organ (or harmonium);
3. Francis Turner (tenor) is linked to the flute;
4. Mabel Osborne (soprano) to the alto saxophone;
5. Minerva Jones (contralto) is accompanied by harp;
6. Andy (bass) duets with French horn;
7. Petit (light soprano) is again accompanied by harpsichord;
8. Jonathan Houghton (baritone) dialogues with oboe and clarinet;
9. Lois Spears (soprano) is paired with celesta.

From the Lento introduction, the fundamental Soli/Tutti dialectic is thus clearly established – unfolding not only in timbre, register, and texture, but also in compositional treatment. The strings create a sort of sonic continuum with chromatic motion. As Sala has already pointed out in his detailed analysis,[20] the individual parts move predominantly within the intervals of perfect fourths and fifths (violins I and IV – V). Furthermore, they play on semitone trills (violins II – III), or tremolos of thirds (violas II – III), and sustain long pedal tones generally based on perfect intervals (fourth, fifth, octave). Despite a locally tonal setting, the overall result is a harmonically undirected, nebulous sound mass with a circular character. The harmonic behaviour, especially in the choral sections, can also be interpreted in light of Negri's adherence to Roberto Lupi's gravitational harmony.

The theoretical foundations of this system are clearly explained by Alfredo Casella in his preface to Lupi's treatise:

> The old social order is collapsing, and humanity anxiously seeks to construct a new one in its place. This immense crisis finds a clear reflection also in the arts – particularly in music, where the evolution of the past half-century has gradually brought about the collapse of the harmonic system that had sustained our art for four centuries, and now appears irremediably surpassed. The old laws have essentially vanished, and new ones are being arduously formulated – such as dodecaphony.[21]

In short, Lupi's theory is based on the concept of the "harmonic halo", a relational system between a given pitch *x* and its partials. A note is considered "attractive" if *x* is included among its own harmonics. Intuitively, the gravitational pull between these "solar systems" is stronger when the reference pitch appears among the

20 Sala 2019, 55–57.

21 Casella 1946, 5.

lowest partials of the related sound. Numerous other phenomenological observations are involved, which cannot be discussed here in detail. It suffices to say that the theory enabled Negri to treat harmony in a way that retains traditional features (triadic chord construction, cadences as formal articulations, etc.) while allowing original relationships – e.g., between tonalities that would be considered distant in conventional tonal theory, or between novel chord progressions justified within this alternative system. Hence Casella's reference to a "system of order": rather than negating tonality with atonality, pantonality, or dodecaphony, the idea is to operate within a tensile-distensional force field grounded in acoustical principles (i.e., harmonic partials), yet distinct from that theorized by Rameau.

Although Negri's work makes no use of electronics (Pierre Schaeffer had only just begun experimenting with *musique concrète* at the Paris Radio in 1945, and Milan's Studio di Fonologia would not be founded until 1955 – magnetic tape technology still being in its infancy), the Soli/Tutti dichotomy, while historically recalling the oratorio tradition, conceptually anticipates much later compositions such as Bruno Maderna's *Musica su due dimensioni* (1959).

5 The Staging

Building upon this premise, the dramaturgy of the production was conceived by Emilio Sala and a group of students from the Music, Culture, Media, Performance (MCMP) Department at the University of Milan, and in close partnership with the Scenography School of the Brera Academy and the Milan Conservatory. As Sala explains:

> We imagined that Gino Negri, not yet thirty at the time, was inspired, in composing his work, by the sight of an artificial hill gradually forming in those months out of the rubble of the bombed city: the demolition of unsafe buildings whose debris was transported just outside Milan, and which eventually became Monte Stella, or, to borrow the words of Edgar Lee Masters, "The Hill". It is worth mentioning what Massimo Mila wrote about *Antologia di Spoon River* in 1946: Negri "knows how to stage not *over* the music, but *within* the music itself. There is in him a kind of imaginative stage director that accompanies the musician".[22]

Thus, alongside the framing structure provided in Negri's score by the interventions of the choir and the *divisi* strings – where the choir serves as a collective voice, an expression of the community and its identity in the manner of the Greek tragedy chorus – the stage direction developed for the 2024 production introduces an

22 Mila 1947, own italics.

additional frame, distinctly intermedial in character. This is intended to create multiple meta-levels of connection between past and present, between the original work and its intermedial reinterpretation, in a decidedly polysemic way.

The overall structure is thus articulated as follows: an initial multimedia sequence, characterized by the sounds of bombings and the projection of images of Milan in 1945 – "devastated by air raids and reduced to a cemetery". A voice-over is accompanied by electronic music that marks the sequence of archival images and narrates the genesis of what would later be called Monte Stella (as named by the architect Piero Bottoni). Monte Stella, colloquially referred to by the Milanese citizens as *La montagnetta*, was therefore a mound formed from the "remnants of shattered lives" and the rubble transported to the city's north-western outskirts and heaped into an artificial hill.

The hill itself, and the history that has shaped it from its origin to the present day – from the "horror of the ruins" to the "project of rebirth" alluded to in the opening text – thus becomes the symbol linking Lee Masters' text to the Milanese community.

Another interpretive layer introduced in the performance is the appearance of the composer himself, at the beginning, middle and end of the oratorio: a physical presence throughout the show, which sometime becomes medial, as it happens in the final scene. Gino Negri becomes a character within his own work, appearing at specific structural moments in the performance.

The representation that follows strictly adheres to the original score, including the instruction – present in the autograph manuscript but omitted in the first printed edition – to keep the string orchestra visible on stage. The ensemble is only partially veiled behind a translucent TNT while performing and disappears entirely (including stand lights) as solo character episodes occur, during which projections are displayed on the screen. The choir, too, remains fully visible during its interventions, positioned at the back of the stage on a raised platform behind the string ensemble.

The choir members' faces, painted white, stand out – enigmatic and expressionless – against the overall darkness that envelops the hall throughout the performance.

Let us now turn to the "nine stations" of what, following Sala, we have termed a secular *Via Crucis*. The first three characters (or more precisely: the first three invisible voices) are generally positive figures, untouched by deep internal ruptures.

The first voice introduced in the 2024 production (as a pre-recorded voiceover) is that of the elderly *Lucinda Matlock*. With her twelve children (of whom "eight died before I reached sixty"), she symbolizes the traditional values of society, rooted in marriage and family, which appear threatened by the decadence of modern times. Edgar Lee Masters addressed this theme already in 1915 (!), drawing

inspiration for the figure from his own grandmother. It is with this character that Negri begins his journey through the human types.

Unlike the American poet, however, Negri seems to cast doubt upon the moralizing tone that resonates in Lucinda Matlock's words. The solemn closing lines of her monologue ("Degenerate sons and daughters, / Life is too strong for you – / It takes life to love Life") are immediately followed by a mocking, irreverent glissando from the piano – her sole accompaniment throughout the piece – suggesting a dissonance between the music and the character's affirmations.

The second epitaph is a duet: *William* (baritone) and *Emily* (contralto), a couple who lived and died in unison – both figuratively and literally, as the number begins and ends with the two singers intoning the same pitch an octave apart. At the outset, this is rendered not as a traditional melodic line but as a *Sprechgesang*, a Schoenbergian technique that Negri employs with particular affection in this work.

The composer does not set the entirety of Lee Masters' poem to music; instead, he selects only its opening and closing lines, which, in their circularity, encapsulate its deeper message: "There is something about death / Like love... There is, among the spirits, / A harmony that resembles love!"

The remainder of the number unfolds as a dialogue between the sustained texture of the string ensemble (Negri's original structural frame) and the harmonium or organ, composed in a highly chromatic and polyphonic style. This writing anticipates the symbolic system Negri gradually builds, where different harmonic contexts (with diatonic harmony corresponding to life; while chromatic harmony symbolizing death) acquire semantic weight – culminating in the work's final moments.

The Third Station features *Francis Turner* (tenor), a young man with a heart condition whose soul "fled" as he kissed a girl. His fleeting soul is echoed by a flute line. Indicated in the manuscript (with an Italian text) to be sung *con ingenuità* ("with innocence"), this epitaph is among the most evocative of the entire collection – translated by Cesare Pavese and later adapted by both Fabrizio De André and Morgan. Moreover, Francis Turner is the first character to appear on stage in full: represented through a puppet, but one whose face is visible. In contrast, *Lucinda Matlock* and the lovers *William and Emily* have no faces – their ghosts are conjured by their attire (in Lucinda's case) and torsos (in the lovers'), always set against abstract, shadowy backgrounds.

The following triad begins with *Mabel Osborne*'s embittered voice, accompanied by an E-flat alto saxophone. A young woman "thirsting for love of her fellow man", she was neglected by the "idle provincial town", which let her wither away – just as the red geranium withers on her grave, unwatered and forgotten. Mila

described her song as a "dramatic and highly flexible lament".[23] From this comes the scenic intuition to transform Mabel's skirt into a geranium that gradually fades, leaving only a headless mannequin torso.

In this first piece of the second triad, the chorus returns, whispering further names in *Sprechgesang* with choked voice: *"Where are Ella, Kate, Meg, Edith, and Lizzie –* / *The gentle, the simple, the loud-voiced,* / *The proud, the happy?"*. Musically, Negri employs an unmeasured notation, without barlines, symbolizing the absence of a *tactus* – a rhythmic pulse – and perhaps mirroring the emotional freedom that once defined the young woman.

Next follows the fifth monologue, given to *Minerva Jones* (contralto, accompanied by harp), the "village poetess, jeered at by the louts", who died during a botched abortion after having been raped. Her scenic representation is that of an incomplete statue, once again headless. Behind her, a single drop of water falls into a basin, symbolizing decline. As the lines "I was so thirsty for love, so hungry for life" are sung, images of the Milanese poet Alda Merini (1931–2009) appear – captured during one of her famous walks along the Naviglio in Porta Genova – adding another layer of urban context.

At the oratorio's midpoint, the direction inserts another intermedial segment that advances the meta-narrative concerning Monte Stella. Several decades have now passed since its creation, and "life goes on", as projected on screen. The caption "First kiss" introduces the next sequence.

The *montagnetta* has now become a *locus amoenus*, celebrated in the dialect poems of Nino Rossi[24] as a spot for romantic strolls. Beneath the narrator's voice, we see an image of a passionate kiss between two young lovers, perhaps recalling Francis Turner's fateful moment with Maria ("with my soul upon my lips"). But now the death-bound moment is refigured as one of life and rebirth.

Indeed, Monte Stella has become a site of leisure and even sport. Archive headlines from the 1980s (notably from *La Gazzetta dello Sport*) appear, referencing ski

23 Mila 1946.

24 Nino Rossi, one of the most renowned singer-songwriters from Milan, sang about it in *La montagnetta de San Sir*: Pussee che on mont a l'è on monton de tèrra / che la natura in verd la quattarà / inscì sarann sconduu i orror de guèrra e fra on quaj ann nissun ricordarà / che quèll che ciamom la "montagna" ormai / l'è fada de maceri e cattanai /de nòster cattanai de nòst casètt / che anca a tocchèi sortisen el sò effètt. [More than a hill, it's a heap of earth / that nature will gently cover in green / so that the horrors of war will be hidden, / and in a few years, no one will remember / that what we now call a "mountain" / is made of rubble and debris / our own debris, from our own little houses / that even in pieces still make their presence felt]. Since 2003, the Montagnetta has hosted the 'Garden of the Righteous Worldwide', established to honour the memory of those who personally opposed genocides and crimes against humanity.

races held on the hill, with participation from Italian ski legends such as Alberto Tomba (1966–). The caption "The last snowfall", a nod to the winter of 1985, introduces a final film segment showing amateur footage of the snow-covered hill, filled with Milanese revellers and their inevitable tumbles – set to electronic music.

The secular *via crucis* continues with *Andy* (bass), a night watchman who died during his shift. On stage, only his "Spanish cloak", his chair, and his faithful dog remain (in the 2024 production, this included a live trained dog). Accompanying him is a horn in F, and like Mabel's earlier piece, the music is unmeasured – his scene being symmetrically placed opposite hers in the overall structure (occupying the fourth and sixth positions, respectively).

The final triad begins with *Petit the Poet*, whom Mila described as a "musical jest". Sung by a light soprano, the piece is marked *Animato*, *staccato*, and light in character. He is accompanied by a hysterical harpsichord, rendered even more piercing through unpredictable meter changes, perpetual motion of 32nd notes, glissandi, and nervous repeated figures.

The penultimate episode features *Jonathan Houghton* (baritone), accompanied by both oboe and B-flat clarinet. The music is slow and dreamlike ("*con voce uguale*"), evoking a past when life was truly Life (to quote Lucinda Matlock). On screen, a live-feed shows Houghton collecting words into a suitcase: "beyond", "imagination", "reality", "us" … and, finally, "I".

The narrator returns, reciting Lee Masters' verses while Houghton – now visibly aged – opens the suitcase, revealing only dust inside: "Then thirty years passed – / And the boy came back, worn out by life. / And found the orchard vanished, / The forest gone, / The house sold, / The road covered in automobile dust, / And himself longing for the hill!"

Following a pause, Negri crosses the stage in silence with his bicycle. The final word is given to *Lois Spears* (soprano), accompanied by the mysterious and *phantastisch* timbre of the celesta. According to Mila, the character expresses "energetic acceptance of life". The blind woman who, despite her condition, was "the happiest of women – as wife, mother, and housekeeper", guided through her home and garden "by an instinct as sure as sight". Her monologue is accompanied by the projection of an iris reflecting images. The celesta supports the soprano's sweet, radiant melody, which rises above the texture of choir and strings. Finally, as her voice fades on the line "*Glory to God in the highest*", the previously dissonant chromaticism of the strings resolves into consonance: a C major chord emerges as an adamantine ideal – metaphysical purity, a sonic image of a hill born of ruins and reborn, secularly, into life.

A multimedia sequence concludes the performance: its protagonist is Negri himself, who, riding his red *Graziella* bicycle, pedals in sync with a jingle. He rises from one of the pathways of Monte Stella, flying over Milan and offering the audience a panoramic view of the city's northwestern outskirts: the modern district of City Life.

6 Collective Memory and Symbolic Construction of a Community in Milan

This process of recovery and reenactment involved three Milanese institutions that collaborated to develop a laboratory-based project in which archival reactivation and reinterpretation, experimental pedagogy, scholarly rigor, artistic creativity, and civic engagement converged toward a common goal: to stage Negri's work not as an exercise in preservation, but as an act of transformation; to reread the past not solely as a form of memory, but as a generative space for the creation of new temporalities.

Negri's score – already "open" in several respects – and the verses of Lee Masters allowed for (or rather, suggested) a mise-en-scéne that employed heterogeneous strategies, such as metatheatrical and intermedial elements, designed to link past and present, the literary horizon (*The Hill of Spoon River*) and its contextualization in the *hic et nunc* (Milan, 2024). This is enforced by stylistic eclecticism, both musically and more broadly, at the multimedia level.

Moreover, temporal linearity is fragmented: the narrative of Monte Stella's history is interspersed with the monologues of the three triads of characters, which interact with and reinterpret the narrative itself, establishing a reciprocal process of re-signification of traumatic events (war / death). Negri's transformation from composer to onstage character seems to suggest an attempt to explore the artistic creation process.

The staging thus enabled the articulation of a polysemy that opens up multiple interpretative pathways – pathways that revolve above all around the question of collective memory, understood as a symbolic construction of shared identity and, as such, a foundational criterion for a community that recognizes itself within it.

A performance, then, about a past that returns – but also about historical memory, and even about involuntary memory, about a repressed future that failed to materialize, about the ghosts haunting the present, about "minor" art outside the canon, and about its still-possible – indeed, necessary – future.

Therefore, the recontextualization and remediation of Negri's secular oratorio, intertwined with Milan's local history, serves not only a commemorative function, but more importantly enables the continuous resemanticization and presentification of the work through its performance.

This process not only actively involves a collective audience but also highlights the performative encounter with contemporary Milanese spectators as a moment of self-identification, fostering a sense of shared identity within a broader, diverse, and multicultural community.

To rediscover the work of Gino Negri and the interrupted future it carries with it is to open a window onto a utopian, and in some respects uchronian, space. The attempt was to give theatrical and sonic form to a "repressed" score, much like traumatic events in psychology – always present, and always relevant, as they constitute part of our identity.

Taking on such an endeavour in the centenary year of both the Scenography School and the University of Milan was also a choice imbued with strong symbolic meaning, as well as a way to celebrate a fruitful and promising confluence – one that, it is hoped, will lead to further productions and future developments.

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Uta Felten

Opera for a Postmodern Generation: From Sellars' *Don Giovanni* and *Così fan tutte* to Serebrennikov

Abstract: Our contribution aims to analyse Peter Sellars' transposition of the three famous operas from the Mozart/Da Ponte cycle – *Così fan tutte ossia La scuola degli amanti*, *Le nozze di Figaro*, and *Don Giovanni* – with a specific focus on his 1991 production of *Don Giovanni*. We begin from the thesis that, for many contemporary stagings, Sellars' well-known interpretations of the Mozart cycle serve as a key reference point. In the 1980s, Sellars was among the first directors to reimagine opera for a younger audience shaped not by traditional bourgeois culture, but by mass media. Television formats such as the daily soap opera, the music video, and television advertising, as well as cinema (in short, the whole of pop culture) represent for Sellars key models in his rewriting of eighteenth-century operas. Furthermore, this study seeks to highlight how subsequent directors – most notably Kirill Serebrennikov, with his recent *Così fan tutte* at the Komische Oper Berlin (2024) – have engaged with Sellars' legacy.

Keywords: Peter Sellars; Adaptation; *Don Giovanni*; *Così fan tutte;* Kirill Serebrennikov.

1 Introduction

In recent decades, the operatic canon has undergone a profound transformation – not merely due to musical interpretation, but also as result of increasingly radical interventions into staging, integration, and dramaturgical framing. Among the most influential of these interventions was Peter Sellars' *Don Giovanni* for television (1991), which has become emblematic of opera's entanglement with cinematic and televisual forms.

This essay investigates the aesthetic and epistemological implications of Sellars' adaptation, situating it within broader discourses on affect, media, and cultural memory. It traces how Sellars' transposition of Mozart's and Da Ponte's *Don Giovanni* – and, by extension, the entire Da Ponte trilogy, notably *Così fan tutte* – into the symbolic and material conditions of late-20th-century American culture initiates a confrontation between distinct historical affect cultures. Drawing on theorists such as Jean Baudrillard, Niklas Luhmann, and Roland Barthes, I explore how Sellars

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translates the Enlightenment code of *amour galant* into the fractured emotional syntax of the postmodern era.

In doing so, this study also examines how later directors – most notably Kirill Serebrennikov – have responded to Sellars' legacy. Serebrennikov's 2024 staging of *Così fan tutte* at the Komische Oper Berlin, I argue, can be read not only as a reinterpretation of Mozart's opera, but as a self-reflexive continuation of Sellars' project. By analysing these productions in relation to one another, the essay articulates how opera, far from being an antiquarian art form, remains a dynamic site of cultural critique – an aesthetic laboratory in which past and present, music and image, contemporary and historical affect cultures are constantly being renegotiated.

Peter Sellars' opera productions, particularly his televised reinterpretations of Mozart's *Don Giovanni* and *Così fan tutte*, demand a theoretical approach that can account for the complex interplay between media and aesthetic registers. As hybrid works situated at the intersection of opera, television, filmic narration, and performance art, they resist analysis by traditional musicological means alone. Our methodological approach outlines a twofold framework: first, the theory of intermediality, and second, central concepts of postmodernism, both of which illuminate the aesthetic logic and cultural significance of Sellars' productions. The concept of intermediality, as developed in the work of Irina Rajewsky and Joachim Paech provides an essential foundation for understanding Sellars' approach to opera as a multimodal cultural form that operates across and through different media. Rajewsky defines intermediality as "relations between media that result in a crossing of borders between distinct media types".[1] She distinguishes between media combinations (e.g., opera, where multiple media coexist), media transpositions (e.g., the translation of opera to television), and intermedial references, where one medium cites or stylistically references another.

In Sellars' productions, as the following analysis will attempt to show, all three types are operative: the traditional media constellation of opera (music, libretto, stage design) is reshaped through televisual strategies – camera angles, close-ups, editing – and infused with filmic and televisual codes that recode operatic narrative into contemporary visual language. Joachim Paech further develops this idea by emphasizing media translation and the loss or transformation of meaning that occurs when a work moves from one medium to another.[2] For Paech, intermediality entails not only a structural crossing but a semantic reconfiguration of the work. In this sense, Sellars' *Don Giovanni*, as the analysis below will make clear, is not merely staged for television; it becomes a television-specific opera, one in which

1 Rajewsky 2005, 46–64.

2 Paech 1996, 252–263.

the conventions of musical drama are refracted through the aesthetic lenses of media culture – news broadcasts, music videos, urban culture.

To fully account for the aesthetic of Sellars' productions, intermediality must be supplemented by postmodern and poststructuralist theory, particularly as articulated by Jean-François Lyotard, Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes and Jean Baudrillard. Jean-François Lyotard's notion of the incredulity toward metanarratives offers a critical lens through which to view Sellars' deconstruction of operatic plots and archetypes.[3] Roland Barthes' notion of the fragmented nature of contemporary love discourse[4] and Jacques Derrida's theory of difference and deconstruction illuminate how meaning in Sellars' work is always deferred, plural, fragile, and unstable.[5] As will be argued in both *Don Giovanni* and *Così fan tutte*, identities are not stable but iterable, constantly repeated and revised through performance. The roles of Don Giovanni and Leporello, traditionally defined by class and power hierarchies, are played by Black singers, thus injecting, as the following analysis seeks to demonstrate, a postcolonial and racial dimension that deconstructs the traditional operatic subject and disrupts audience expectations of voice, body, and authority.

Jean Baudrillard's concepts of simulation and of hyperreal,[6] in which he examined the relationships between reality and society through the significations and symbols in culture and media, are especially relevant to the analysis of Sellars' productions for a televised medium. In *Don Giovanni*, the urban setting, filmed aesthetics, and stylized violence evoke not the "real" world of the European 18th century, but a simulated environment shaped by media representations – of crime and masculinity. Baudrillard helps us understand how televised opera becomes a simulacrum, severed from its original referent and functioning instead within a closed system of signs: opera quoting television quoting films. The convergence of intermedial theory and postmodernism allows for a multilayered analysis of Sellars' productions. Intermediality addresses the formal and technological hybridity, while postmodern theory elucidates the epistemological ruptures that these productions stage. In *Don Giovanni*, the camera does not merely document the opera – it constructs, as will be demonstrated in what follows, new meanings, fragments the gaze, and destabilizes operatic hierarchies.

3 See Lyotard 1984.
4 See Barthes 1977.
5 See Derrida 1976.
6 See Baudrillard 1994.

2 Peter Sellars' *Don Giovanni*

Peter Sellars' 1991 television adaptation of *Don Giovanni* remains a seminal example of the integration of televisual and cinematic techniques into the operatic medium, a production that has provoked intense and enduring debate. While some critics have hailed it as a compelling manifestation of postmodern and pop-cultural aesthetics, others have decried it as a profanation of the 18th-century culture of seduction, undermining its rich tapestry of visual, literary, and epistemological references. Sellars' adaptation, based on his 1987 stage production and first broadcast by ORF in Vienna, represents a paradigmatic case of intermedial opera on television – a format that blends filmic elements (notably, the cinematic rendering of the overture) with televisual aesthetics, fusing stylized artifice with improvisational spontaneity. As documented in the studies of the Salzburg Symposium on "Musiktheater in den audiovisuellen Medien", approximately 50 percent of the voices were digitally enhanced in post-production.[7] Moreover, according to director Brian Large, the camera work was guided not by a coherent *mise-en-scène* but emerged from ad hoc improvisation, retrospectively assembled during the editing process. Yet, as Martin Elste argues, this approach mirrors the production logic of the television soap opera and should not be misconstrued as a flaw but rather understood as a conscious appropriation of televisual narrative conventions.[8]

Sellars' reinterpretation of the Da Ponte trilogy (*Don Giovanni*, *Così fan tutte*, *Le nozze di Figaro*) is itself grounded in a deliberate epistemological posture. For some, it constitutes an effort to re-engage with Mozart within the framework of contemporary media systems;[9] for others, it is a provocative dismantling of the myth of Don Giovanni, bordering on the socially grotesque. His project can be read as a transposition of 18th-century affective structures into those of the late 20th century – a move that necessarily entails a collision between distinct emotional economies. Drawing on Jean Baudrillard, we can characterize the *Settecento* affective regime as one governed by the aristocratic code of *libertinage*,[10] in which love functions primarily as seduction. Yet even within Mozart and Da Ponte's original works, this system exhibits fissures: the seduction code is already intersected by emergent notions of romantic passion.[11]

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7 Large 2001, 58.

8 Large 2001, 58: "It was improvised with the camera, according to the principle: Do what you want (…)". Unless otherwise stated, translations are our own.

9 See Nagel 1996, 123–145.

10 See Baudrillard 1979.

11 See Felten 2002, 169–180.

Whereas the *Settecento*'s affective structure is still partially coherent – if increasingly unstable – the postmodern era, as theorized by Niklas Luhmann[12] and Roland Barthes,[13] is marked by a profound fragmentation of the amorous codes. The postmodern lover becomes a *bricoleur* of affect, assembling amorous fragments from a fractured discourse of love. Against this backdrop, Sellars' *Don Giovanni* emerges as an experiment in affective translation – a rearticulation of Enlightenment libidinal discourse within a late-capitalist postmodern media context.

Before turning to a close reading of specific scenes from Sellars' *Don Giovanni*, it is necessary to clarify the epistemological underpinnings of his televisual strategy. As Ivan Nagel observes, Sellars conceives all three Da Ponte operas as sharing a fundamental philosophical orientation: an anthropological curiosity about human nature, mirrored in the Enlightenment's moralist discourses. According to Nagel, Sellars believes "that Mozart gave these three operas everything he knew about mankind".[14] His directorial ambition is therefore not merely aesthetic but philosophical: to stage a contemporary masculinity portrait rooted in the affective culture of 1980s New York.

Sellars thus inscribes himself within the moralist tradition of the European *Settecento*, aligning his dramaturgical project with Da Ponte's own impulse to anatomize the soul – its desires, its deceptions, its erotic and political entanglements. This philosophical vision is fundamentally cross-class in scope: bourgeois, aristocratic, and subaltern characters alike are subjected to the same analytical scrutiny. Accordingly, Sellars relocates the three Da Ponte operas into socially distinct settings within the late-20th-century United States: *Le nozze di Figaro* unfolds in the sleek opulence of Trump Tower (Fig. 1), *Così fan tutte* in the quotidian setting of a working-class coffee shop (Fig. 2), and *Don Giovanni* in the marginalized, sub-proletarian milieu of the Bronx (Fig. 3).

12 See Luhmann 1984.

13 See Barthes 1977.

14 See Nagel 1996, 127.

Fig. 1: Screenshot from Sellars: *Le nozze di Figaro* (1990), min: 1:29:49, free available on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2LGIP-b6PpM.

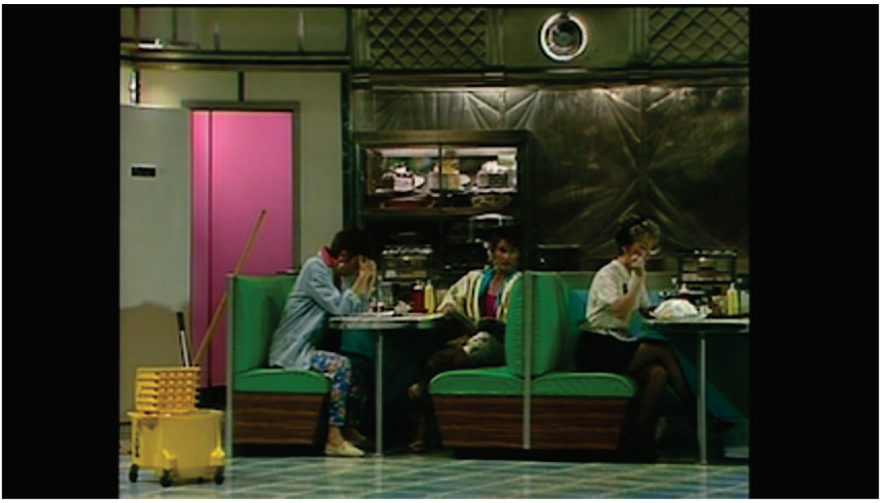

Fig. 2: Screenshot from Sellars: *Così fan tutte* (1990), min: 1:33:42, free available on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZzHcNr_ChHE.

Fig. 3: Screenshot from Sellars: *Don Giovanni* (1990), min: 1:38:09, free available on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vMXU5pjhPTM.

The transposition of the setting of *Don Giovanni* in the sub-proletarian milieu of the Bronx is where the break with traditional epistemes begins. After all, the transformation of the traditional epistemology on which Da Ponte's opera is based, the transformation of the aristocrat Don Giovanni into a sub-proletarian rebel in Peter Sellars' work, is a central intervention with media-aesthetic consequences. As a sub-proletarian rebel, drug dealer and gangster boss (Fig. 4), Sellars' *Don Giovanni* quotes the entire repertoire of popular icons of the audiovisual media system: the action film, the rap video clip and the commercial, as we will explain in a moment using the example of individual scenes from the production.

Our methodological premise is that every reworking of *Don Giovanni* necessarily operates within specific medial and pictorial grids of perception, shaped by the historically specific expectations of its audiences. In this regard, Sellars' television adaptation aligns itself with the perceptual logic of the postmodern recipient – one whose cognitive and aesthetic frameworks have been fundamentally shaped by the codes and conventions of popular media, including soap operas, music videos, advertising formats, and action films. Traditional stagings, by contrast, construct an ideal spectator whose interpretive frame is still informed by the tableau conventions of Pietro Longhi's genre painting, the symbolic rituals of pastoral poetry, and the aesthetic of Italian tradition of *commedia dell'arte* and Spanish tradition of *comedia de capa y espada*.

Fig. 4: Screenshot from Sellars: *Don Giovanni* (1990), min: 13:20, free available on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vMXU5pjhPTM.

This epistemological realignment becomes especially pronounced in Peter Sellars' staging of the famous *Champagne Aria* ("Fin ch'han dal vino"[15]). Whereas conventional stagings reinforce the hierarchical and gendered codes of Enlightenment social order – Don Giovanni as master of ceremonies within the patriarchal cube – Sellars disrupts these coordinates entirely. His Don Giovanni, reimagined as a Black drug lord, upends the aristocratic visual code; the aria's call for disorder ("senza alcun'ordine la danza sia"[16]) is no longer metaphorical or momentary but fully embodied in the social structure of the Bronx. Don Giovanni's symbolic place at the top of the pyramid is thus already subverted: both he and Leporello, now presented as sub-proletarian rebels (Fig. 5), inhabit a social system whose logic is no longer aristocratic but post-industrial and media saturated.

This subversion is further articulated through sartorial and gestural codes. Don Giovanni's violent destruction of Veuve Clicquot bottles (Fig. 6) is not merely an act of debauchery, but a symbolic desecration of elite insignia. It can be read as a deliberate parody of bourgeois opulence – a mythoclastic gesture aimed at displacing traditional opera's visual heritage. On a meta-theatrical level, the act constitutes a transgressive commentary on the very epistemology of operatic representation: the iconography of champagne, so often used as shorthand for aristocratic excess, is

15 Mozart/Da Ponte 1986, Aria No. 11, 64–66.
16 Mozart/Da Ponte 1986, Aria No. 11, 64–66.

repurposed to critique the aestheticized rituals of dominance that have long structured the operatic canon.

Fig. 5: Screenshot from Sellars: *Don Giovanni* (1990), min: 1:39:17 (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vMXU5pjhPTM).

Fig. 6: Screenshot from Sellars: *Don Giovanni* (1990), min: 1:09:07 (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vMXU5pjhPTM).

Peter Sellars' decision to cast Don Giovanni and Leporello as two Black singers, the twin brothers (see Fig. 5), Eugene Perry and Herbert Perry, aims to abolish the classical servant-master difference in traditional comedy and thus represents not only a further element of subversion of the hegemonic discourse of the classical episteme, but also an option for 20th century approaches to interpretation. Sellars' casting of Eugene Perry as Don Giovanni and Herbert Perry as Leporello is neither incidental nor colorblind. Rather, it is an intentional act of re-inscription, one that positions Black bodies and Black voices at the very centre of a European cultural institution long associated with whiteness, privilege, and colonial legacy. By doing so, Sellars challenges the historical exclusions of the operatic canon and reopens the question of who is allowed to speak, act, and desire on stage. Opera, as a genre born of European aristocratic culture, has traditionally marginalized Black performers. The inclusion of Black singers in leading roles – especially those associated with charisma, authority, and sexual power – marks a significant rupture with operatic norms. Sellars' *Don Giovanni* thus becomes a stage for both performance and resistance: a space where the politics of race are not only acknowledged but foregrounded.

This casting choice also recasts the opera's core narrative of power and transgression. In Mozart's original, Don Giovanni is a nobleman whose crimes are ultimately punished in the name of moral order. In Sellars' production, however, the figure of Don Giovanni – embodied by a Black man in an American inner-city context – evokes an entirely different set of cultural associations. The character becomes a complex signifier, caught between the projection of criminality that American culture has long associated with Black masculinity and the performative excess of Don Giovanni's seductive freedom.

Rather than reinscribing racist tropes, Sellars uses this tension to subvert them. Eugene Perry's portrayal of Don Giovanni refuses to play into stereotype; instead, he enacts a performance of control, poise, and unapologetic presence. His charisma is neither exoticized nor vilified but presented as a mode of agency – an assertion of presence in a cultural form that has historically rendered Blackness invisible.

The casting of Herbert Perry as Leporello further complicates and enriches this dynamic. As the servant and accomplice of Don Giovanni, Leporello has traditionally been read as comic relief, a figure of subservience and mimicry. In Sellars' production, however, the racial dynamic between Giovanni and Leporello is erased: both are Black men, bonded not by class difference alone, but by a shared cultural and racial experience that resonates deeply with the realities of systemic oppression.

This reframing invites a more nuanced reading of the master-servant relationship. Rather than a clear hierarchy, Leporello becomes a foil, a witness, and even a

double to Don Giovanni as already underlined by the philosophical interpretation of Sören Kierkegaard.[17]

Leporellos famous *Catalogue Aria* is no longer just a comic tally of conquests; it becomes a performance of documentation, surveillance, and perhaps complicity – a reflection on how desire and domination are chronicled and perpetuated within patriarchal systems. In the bodies and voices of Black singers, this dynamic takes on profound political weight, suggesting a genealogy of violence and resistance that stretches far beyond the libretto.

Sellars' "multiracial casting"[18] also functions as a form of embodied counter-history. By placing Black performers at the centre of *Don Giovanni*, the production calls attention to opera's colonial unconscious – the way it has historically excluded, appropriated, or misrepresented racialized others. In reassigning these roles, Sellars offers not a token gesture of diversity, but a structural critique of operatic whiteness. He stages what might be called a dissonant historiography: a performance that exposes the fissures in the classical canon and uses the very tools of high art to speak back to power.

Moreover, the medium of television intensifies the visibility of these choices. Close-ups, camera angles, and editing techniques render the performers' expressions, gestures, and interactions with heightened intimacy. Black presence in *Don Giovanni* is not backgrounded but foregrounded – inscribed into the aesthetic logic of the production itself. Peter Sellars' casting of Black singers in *Don Giovanni* redefines what opera can be – not only as a musical form, but as a site of cultural negotiation and political intervention. It challenges audiences to confront their own expectations of race, voice, and authority. It empowers performers who have long been marginalized by operatic institutions.[19] And it transforms the stage into a space where the historical exclusions of the canon are not only made visible but actively contested.

In an art form often accused of being out of touch with contemporary realities, Sellars' *Don Giovanni* stands as a powerful example of how opera can be both aesthetically radical and socially urgent. The presence of Black Don Giovannis and Leporellos is not simply a casting choice – it is a cultural demand, a political gesture, and a reimagining of what it means to perform history in a postmodern setting.

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17 See Kierkegaard 1988, 159.

18 Citron 2000, 209.

19 See André 2018: "Actors, singers, directors, and audiences are all aware that the personhood of the performer will be read into the characterization of the role and the reception of that actor in that particular role. Audiences may understand that a performer's race is not a featured element of his or her character in the drama; that is not the same as saying that audiences will ignore (or even forget) the racial identity of an actor".

Let us now focus on the staging of the festival scene. In traditional staging, the festival scene can be read as a *tableau vivant* of Italian genre painting of the *Settecento*; the reference to 18th century genre painting is particularly evident in the stylization of the masked figures. Peter Sellars, on the other hand, implements the deliberate musical disorder, which manifests itself in the 'postmodern' scratching of different dances against each other, also within the gestural code of the actors, whose overdetermined gestural codes are conceived as a parody of musical aesthetics. The final scene of the party – the simulated threat to Leporello with a firearm – obviously plays with the coding grids of the popular action film in the format of the American 80's television series *Miami Vice* (Fig. 7).

Fig. 7: Screenshot from Sellars: *Don Giovanni* (1990), min: 1:30:44 (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vMXU5pjhPTM).

In this scene, Sellars thus also follows the staging principle of a consistent transposition of the plot patterns of the *Comedia de capa y espada* into the dominant plot patterns of the popular media system.

Let us now conclude with an analysis of Sellars' staging of the journey to hell. The fundamental epistemological difference between Sellars' and a traditional staging of *Don Giovanni*, which has already been noted, becomes particularly evident once again in the scene of the descent into hell. While traditional staging of the aforementioned scene is oriented towards the aesthetics of a classical dramaturgy which focuses on the hand motif, Peter Sellars uses the postmodern method of multiple coding which invites polyvalent readings of the ending. He leaves open the

question of whether Don Giovanni enters hell or a postmodern paradise of pleasure. The postmodern recipient has the option of reading the nudity of the inhabitants of hell waiting for Don Giovanni's entry into the other world (Fig. 8) as a classical reference to the nudity of the inhabitants of hell in Dante's classical depictions of hell or to decode it in a postmodern, i.e. post-theocentric manner as a reference to the victory of Eros.

Fig. 8: Screenshot from Sellars: *Don Giovanni* (1990), min: 3:02:33 (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vMXU5pjhPTM).

"Is this last cry really a laugh, as Bataille suggested?"[20] With the openness of the final scene, the question formulated by Helga Finter following George Bataille as to whether that famous outcry "Ah" of Don Giovanni is to be interpreted as a cry of pain or as a triumph of the *burla*, as triumphant laughter over the theocentric order, is deliberately kept in abeyance. In opting for a postmodern multiple coding of the scene, Sellars invites the audience to answer the question themselves. The attempted rescue of Don Giovanni by the hand of Leporello and Sellars' visual focus on the explicit drama of the hand scene can be read as a deliberate rewriting of the libretto in the service of a postmodern replica of a famous popular hand scene from Hitchcock's *North by Northwest*.

20 Finter 1991, 657.

"Don't forget the popular",[21] Leopold Mozart once admonished his son, anticipating the televisual staging strategy of Peter Sellars, which was based on the popular media systems of the 20th century.

3 Peter Sellars' *Così fan tutte*

Let us now look at the staging of Sellars' *Così fan tutte* before we will conclude with a reflection on the staging of Serebrennikov's staging of Mozart's opera. At the beginning of Mozart's opera is the play with the *topos* of *inconstantia*, ironically cited in the title, *Così fan tutte*. The game is initiated, as in Laclos' *Liaisons dangereuses*, by a wager between the game's director and its victims. The expert director of the game is an "old philosopher" named Don Alfonso who takes up the well-worn thesis of female *inconstantia* through a quotation from Metastasio's play *Demeter* and, in a café in Naples, presents it to two young officers recently in love to their surprise: "È la fede degli amanti./ Come l'araba fenice:/ Che vi sia, ciascun lo dice;/ Dove sia, nessun lo sa".[22] To the *topos* of *inconstantia* the two officers contrast that of constantia: "La mia Dorabella/ Capace non è:/ Fedel quanto bella/ Il Cielo la fè",[23] and they do not hesitate to place a monetary value on their women's fidelity. Indeed, they bet *100 zecchini* on the constantia of Dorabella and Fiordiligi. Don Alfonso agrees. Driven by a fool desire, the *pazzo desire*,[24] to once again disprove what has long since been acknowledged, that is, "varium et mutabile semper femina", the two men are from the beginning nothing more than puppets in the hands of Don Alfonso who observes from his position as *voyeur* the game of seduction.

Before the game begins, he defines the well-known rules of the play. Staging a farewell, simulating expressions of grief, singing airs of longing, pretending to have to leave for war. The jilted mistresses (Fiordiligi and Dorabella) accompany the departure of the warship with heartfelt pleas to the god of the winds. "Soave sia il vento / Tranquilla sia l'onda / Ed ogni elemento/ Benigno risponda/ Ai nostri desir".[25]

Already at this stage of the work, the contrast between sincerity and simulation produces a complex of contradictions, ambiguities and uncertainties that, at a first level can be defined as an asymmetrical relationship between those who have feelings and those who pretend to have feelings. Men pretend to grieve over departure;

21 Mozart 1780.
22 Da Ponte 1997, 889.
23 Da Ponte 1997, 891.
24 On the motif of *pazzo desire*, see H. Felten 1989, 147–161.
25 Da Ponte 1997, 900.

women, at least it seems so at first glance, suffer the torments of hell. Dorabella models her suffering in an *aria di smanie*, also called the aria of Eumenides, and sings, "Smanie implacabili/ Che m'agitate,/ Entro quest'anima/ Più non cessate,/ Fin chè l'angoscia/ Mi fa morir".[26] The aria is received partly as a parody of the *opera seria*[27] partly as sincere and genuinely felt.[28] Its value lies, in my opinion, in the impossibility of distinguishing between the emotional manifestations proper to a parody masquerade and the sincere ones.

In the second act, the rules of *libertinaggio* are enacted: the choice of the object of seduction and seduction through simulation. After trying to seduce their girlfriends under the guise of oriental erotomaniacs or Latin lover, it soon becomes clear to the two young men that there is a better chance of success with the own girlfriend's friend.

At the end of the first act, the choice of the object of seduction and the first stage of seduction are concluded. The victim is expected to give in and fall. Who gives in first? Dorabella or Fiordiligi? The fall, the erotic transgression of the two sisters, is also staged by Mozart as a synthesis between the stylistic registers of *opera buffa* and those of *opera seria*, where the coquettish Dorabella represents the buffo role and the virtuous Fiordiligi the serious one. Entirely in accordance with the maxim "Nesci labit virtus" Fiordiligi will be the last to fall, but, like her literary sister, the Madame de Tourvel of Laclos' *Liaisons dangereuses*, her fall will be the most ruinous.

According to the rules of libertinism, the fall is immediately followed by the breakage i.e., the symbolic death of the object of seduction. In the opera, the rupture is staged as a quick unveiling of the masquerade of the alleged lovers. One is already one step away from the double marriage staged with the help of the maid Despina disguised as a notary. Joyful and excited Fiordiligi wants to marry her new lover Ferrando, Dorabella wants to marry Guglielmo who no longer takes any pleasure in continuing the game. Suddenly, the two lovers disappear and return, accompanied by the notes of a military march without their disguises. At the end, as in the perfect *chassé-croisé*, they return to the starting point, to the initial configuration of pairs to sing all together, "Fortunato l'uom che prende/ Ogni cosa pel buon verso/ E tra i casi e le vicende/ Da ragion guidar si fa".[29]

The operation staged by Mozart/Da Ponte seems at first glance like the brief execution of the game of libertinism in which the male figures appear as the cold

26 Da Ponte 1997, 902.
27 See Abert 1923.
28 Floros 1979, 97.
29 Da Ponte 1997, 959.

rulers of the game while the women are the victims, fallen into the deception of "true" love. However, this paramisogynous interpretation does not take into account the sophistication and ambiguity of the discursiveness of love in Mozart/Da Ponte, which lies in the inherent and from the beginning present impossibility to distinguish between real and simulated feelings. Thus, female figures need not necessarily be reduced to the sole role of victims of the test of *constantia* organized by Don Alfonso, as is the case in most staging. Their expressions of grief at the time of farewell could be just as simulated as those of their loved ones.

This kind of reading, considered by some to be contrary to the nature of the play, is presented to us in Peter Sellars' staging. Here the two women recognize the disguise of the two young men, so the entire first act, including the theme of wager and disguise, becomes a farce. Nagel and Heinrich summarize this effect of Sellars' staging as follows:

> In other stagings (perhaps even in the minds of Mozart and Da Ponte) seductiveness begins as early as the first act. In Sellars, on the other hand, each of the two women refuses to betray her boyfriend with himself, yet not for the sake of fidelity. Fiordiligi senses that Guglielmo disguised as a punk is the same hollow, brutal macho as ever, and Dorabella finds her Fernando with his mobster glasses just as insipid as without. [...] Disguise for both Sellars and his heroines no longer works.[30]

When Peter Sellars premiered his *Così fan tutte* in 1986 at the Pepsico Summerfare Festival and later brought it to stages such as the Opera Company of Boston and the Mostly Mozart Festival in New York, he shook the opera world. At the time, *Così fan tutte* was still often presented as a traditional opera masked by rococo sets and powdered wigs. But Sellars, in typical fashion, stripped away the artifice. Set in a contemporary American diner, his *Così fan tutte* placed the characters in a working-class milieu – Fiordiligi and Dorabella as waitresses, their lovers as GIs about to ship out. With this simple but radical shift, Sellars brought the drama into an immediately accessible and emotionally resonant environment. The opera was no longer an 18th-century comedy of manners; it was a biting look at gender roles, and the performance of love in a postmodern society. Sellars' *Così* challenged audiences to see beyond the opera's surface comedy and confront its underlying cruelty.

30 Henrichs/Nagel 1996, 148–149.

4 Kirill Serebrennikov's *Così fan tutte*

Fast forward nearly four decades, and we find another artist using *Così fan tutte* as a vehicle to probe the modern human condition: Kirill Serebrennikov, the Russian director known for his politically charged, emotionally raw, and visually inventive productions. His 2024 staging of *Così fan tutte* at the Komische Oper Berlin is clearly aware of the path forged by Peter Sellars. In fact, one could say that Serebrennikov's *Così* is not only a reinterpretation of Mozart's opera – it is also a sophisticated response to Sellars' pioneering vision.

Like Sellars, Serebrennikov refuses to let the opera's emotional violence be smoothed over by charm or tradition. He, too, emphasizes the mental and emotional stakes for Fiordiligi and Dorabella, exploring their longing, confusion, and ultimate disillusionment. His direction invites us to view the opera not as a play organized by Don Alfonso with clear winners and losers, but as an emotional laboratory in which desire, grief, and identity collide. The influence of Sellars on Serebrennikov is not merely thematic – it is also methodological. Both directors use highly stylized spaces to strip away the historical trappings of the 18th century and bring out the opera's emotional universality. Both invite us to reconsider the roles of women in the narrative – not as fickle or comic victims, but as emotionally intelligent beings longing to realize their desire. As in Peter Sellars's work, Kirill Serebrennikov's staging of *Così fan tutte* likewise engages in the translation of 18th-century Italian cultures of love and affect into the contemporary lifeworld of postmodernity. In Serebrennikov's interpretation as well, the lovers no longer meet in a Neapolitan café, but rather in a fitness studio. Fiordiligi and Dorabella are not portrayed as naïve victims of a game orchestrated by the men; instead, they emerge as subjects of desire. Their erotic objects of attraction are no longer orientalised figures in 18th-century costume, but two bodybuilders and callboys, observed by Ferrando and Guglielmo. The male protagonists thus play against themselves. In the postmodern school of lovers, there are no winners.

Ultimately, what unites these two *Così fan tutte* productions is a belief that opera must not flatter its audience. Instead, it must disturb, provoke, and reflect the society it emerges from. Both productions demand more from the audience. They ask us not to laugh too quickly, not to judge too easily. And they remind us that even the most classical of works can be a mirror to the now.

In revisiting *Così fan tutte* through the lens of Peter Sellars' and Kirill Serebrennikov's productions, we see how opera can transcend time not by staying the same, but by changing with us. We also see how the work of one visionary director can inspire another, decades later, across borders and cultures. Serebrennikov's *Così fan tutte* is, in many ways, an homage to Sellars – but it is also a reinvention, tailored

to a new generation's fears, desires, and dreams. It affirms that opera, far from being a museum piece, remains a living, evolving art form – one that continues to speak powerfully to our moment.

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Marc Jeannin

Bringing Opera to Broader Audiences: Innovations and Emotions

Abstract: This paper explores the role of recording and broadcasting technology, sounds and images, and cross-cultural dimensions in making opera accessible to larger audiences. It tackles specifically how Italian singers such as Enrico Caruso, Mario Lanza, Luciano Pavarotti and Mirella Freni, for example, helped bring opera to a global audience by mastering vocal technique, embracing the emotive power of language, performing with expressive intensity, and connecting with diverse cultures and other musical genres. It examines several singers' unique contributions to the art form of opera and its popularization, focusing on how their vocal mastery, cultural approach, and stage presence broke barriers, making opera accessible and engaging to people worldwide. Through a discussion of some singing career highlights and remarkable performances, I will examine how iconic Italian singers bridged the gap between traditional opera and modern, global audiences, creating a lasting impact on the international music scene, and landing marks in the development of music industry. The article also aims to reflect on how to (re)dynamize opera nowadays and bring it to broader audiences while taking into account new possibilities and horizons emerging from new technologies.

Keywords: Opera Democratization; Emotions; Innovation; Cross-cultural Perspectives; Digital Transformation.

1 Introduction

Opera – once the preserve of elite audiences in Europe's grandest concert halls – stands today at a crossroads, caught between its storied traditions and the urgent need to engage a rapidly changing, globalized world. While its reputation for emotional depth, vocal virtuosity, and dramatic storytelling remains unchallenged, opera has often been perceived as distant or inaccessible, especially to younger generations and diverse communities. However, the history of opera is also a story of continual adaptation and reinvention. Over the past century, technological advances and cross-cultural exchanges have profoundly transformed how opera is produced, performed, and experienced. Using iconic Italian opera singers such as Enrico Caruso, Mario Lanza, Luciano Pavarotti, and Mirella Freni as case studies, this paper examines how their careers blended vocal mastery with modern mass

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communication and cultural outreach. Despite past successes, opera today faces a series of pressing challenges. Its audiences are shrinking, aging, and becoming increasingly disconnected from younger generations, who often gravitate toward more accessible and digitally native musical genres. Traditional opera institutions struggle to renew their relevance in a world dominated by social media, streaming platforms, and fast-paced multimedia experiences. As a result, opera risks being perceived as outdated or culturally out of touch. This article addresses a central question: how can opera be revitalized and reimagined for contemporary and future audiences? By studying how renowned Italian singers helped popularize opera globally, we can identify strategies and explore how modern technologies might rejuvenate the art form, bridge generational gaps, and secure opera's place in 21st-century culture.

2 The Role of Technology and Innovations in Conveying Emotions and Democratizing Opera

The relationship between opera and technology is closely intertwined, with technological innovations consistently playing a central role in the democratization of opera – expanding its accessibility and audience base far beyond the aristocratic and elite circles in which it was once confined. Historically, opera was an art form reserved for a small, privileged demographic.[1] However, with the rise of sound recording, broadcasting, television, and more recently, digital media, technology has become a transformative force, enabling the art form to transcend its origins as an exclusive cultural experience and bring it to the masses.

2.1 The Phonograph: The First Step Towards Mass Access

The advent of the phonograph in the late 19th century marked the first technological breakthrough that would enable opera to reach audiences beyond the walls of opera houses. Early sound recordings allowed the voices of opera's great stars – such as Enrico Caruso – to be captured and distributed to a wider audience. Caruso, one of the first artists to realize the potential of recorded music, became a global superstar not only through live performances but also through his extensive catalogue

1 See Atkinson 2006.

of recordings.[2] Caruso's impact on opera cannot be overstated – he became a pioneering figure in the world of sound recordings. His early recordings, made possible by the phonograph, helped introduce opera to an audience far broader than the traditional theatregoers. These recordings allowed listeners in the United States, Latin America, and even as far as Asia to experience Caruso's performances, whether or not they could attend an opera house. His ability to reach listeners from all over the world, including those in rural and remote areas, fundamentally shifted the way opera was consumed. Instead of requiring attendance at a live performance, opera lovers could now experience the artistry of opera from the comfort of their homes. This early form of "broadcasting" allowed opera to become part of everyday life, democratizing it and shifting its status from a highly exclusive activity to one that could be enjoyed by a much broader audience.

Seeking to expand opera's reach beyond the traditional elite audience, Enrico Caruso made a deliberate effort to diversify his repertoire by including Neapolitan songs alongside operatic arias.[3] This choice was not only a reflection of his personal roots, but also a strategic move to appeal to a broader and more popular audience. The shorter length and familiar style of Neapolitan songs made them ideal for early recording technology, and their inclusion in Caruso's repertoire proved immensely popular with listeners who might not otherwise have engaged with opera. By embracing these songs, Caruso helped bridge the gap between high art and popular taste, demonstrating a clear intention to democratize his art and make it accessible to a wider public.

These early recordings not only broadened the reach of opera but also played a crucial role in preserving the voices of its greatest interpreters for posterity. Caruso's voice was immortalized through the technology of the time, allowing his artistry to continue influencing generations of opera lovers long after his death. This ability to preserve and disseminate performances ensured that opera would remain a living art form, accessible to future generations in ways that had never been possible before.

2.2 The Radio Revolution: Bringing Opera to the Masses

In the early 20th century, radio broadcasting further amplified the accessibility of opera to the general public. Unlike the gramophone, which was a more individualistic form of media consumption, radio allowed live opera performances to be

2 See Potter 2009.

3 See Girardi 2000. See also Garst 2016.

transmitted in real-time to vast audiences. This democratized opera even further, allowing listeners in far-off locations to experience performances from major opera houses, often without the need to purchase tickets or travel to the performance venue.

Radio broadcasts, especially from prominent institutions such as the Metropolitan Opera in New York and La Scala in Milan, became essential cultural events, reaching millions of people who would otherwise never have attended a live performance. The Metropolitan Opera's Saturday broadcasts, which began in 1931, for example, allowed listeners across the United States – and later, internationally – to hear complete operas, often featuring some of the world's greatest singers.[4] These broadcasts brought the grandeur and emotional depth of opera into millions of homes, nurturing a wide, diverse fan base that could now engage with the art form in a more intimate and personal way.

2.3 Television and Cinema: Expanding Opera's Visual Reach

In the 1950s and 1960s, television added a new layer of accessibility by enabling opera to reach an even broader audience – this time, with a visual component. Much like radio, television allowed opera to be consumed in the comfort of people's homes, but it added a new dimension, bringing the performers' physical presence and the visual spectacle of opera to life. Television broadcasts of major productions helped to increase the visibility of opera, offering millions of viewers access to performances from iconic venues such as the Metropolitan Opera House and the Royal Opera House in London.[5] These broadcasts were instrumental in introducing opera to a younger, more diverse audience, especially as television became a central part of family entertainment.

Cinematic portrayals of opera also played a pivotal role in this period, with stars like Mario Lanza helping to bridge the gap between opera and popular culture. The figure of Mario Lanza brought a unique combination of operatic virtuosity and Hollywood glamour to the world stage, reaching audiences that were typically untouched by traditional opera.[6] Lanza, like Caruso before him, combined his operatic training with a natural ability to engage mass audiences. However, Lanza's contribution was distinctive in that he merged the worlds of opera and popular culture, particularly through his Hollywood films. Indeed, Lanza's Hollywood films

4 See Fisher 2001.

5 See Block 2019.

6 See Cesari 2004.

such as *The Great Caruso* (1951) and *Because You're Mine* (1952) brought operatic arias to mainstream cinema audiences, showing that opera could be entertaining and glamorous as well as emotionally stirring. The performances featured in these films – such as Lanza's rendition of "Nessun Dorma" from *Turandot* – were designed to entertain while showcasing the beauty of the operatic voice. By doing so, Lanza played a critical role in democratizing opera and allowing it to be consumed as both high art and popular entertainment. While these films were often heavily stylized and sometimes simplified, they were effective in introducing the public to the power of opera, particularly among younger generations who might have otherwise never considered attending a live opera performance.

Television also facilitated the spread of operatic stars' personal brands, turning singers into recognizable public figures with global appeal. Figures like Luciano Pavarotti became household names not only because of their remarkable vocal talents but because their performances were regularly broadcasted on television. Indeed, Pavarotti's combination of vocal mastery, charismatic stage presence, and marketing savvy catapulted him to global stardom, making him one of the most recognized opera singers in history.

In the 1990s, the Three Tenors concert series – featuring Pavarotti alongside Plácido Domingo and José Carreras – was particularly instrumental in bringing opera to a mass global audience. Broadcast to millions of viewers worldwide, the Three Tenors concerts were a cultural event that proved opera could be enjoyed by people of all ages and backgrounds, far beyond the traditional opera-going demographic.[7] Pavarotti's involvement in international charity events, such as the Pavarotti and Friends concerts – with pop music stars like Frank Sinatra, Diana Ross, and Elton John – further cemented his role as an ambassador for the art form. These concerts were used to raise money for humanitarian causes, using his opera stardom as a platform to draw attention to important global issues. Through these ventures, Pavarotti helped break down the cultural elitism traditionally associated with opera, demonstrating how opera could be an inclusive, emotionally resonant experience with global appeal. His ability to connect with diverse audiences, both through his vocal artistry and his charitable work, further solidified his legacy as a key figure in opera's transition from an elitist art form to a universally celebrated genre. Pavarotti's voice, with its bright and effortless high notes, became the epitome of the Italian operatic tradition.[8] Throughout his illustrious career, he achieved what no tenor before him had: he became a mainstream superstar, captivating both opera enthusiasts and newcomers to the genre.

7 See Sachs 1990.

8 See Jeannin 2022.

This period marked the globalization of opera, as performances could now be watched anywhere in the world, breaking down national and linguistic barriers. This increased visibility helped opera to retain its cultural relevance in an increasingly competitive entertainment landscape.

2.4 Digital Media and the Internet: A New Era of Global Access

By the late 20th and early 21st centuries, the internet and digital technologies revolutionized the consumption of opera once again. Streaming services such as Medici.tv, The Metropolitan Opera on Demand, and YouTube allowed opera to be accessible at any time, from anywhere, and on a wide array of devices – from desktop computers to smartphones.[9] For example, Mirella Freni's legendary legacy at the Metropolitan Opera is not only preserved by her unforgettable stage performances but also amplified and immortalized through the power of video and streaming technologies. These tools have played a crucial role in extending her artistry far beyond the physical opera house, bringing her performances to global audiences and ensuring their accessibility for future generations. A prime example is the celebrated 1983 Met production of Verdi's *Don Carlo*, available on DVD, in which Freni stars alongside Plácido Domingo under James Levine's baton. This recording is more than a historical document – it is a vibrant showcase of her vocal mastery and dramatic depth, offering new audiences the chance to witness her iconic portrayal of Elisabetta.

Streaming has further cemented Freni's international influence. Her longstanding Met career, from her 1965 debut as Mimì in *La Bohème* to her 2005 farewell gala, lives on through a wealth of televised and radio broadcasts now featured on the Met's digital platforms. Among these, her electrifying 1997 telecast of Giordano's *Fedora* – a role she imbued with both vocal brilliance and emotional intensity – remains a standout, continuing to receive acclaim and reach viewers around the globe. Far from being mere recordings, these video and streaming archives are powerful cultural instruments. They ensure that Freni's interpretive genius and expressive range in operas by Puccini, Verdi, and others transcend time and geography. Through these technologies, her artistry is not only preserved but actively shared, promoting operatic tradition to broader and more diverse audiences worldwide. As such, Mirella Freni's digital legacy reinforces the enduring relevance and universal beauty of opera, securing her place as one of the most cherished figures in the history of the art form. Opera enthusiasts no longer have to rely on scheduled

9 See Mao 2023.

broadcasts; they can access an endless catalogue of performances and documentaries, revisiting their favourite productions or exploring new works.

Moreover, high-definition live streams from opera houses such as the Metropolitan Opera have made it possible to experience world-class performances in cinemas around the world. These cinema broadcasts allow opera to reach audiences in areas where live performances are impractical, whether due to geographic or financial constraints. The combination of HD technology, surround sound, and cinema atmospheres provides a sensory experience that rivals live theatre, without the prohibitive costs of tickets or travel. This form of "virtual opera" has opened up opera to previously inaccessible or underserved markets, allowing opera houses to connect with an entirely new, global audience.

Social media platforms also played a significant role in opera's democratization. Singers and opera companies have embraced platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter to connect with fans, share behind-the-scenes content, and offer direct access to performances and interviews. These platforms harness trending formats like short videos, live streams, and interactive stories. For the first time, audiences could engage with opera artists on a personal level, breaking down the traditional barriers between the stage and the audience. This has been especially crucial in appealing to younger generations who may feel disconnected from traditional operatic venues but are accustomed to engaging with cultural products through social media and digital platforms.

3 The Emotive Power of Opera through its Language and Cross-Cultural Dimensions

Opera, in its essence, is a universal art form that communicates profound emotions through a combination of music, lyrics, and performance. One of its most remarkable features is its ability to transcend cultural and linguistic barriers, making it a deeply emotive experience for people across the world, regardless of their native language or cultural background. The success of opera on the global stage owes much to the intersection of cross-cultural influences and the emotive power of language.[10] While opera is often performed in its original language – most frequently Italian, French, or German – it has been able to connect with audiences who may not understand the words, thanks to the power of musical expression, gestures, and the universal emotional content of the stories being told.

10 See Jeannin 2021.

3.1 Opera as a Global Language: The Universality of Emotion

At its core, opera communicates through emotionally charged music, which speaks directly to the listener's heart, bypassing language altogether. This powerful musical language has the ability to convey joy, sorrow, longing, despair, and other deep human emotions with a directness that is universally understood. For instance, even if a listener does not understand the Italian libretto of Puccini's *La Bohème*, they can still deeply feel the emotional gravity of the aria "Quando me'n vò" (Musetta's Waltz) due to the intensity of the music and the emotional delivery of the performer. The symphonic richness, the dynamics, and the vocal delivery are capable of evoking a shared emotional response that transcends words.

This emotive power is particularly crucial in making opera accessible to global audiences, as the music serves as the primary emotional communicator, making it possible for people from various cultures to connect with the performance on an intuitive level. Whether it is the melancholy beauty of a Verdi aria or the lyrical passion of a Puccini love duet, the audience can understand the emotional landscape being portrayed without relying heavily on linguistic comprehension. Moreover, the ability of opera to evoke emotions through non-verbal means – such as gestures, facial expressions, and stage direction – adds another layer of accessibility. Even in a foreign language, these visual and musical cues convey a narrative that reaches across cultural boundaries, allowing opera to maintain its emotional impact regardless of the linguistic context.[11]

3.2 The Role of Italian as the Lingua Franca of Opera

Italian has historically been regarded as the lingua franca of opera, and its melodic, flexible nature makes it especially well-suited to the expressive demands of opera music. For centuries, composers such as Verdi, Puccini, and Donizetti have written operas in Italian, shaping the global identity of the art form. Italian is often considered an ideal language for opera due to its vowel-rich phonetics, which facilitate smooth, expressive singing. The sonority and natural rhythm of the Italian language complement the musicality of operatic composition, enabling the voice to flow effortlessly and convey emotional nuances with clarity.

However, as opera became more globalized, singers and audiences alike encountered the challenge of performing and appreciating operas in languages that were not universally spoken. The question arose: How could the beauty of opera be

11 See Mateo 2014.

preserved when performed in different languages, and how could audiences from various cultural backgrounds engage with the content if they did not understand the lyrics? The answer lay in a combination of cross-cultural exchanges and the universal language of human emotion.

3.3 Subtitles and Translations: Breaking Down Language Barriers

The introduction of subtitles or translations in opera performances was one of the most significant developments in making opera accessible to non-Italian-speaking audiences. The practice of supertitling – displaying translated text above the stage – has revolutionized opera-going, particularly for audiences who might otherwise feel alienated by the language barrier.[12] While Italian opera remains at the heart of the art form, many of today's major opera houses provide subtitles in multiple languages to ensure that opera can be enjoyed by a global audience. Subtitles have allowed opera houses to expand their reach, ensuring that the emotional content of an opera is not lost in translation. This innovation, however, has not only made opera more accessible but has also provided an opportunity for cross-cultural exploration. For instance, opera audiences in the United States, China, or South America can enjoy the same Italian or French opera that is regularly performed in Europe, while still engaging with the text. In this sense, the translation of the libretto into local languages makes the opera's emotional impact more immediate and understandable, allowing it to resonate with audiences from diverse cultural backgrounds.

The challenge of translating the subtleties of operatic language into another language is considerable, yet many opera companies have found creative ways to preserve the emotive qualities of the original work. In some cases, translations are designed to reflect not only the meaning of the words but also the poetic cadence and musical rhythm of the original libretto.[13] This balance between linguistic accuracy and emotional resonance ensures that the power of the language remains intact, even as it is adapted for audiences unfamiliar with the original tongue.

12 See Orero/Matamala 2007.

13 See Desblache 2007.

3.4 Cross-Cultural Interpretations: How Opera Adapts to Different Cultures

While opera's primary linguistic foundation is rooted in European languages, its ability to cross cultural boundaries is one of its defining characteristics. Italian opera, in particular, has been embraced and adapted by diverse cultures, both within and outside Europe.[14] The globalization of opera has led to a range of cross-cultural adaptations that reflect local interpretations, sensibilities, and storytelling traditions. For example, productions of Italian operas in Japan, South Korea, and China often include unique directorial perspectives that incorporate aspects of local aesthetics, such as costume design, stagecraft, and sometimes even local musical influences. These adaptations demonstrate how opera, while rooted in a specific cultural tradition, has the capacity to evolve and resonate with people from different cultural backgrounds, making it a truly global art form. Similarly, in countries with strong operatic traditions, such as Mexico, Brazil, and Argentina, local singers and directors bring a distinct emotional depth and cultural flair to their interpretations of classic Italian works, further enhancing opera's ability to speak to audiences in a way that feels personal and relevant to their own cultural context.

3.5 The Emotional Universality of Opera: Reaching a Younger, Global Audience

As the world becomes more interconnected, the need to adapt opera's messaging and presentation becomes more pressing. Younger audiences, in particular, often seek engaging experiences that resonate emotionally and are presented in a manner that reflects their own cultural contexts. With the rise of social media and digital technologies, opera has a unique opportunity to expand its reach through creative use of these platforms.[15] Social media offers an avenue for opera companies to share behind-the-scenes footage, interactive content, and live-streamed performances, allowing a more diverse, younger audience to engage with opera on their own terms. Additionally, collaborations between opera houses and other cultural institutions – such as art galleries, theatre groups, and film festivals – have facilitated cross-cultural exchanges that foster innovation and attract new audiences to the art form.[16]

14 See Körner/Kühl/Kreuzer 2022.

15 See Wei 2023.

16 See Wilén/Huang-Kokina/Hjorth 2024.

The emotive power of opera, when combined with the capacity for cross-cultural collaboration, allows the art form to remain vibrant, accessible, and relevant in an ever-changing global cultural landscape. The ability of opera to resonate emotionally, coupled with its linguistic and cultural adaptability, ensures that it will continue to be a meaningful and universal form of artistic expression, capable of moving audiences across the globe for generations to come.

4 Contemporary Perspectives: Redynamizing Opera for New Audiences

Opera, with its rich history and profound artistic depth, is facing a pivotal moment in the 21st century. The traditional opera-going audience is aging, and the genre's appeal among younger generations is dwindling. In an era dominated by fast-paced digital media, instant gratification, and an overwhelming abundance of entertainment options, opera's traditional modes of engagement – with its formal settings, high ticket prices, and lengthy performances – can feel out of touch with contemporary tastes and expectations. Yet, this challenge also presents a unique opportunity to reinvigorate the art form and ensure its future relevance in an increasingly globalized, digital, and cross-cultural world.

4.1 Digital Transformation: Embracing New Media Platforms

One of the most powerful tools in the hands of contemporary opera companies is the digital revolution. The rise of streaming platforms and social media has transformed how audiences engage with music, providing greater access to previously exclusive content and facilitating real-time engagement. The globalization of the internet allows opera to transcend geographic boundaries, reaching audiences who may not have had access to live performances.[17]

Opera companies and singers are increasingly adopting streaming services, offering live broadcasts and archived performances on platforms such as YouTube, OperaVision, and social media channels like Instagram and TikTok. These platforms allow younger, digitally native audiences to engage with opera in a more accessible, flexible format, whether through watching entire performances at home,

17 See Bellini/Guerzoni 2023.

glimpsing behind-the-scenes footage, or engaging with interactive posts about operatic techniques and performances.

One notable example of the digital revolution is the success of live streaming opera performances. Major opera houses, such as the Metropolitan Opera in New York, have embraced streaming programs that bring high-quality performances to viewers worldwide. These initiatives have opened up opera to new, often younger, audiences who might otherwise have been deterred by the formality and cost of attending a live performance. This democratization of opera ensures that the art form is no longer confined to the exclusive world of opera houses but can be shared globally through the click of a button, breaking down the geographical and financial barriers that often limit its reach.

4.2 Hybrid Performances: Merging Opera with Other Art Forms

To engage new audiences, many companies are increasingly experimenting with hybrid performances – blending opera with other art forms, music genres, and modern technologies. The fusion of opera with contemporary dance, visual arts, theatre, and even popular music genres has allowed for fresh interpretations of traditional operas, ensuring their relevance to younger generations who might not otherwise be drawn to classical music alone.

Innovative productions such as multimedia opera, which integrates projection mapping, interactive visual elements, and electronic music, create a visually immersive experience that appeals to the modern spectator. For instance, Philip Glass's *The Perfect American* (2013), which incorporated multimedia projections and a contemporary, minimalist score, demonstrates how opera can adapt to modern aesthetics, making it appealing to audiences accustomed to cinematic experiences and immersive theatre.

Moreover, collaborations with popular music stars – such as the partnerships between opera singers and pop musicians seen in the past with Luciano Pavarotti and Andrea Bocelli – have demonstrated how opera can thrive in contemporary formats. Newer projects that blend opera with genres such as hip-hop, rock, or electronic music hold particular promise in attracting younger, culturally diverse audiences. The genre-defying nature of these hybrid performances not only attracts younger, genre-fluid audiences but also redefines the boundaries of what opera can be, challenging traditional conceptions and expanding its potential.

4.3 Interactive and Immersive Experiences: Redefining the Opera House

While digital platforms offer a virtual connection to opera, there is also significant potential to reimagine the physical opera house experience. The traditional opera house – while grand and historical – can sometimes feel out of place in a modern world where audiences are accustomed to interactive and immersive experiences. In response to this, some opera companies are reinventing the format of live performances to engage new audiences in more dynamic ways.

One emerging trend is the development of interactive opera performances, where the audience plays an active role in shaping the experience.[18] "Immersive theatre", popularized by experiences such as *Sleep No More* in New York, has shown how live performance can be brought into physical spaces that blur the line between performer and spectator. Opera companies, especially in places like Berlin and London, are experimenting with performances that take place in non-traditional venues – such as warehouses, street festivals, or even outdoor spaces – allowing for more intimate, experimental, and interactive experiences. These productions aim to attract audiences who may feel alienated by the formality of traditional opera houses and bring the art form to a wider and more diverse audience. In these more fluid environments, opera-goers can choose their path, interact with performers, and even influence how the narrative unfolds, thereby creating an experience that feels more contemporary and personally engaging. By breaking down the walls between performers and the audience, these immersive experiences allow opera to evolve from a passive to an interactive form of cultural engagement, much in the way that digital media have redefined other entertainment industries.

4.4 Outreach and Education: Cultivating New Opera Audiences

While technological innovations and immersive performances are essential for attracting new audiences, outreach and education initiatives are equally important in ensuring that opera reaches younger generations and more diverse cultural communities. To revitalize opera, it is critical to start at the grassroots level, fostering a deep understanding of the art form and nurturing a new generation of opera lovers.

Many opera houses are now offering education programs, community outreach initiatives, and youth-friendly performances to introduce younger and more

18 See Striner et al. 2021.

diverse audiences to opera.[19] For example, interactive workshops, opera schools, and school performances provide hands-on learning experiences for young people, demystifying the genre and making it more relatable. Additionally, youth discounts, student rush tickets, and sponsored programs have been introduced in many cities to reduce financial barriers for younger audiences. These initiatives also promote diversity and inclusion by focusing on reaching communities that may not have historically attended opera performances.

Furthermore, collaborations between opera companies and schools or youth organizations can serve to democratize opera by offering programs that engage young people directly with the art form. These efforts can help break down the perception that opera is an elitist or outdated genre and position it as a vibrant, accessible, and relevant cultural expression that has the power to connect with youthful energy and modern sensibilities.

4.5 Evolving the Operatic Repertoire and its Forms

In an effort to modernize traditional and foundational operatic works, the renewal of the aging repertoire has been pursued since the mid-20th century,[20] primarily through innovative stagings and contemporary *mises en scène*. This approach – which continues today with some productions addressing current societal issues – has often come at the expense of highlighting the singers, thereby limiting opportunities for operatic stars to emerge. Moreover, these contemporary interpretations, which can differ dramatically from the original productions, are not always universally embraced and have frequently been the subject of ongoing criticism.

As an alternative to these controversial stagings, private companies reinterpret operatic masterpieces in formats that resonate more with modern audiences. In that perspective operas are shortened or presented as highlights in unconventional venues, aiming to capture the interest and curiosity of new audiences.[21] It is also

19 See Gould 2014.

20 The movement to modernize and reinterpret traditional opera through innovative staging began in earnest in the mid-20th century, particularly after World War II. This period saw the rise of directors such as Wieland Wagner at Bayreuth, who introduced abstract and contemporary approaches to staging classic works, shifting focus from singers to directorial vision and concept. For further discussions about the post-WWII shift in opera staging and the resulting debates about innovation versus tradition, see Levin 2007 and Robinson 2012.

21 A clear example is Musica a Palazzo, a private company in Venice that presents condensed versions of operatic masterpieces in the historic Palazzo Barbarigo Minotto along the Grand Canal. Their productions, such as Verdi's *La Traviata* or Rossini's *Il barbiere di Siviglia*, are performed as

important to remember, in light of the past successes of renowned opera singers, that it is often the performer who creates opportunities to expand the audience. By embracing a more globalized repertoire and exploring innovative methods of connecting with the public – such as new advertising platforms and creative stagings – singers play a pivotal role in broadening opera's reach. Finally, to reinvigorate opera for modern audiences, there is a growing recognition of the need to evolve the opera repertoire. While the great operatic works of Verdi, Puccini, Wagner, and others remain foundational to the genre, there is an increasing push to create and showcase new operas that address contemporary themes, modern sensibilities, and diverse cultural perspectives. New works by contemporary composers such as John Adams,[22] Kaija Saariaho,[23] and Thomas Adès[24] reflect modern issues and innovative musical styles that resonate with today's audiences. These operas often explore themes like identity, social justice, gender and race, aligning with the concerns of a modern, global audience. By engaging with contemporary social issues and incorporating more diverse cultural perspectives, these new operas can attract younger, more socially-conscious audiences. Moreover, many opera companies are beginning to commission works from underrepresented composers, providing a platform for new voices and perspectives in the operatic world. This reflects the growing emphasis on diversity and inclusion within the arts, making opera more reflective of the pluralistic and globalized world in which we live.

5 Conclusions

Opera's evolution from elite European salons to global stages and mainstream media has been driven by pioneering artists and the transformative influence of technology

immersive, itinerant shows: each act takes place in a different ornate room, with the audience moving alongside the singers and musicians. The performances are shortened, highly interactive, and held in an intimate setting, offering a contemporary, accessible alternative to traditional opera stagings and aiming to engage new audiences through both format and venue.

22 See, for example, *Nixon in China* (1987), which examines recent political history and the complexities of global diplomacy, or *Doctor Atomic* (2005), which explores scientific ethics and personal responsibility during the creation of the atomic bomb.

23 See, for example, *L'Amour de loin* (2000), which meditates on longing and distance, reflecting modern emotional sensibilities, or *Innocence* (2021), which addresses trauma and collective memory in the aftermath of a school shooting, engaging with urgent contemporary issues.

24 See, for example, *Powder Her Face* (1995), which satirizes celebrity culture and societal norms through the scandalous life of the Duchess of Argyll, or *The Exterminating Angel* (2016), which adapts Buñuel's surrealist film to examine existential anxiety and social structures.

and innovations. The most iconic opera singers were not only exceptional vocalists but also cultural mediators who understood how to connect operatic tradition with emerging audiences and platforms. These artists did not merely preserve tradition; they reimagined opera for their own eras, enlarging their repertoire and using every available medium to connect with new publics and ensure opera's continued relevance. Despite these historical advances, opera today finds itself at a crossroads and faces profound challenges: shrinking and aging audiences, competition from digital entertainment, and the perception of being out of step with contemporary life. Yet, as explored throughout this article, these challenges have also sparked a wave of creativity and renewal. Opera houses and artists are embracing digital transformation, experimenting with hybrid and immersive performances, and forging partnerships with other cultural institutions to foster innovation and attract new audiences. Educational initiatives and outreach programs are helping to cultivate the next generation of opera lovers, while new works and modern stagings address the pressing issues and diverse perspectives of our time.

The ongoing debates about tradition versus innovation, the role of the singer versus the director, and the adaptation of repertoire for modern sensibilities highlight the complexity and vitality of opera today. Rather than retreating into nostalgia or rigid preservationism, the opera world is increasingly open to experimentation, inclusivity, and dialogue with contemporary culture. Ultimately, the future of opera depends on its ability to balance its rich heritage with a spirit of openness and reinvention. By drawing on the creative legacy of its greatest artists and embracing the possibilities offered by technology and cross-cultural exchange, opera can continue to captivate, challenge, and inspire audiences for generations to come – remaining not just a relic of the past, but a vibrant and essential part of the global cultural landscape connected to the lives and imaginations of modern audiences.

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Benedetta Bronzini

Opera for All? Contemporary Strategies of Dissemination and Social Commitment of the Komische Oper Berlin as a Case Study

Abstract: This essay analyses the politics of dissemination and social involvement of the prominent German opera house Komische Oper Berlin, existing since 1947, and born with the motto of "opera for all!", since its first director Walter Felsenstein, until the most recent productions. Among the dissemination strategies of Berlin's third opera house, the actions of opera dissemination outside of the opera house appear to be most relevant. In 2011 the intercultural outreach-project *Selam Opera!* was launched, taking the image as an 'opera house for everyone' quite literally and aiming to create occasions for encounters between multicultural urban society and opera. After almost fifteen years, this innovative action of cultural activation is still evolving and strengthening the network between the opera house and the people in the city, also through a divulgative publication, *Selam Opera!* (2014) and through a documentary *Eine Opernreise* (2016) and has become a referring point in the Turkish-German cultural dialogue in Berlin.

Keywords: Komische Oper Berlin; Intercultural Exchange; Opera; Site-specific Performance; Community Activation.

> Community engagement is not giving them what
> (we think) they want. Rather, it demands learning
> enough about communities to know what work
> of the international cultural canon will be meaningful
> to them and then programming that with them.
> Doug Borwick[1]

This work benefits from the direct involvement of the team of the Komische Oper Berlin, in particular Julia Oesterreich and Mustafa Akça, project directors of *Selam Opera!*, which contributed with interviews, and by sharing archive material which have a crucial role in this research.

1 Borwick 2015, 82.

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1 Opera in the City Today: Audience-Related Challenges for Contemporary Metropolitan Opera Houses

In 2006 Linda Hutcheon, observing the "dramaturgical turn"[2] and the opening up of the opera studies to other disciplines apart from musicology, asked herself and her readers if the new challenge of opera studies was then to present opera not only through other eyes, referring to David J. Levin's groundbreaking study of 1994,[3] but also through other ears,[4] focusing on new possible audiences for the most "elitarian and expensive of the performing arts".[5] The diversification of audiences and their role either as spectators, or as aware and/or unaware active participants is one of the crucial questions[6] in contemporary performance arts, with controversial outcomes and a growing interest towards immersivity and participation.

Already since its beginnings in Italy with the first public opera house, the Teatro San Cassiano, founded in Venice in 1637, the development of the operatic genre has always been inevitably connected to the public sphere and to urban spaces.[7] Opera houses were, and still are, mostly erected in city centres, both as secular temples and sites of entertainment in which the appreciation of high art coexisted with popular conviviality and with social, political, and economic power. Furthermore, as a specialized art form, which has developed over the last four centuries requiring highly skilled performers on stage, an orchestra, a large body of back-stage staff, management, and a proper acoustic and performative space, opera can be considered as the most expensive of the performing arts. In the age of *postopera*, as a wide range of operatic practices that have appeared in Western musical theatre since the last quarter of the twentieth century,[8] these characteristics are still applicable to contemporary opera companies, who, among the numerous challenges, are coping with the emergence and advancement of new technologies of sound and image reproduction, with the necessary evolution of live performances into, with the words of Lawrence Kramer, "multimedial art"[9] contents, and

2 Hutcheon 2006b, 806.
3 Levin 1994.
4 Hutcheon 2006b, 808.
5 Towse 2011, 313–316.
6 See Bishop 2006; 2012; Rancière 2009.
7 Feldman 2020.
8 Novak 2015.
9 Kramer 1996, 25.

with the related threat[10] of a gradual reduction of live events in favour of an increasing (and economically more accessible) digital fruition.[11] On the other hand, over the past four decades, there has been a steady revolution in the day-to-day activities of orchestral musicians and opera companies across the globe. As Emily Dollman recently remarked:

> Today, we find orchestral and opera musicians working "off stage" in venues as disparate as schools, hospitals, prisons, nursing homes, conservatoriums, shopping centres, museums, art galleries, public libraries, and even train stations and car parks. You will now find an education or community engagement department centrally placed in all major orchestras and opera companies across the world. In some of the world's leading classical organisations, the managing director began their career path in the education department, bringing the perspective they gained through community and education work directly to the engine room of decision-making. […] Education and community engagement programming has evolved to be a crucial counterpoint to main stage performance programming for orchestras and opera companies.[12]

How do these changes impact on the relationship between theatre houses and their evolving sociocultural urban context?[13] Considering the reception of opera as an issue in which multiple factors such as music, literature, interpreters, technology, performative and cultural context are intertwined,[14] and following Doug Borwick approach in "building communities and not audiences",[15] this work focuses on the role of an opera company in the dissemination and accessibility of operatic music in contemporary times, with specific attention to live, site and audience-specific performances, and to the diversification of the audience.

10 Even if, following Yacine Ouzzani: "There is no scale in the literature that measures the intention to attend a performance in a physical venue after viewing the same type of performance streamed over the Internet", see Ouazzani/Calderón-García/Tubillejas-Andrés 2022, 418.

11 Navarrete Hernandez/Towse 2019, 419; Ouazzani 2022, 422.

12 Dollman 2023, 3.

13 Even if not specifically focusing on opera, but extended to multiple contexts and music genres, *Musical Performance and the Changing City. Post-industrial Contexts in Europe and the United States* is a groundbreaking study on the music driven cultural exchange in urban spaces, also focusing on Berlin's music landscape. See Holt/Wergin 2013, 100–109, 227–255.

14 After David Levine's milestone *Opera Through Other Eyes* (1994), the groundbreaking study *Opera in a Multicultural World* edited by Mary I. Ingram, Joseph K. So and Roy Moodley in 2016, fosters the development of a more integrated understanding of interdisciplinarity, including Theatre, Gender, and Cultural Studies.

15 Borwick 2015.

2 The Popular Vocation of the Komische Oper Berlin

In the rich and various scenario of the Berliner classical music institutions,[16] the Komische Oper is well recognized for its social commitment and its popular vocation, which have been characterizing the opera company since its foundation.

After the Berliner Staatsoper in Unter den Linden, the music temple of Prussia since 1742, and the Deutsche Oper, founded in 1912 in Charlottenburg, the Komische Oper is the third opera house of Berlin, whose destiny is inevitably intertwined with the recent history of its country. Its location until 2023, the playhouse in the Behrenstraße 55–57, was built around 1892 and was already existing as opera house, first named Theater Unter den Linden (1892–1898), then Metropol-Theater (1898–1934) and the nationalized as Operettentheater during the NS-regime, until the bombing on May 7, 1944. The new Komische Oper Berlin was officially founded in 1947, as the first opera house of the capital city of the GDR, under the general direction of the Austrian actor, theatre, opera and film director Walter Felsenstein (1901–1975). At the time, the need of a proper cultural rebirth in the newborn socialist country still fighting to arise from the ruins of the recent past met Felsenstein's visionary approach toward music theatre and social commitment of cultural institutions. Felsenstein, who chose the name 'Komische Oper' as an homage to the Parisian Opéra Comique, strongly believed in a new, inclusive and experimental playhouse in East Berlin addressed to opera, opera buffa, operetta, musical and ballet, explicitly focused on the audience and open to intercultural exchange: "We must not build fences between these elements; rather, we must seek out and promote the theatrical experience in every form of its existence."[17] These words were written by Felsenstein ten years after the opening of the new Komische Oper, which, according to his will, offered music theatre productions mostly translated into German, specifically for the local audience. Namely he personally translated and edited numerous operatic works, including Bizet's *Carmen* (1949) and Verdi's *Traviata* (1955) into his mother tongue, and, in 1969 he also directed in Moscow a production of *Carmen* in Russian language. Furthermore, Walter Felsenstein, often compared to Konstantin

16 In the German capital at least six institutions need to be mentioned, i.e. the Rundfunk Orchester und Chöre gGmbH Berlin (ROC), the Berliner Philharmonie, the Staatsoper Unter den Linden, the Deutsche Oper Charlottenburg, the Classical N:ext Festival, and of course the Komische Oper.

17 Felsenstein 1975, 6–7.

Stanislavski,[18] strongly believed in the creative engagement of the actors, and wanted to turn music making and singing on stage into

> a communication that is convincing, truthful and utterly essential. All problems of drama and of staging are secondary to this. Music-theatre exists when a musical action with singing human beings becomes a theatrical reality that is unreservedly believable. The dramatic happening must take place on a level where music is the only means of expression. The performer must not give the effect of being an instrument or a component part of music that already exists, or of a marionette being manipulated by the music, but that of being its creative fashioner.[19]

One of his main references was in fact Christoph Willibald Gluck's reformist ideas, as expressed in the letter written in 1767,[20] and addressed to the Grand Duke Leopold of Tuscany as foreword for his *Alceste*, an excellent paradigm for the intermedial and multidisciplinary nature of opera and of its multiple challenges involving both the audience and the institutions.[21]

Walter Felsenstein's legacy can be observed in his offsprings at the Komische Oper, still in the last twenty years, not only related to the now well-established field of the possible relations between technology and performance arts,[22] but even more connected to the popular vocation of Felsenstein's music theatre and to the historical presence of the Komische Oper on the Berliner territory, as a facilitator between music and community, starting from the ticket funding policy for disadvantaged audiences, which is still applied. Alongside of the development of experimental digital productions,[23] and of the regular subtitling of all productions in German, English, French and Turkish – a peculiarity of the playhouse –, the Komische Oper has in fact developed its own format of *site-specific opera*, exiting the opera house, and reaching out for the Berliner community.

Many of the projects of the Komische Oper Berlin which are objects of this study were realized during the directorship of the Australian theatre and opera director Barrie Kosky. After the challenging crisis for the GDR cultural institutions which immediately followed the fall of the Berlin Wall,[24] and after the foundation

18 Walter Felsenstein and Konstantin Stanislavski worked together in Moscow, on invitation of the Stanislavski and Nemirovich-Danchenko Theatre.

19 McMurray 1989, 452.

20 Before December 16, 1767, as in Gluck 1962, 24.

21 Gluck, 1962, 22–24.

22 In *Digital Theater* Nadja Masura brings technological experimentation in the operatic context as the main case study through the analysis of Mark Reaney's *Magic Flute* in VR. See Masura 2021.

23 In 2020 the Komische Oper Berlin together with the Berliner Ensemble developed the online platform *Spielräume!*, a research space for digital performances. www.berliner-ensemble.de spielraeume

24 New York Times 1990, 93.

in 2004 of the Stiftung Oper Berlin (Berlin Opera Foundation),[25] the presence of Barrie Kosky at the Komische Oper from the season 2012/2013 to 2021/2022 can be considered as a turning point in the recent history of the opera house. The Komische Oper was voted 'Opera House of the Year' by *Opernwelt* magazine in 2013, and in 2015 at the International Opera Awards in London. A first successful example of urban dissemination offered to the Berliner community is the popular format of the popup concert, a nowadays widespread activity for several opera houses and companies. Since 2016 *PopUp Opera* makes the city of Berlin and the public space (e.g. farmers markets, libraries, cafés, clubs and museums) the scenario of sudden opera, opera buffa and operetta performances for unprepared audiences. The repertoire, now reaching around 30 performances a year each of about 5 to 10 minutes, include arias and songs chosen from the running productions in the opera house, as a proper invitation for operatic neophytes. At the same time, the short popup events are meant to be filmed for a wider online audience, who follow the Komische Oper on its media channels,[26] therefore the live audience is part of a proper video set. Differently from the North Opera popup events, where the arias singers, anonymous among the crowd, suddenly reveal themselves by singing, the *PopUp Operas* are realized as structured site-specific costumed performances. Beside the popular punk-'Habanera' (2017) in a Kreuzberger club, *Barbiere di Siviglia* arias in the Berlin Tegel-Airport, and Offenbach's *La belle Hélène* sung in a popular boxing-gym, several times the connection between the venue and the repertoire is evident: this is the case of the *Don Giovanni*'s 'Catalogue aria' in Kreuzberg's market Marheineke Markthalle (2018), sung in German according to Felsenstein will, or the 'Zitti zitti moviamo a vendetta' aria (here adapted in German as 'Leise leise') from Verdi's *Rigoletto*, in which the invoked silence was contextualized in the main hall of the Zentral- und Landesbibliothek in the Berliner Breite Straße, in 2020. Even more fascinating was, in 2019, the case of Georg Friedrich Händel's *Semele* (1744) aria 'Hence, hence, Iris, hence away', in this case sung in Turkish by the soprano Ezki Kutlu, in front of the Ishtar-Gate of Babylon in the Pergamon Museum, in front of a crowd of surprised visitors. Parallel to the marketing-oriented popup events, in the last fifteen years several artistic and participatory formats were developed aiming at making operatic music a device for inclusion and multicultural exchange. Some examples are the workshops for elementary school pupils *Berliner Sing Along* (2019–ongoing), and *Zeit für Oper*, which involve the children in the Komische Oper

25 Since January 1st, 2004, the Berliner Staatsoper, the Deutsche Oper, the Staatsballet and the Komische Oper Berlin are co-founder parts of the funding institution Stiftung Oper Berlin.

26 While the YouTube channel of the Komische Oper Berlin has around 9930 followers (May 2025), the PopUp-Opera snippets have a range of 14.000–25.000 visualisations.

Kinderchor (children choir), and the recent cooperation with the Charitè Hospital in the project *Resonare* (2021–2022), music lessons dedicated to patients affected by dementia. Here the intense cooperation with third parties (e.g. schools, retirement homes, cultural centres, hospitals) directly involved in the territory offers a crucial contribution to focusing on the most important challenge for cultural institutions coping with community engagement, i.e., paraphrasing the words of Doug Borswick, "giving the audience what they really need, instead of what they are supposed to need".

Although, the first crucial, and very successful experiment was the musical adaptation as a children's opera of one of the most famous of stories from the *One Thousand and a Night*, *Ali Baba and the 40 Thieves* by the Turkish-born, Berlin-based composer Taner Akyol, in 2012. Here Akyol drew together native Turkish sounds and Western music traditions, mingling classical Turkish wind instruments, such as the kaval and the zurna, with oboes and flutes, whilst, as expected, the libretto was both in German and Turkish. A first challenge in the multicultural adaptation, as the author explains,[27] was of musical nature. Indeed, whilst Berlin is undoubtedly rich of zurna and kaval players, many of them are used to playing traditional songs by heart, and don't feel comfortable with notes and scores. Furthermore, beyond the musical and cultural mingle related to the production, over 100 workshops for children and teenagers were held in the months around the premiere,[28] a format that turned out to be a specific feature of the Komische Oper's productions devoted to intercultural dialogue. Despite all cultural and economic challenges, the famous refrain *Açil susam açil!* (Open sesame!), indeed opened the opera house the access to Turkish music culture and, at the same time, it encouraged many children of Turkish background, together with their families, to approach the Komische Oper and take part in the *Kinderchor*, thus initiating countless new projects.

If community-oriented activities are nowadays an established practice for cultural institutions and opera houses,[29] the Komische Oper Berlin has had the peculiarity of making the vibrant multicultural identity of the German capital city, and in particular the Berliner-Turkish community, around the 6% of the capital's population and the 12% in Germany in 2024,[30] a specific addressee and focus of its research and of its commitment.

27 Komische Oper Berlin 2014, 108.

28 Komische Oper Berlin 2014, 106–107.

29 Dollman 2023; Petri-Preis/Volt 2023.

30 Statista.de 2025; Immigration-Integration. Mediendienst: Wer kommt und wer geht 2025.

Before analysing the main related projects in detail, it is interesting to notice that music, and especially Gangsta Rap, with famous stars like Bushido and Eko Fresh, is a powerful vehicle of a specific Turkish-German identity and of its language, the *kanak sprak*,[31] giving voice to feelings of exclusion and marginality. On the other hand, the multifaceted migratory background of the at least four generations of Turkish-German identities has been object of the high-brow culture already since the 1980s, it is enough to quote among many, of the Georg-Büchner-Preis 2022 winner Emine Sevgi Özdamar, or of the theatre works Feridun Zaimoglu, now in residence at the Worms *Nibelungenfestspiele*, as well as of the world famous director Fatih Akin. Considering these popular examples, as well as the Turkish-German Rap tradition, it is possible to see how the efforts of the Komische Oper Berlin are working to fill a gap from the inside, in the everyday life of a vibrant multicultural community, by creating new networks and a new shared language of communication.

3 *Selam Opera!* Operatic Music for Cultural Exchange

In 2012 the urban intercultural project *Selam Opera!* ('Hello Opera!') was born from an idea of Mustafa Akça, stage director at the Komische Oper Berlin since 2011, whose credo, not far away from Walter Felsenstein's, reads: "music-theater can speak a universally understandable language".[32] Due to his commitment in building cultural bridges and enabling cultural dialogue through opera, Mustafa Akça was awarded the Order of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany in 2024. Akça has himself a Turkish migratory background and remembers his first encounters with the opera world, perceived as elitarian and distant.[33] Since 2011, he has been in charge of *Selam Opera!*, conceived as

> [...] intending to appeal more to people from different cultural backgrounds and at the same time respond artistically to current developments in Berlin's urban society. On the one hand, the aim is to arouse enthusiasm for contemporary and diverse musical theater among the general public and, on the other, to open up the Komische Oper Berlin itself and sensitize it to a changed audience.[34]

31 Bower 2011.
32 Komische Oper Berlin 2025f.
33 Komische Oper Berlin 2025f.
34 Komische Oper Berlin 2025f.

Selam Opera! was born with the aim of bringing musical theatre in non-theatrical spaces, to diverse audiences: people who don't know opera, people who are not interested in classical music, people who cannot afford a classical concert. Therefore, the team of *Selam Opera!* aims at involving the capital's multicultural neighbourhoods, such as Kreuzberg and Neukölln, former parts of the American sector before 1989, and areas with the highest concentration of immigrants already since the 1960s, and now object of gentrification, and, at the same time, disadvantaged areas, where diversity means "social demixing",[35] and abandonment of public space.

The project is structured into several modules and activities which all together reflect the multiplicity of aspects connected to music as a device for cultural exchange. In the tradition of the Komische Oper's dissemination strategy since 1947, the playhouse also released a dedicated non-scientific publication in 2014, involving both well-known exponents of German, and Berlin intercultural dialogue in particular, such as the Afro-German sociologist Prinz Asfa-Wossen Asserate[36] and the well-known Turkish-German literary and theatrical author Feridun Zaimoglu, as well as citizens and professionals directly involved in the musical, educational and social activities, among them the activist and former neighbourhood manager of the Wrangelkiez in Kreuzberg Emine Başaran and the music pedagogist Anne-Kathrin Ostrop. The task the book set itself is not to produce a scholarly text on the *Selam Berlin!* project, but rather to offer a multifaceted, detailed and realistic portrait of Turkish-German socio-cultural dialogue in the German capital city.[37]

Mustafa Ak-ça's first public module created for *Selam Opera!* is the *Operndolmuş*, literally 'Opera-stuffed taxi',[38] an actual minibus (a so-called *Sammeltaxi*) that carries a small ensemble of the Komische Oper Berlin made of two singers and three musicians (bajan, violin and contrabass) as well as a moderator, performing in non-conventional space, such as education centres, migrant reception centres, public gathering places, fostering musical, artistic and personal encounters. As Linda Hutcheon well remarks discussing transcultural adaptation, "differently knowing audiences bring different information to their interpretations".[39] As Akça and his co-operators state, the first crucial choice was in fact the repertoire and the structure of the concerts, whose aim is not music education, but the desire to find through

35 Komische Oper Berlin 2014, 60.

36 Asserate 2016.

37 From March 2022 to nowadays there have been almost sixty *Operndolmuş* performances, including the *Fatma & Fatoş* series.

38 *Dolmuş* (lit. 'stuffed') is the Turkish name for group-taxis (*Sammeltaxi*), which are often overloaded with clients. See Komische Oper Berlin 2014, 82. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are the author's own.

39 Hutcheon 2006a, 149.

music a common language that can respect all cultures involved in the dialogue and make everyone feel equally understood. Therefore, the repertoire includes both arias, duets of popular operas and operettas, and popular Turkish music of the 19th and 20th century. All the arias, duets and songs were rearranged as an acoustic operatic performance, while, on the other hand, the chosen instruments (violin, bajan, and contrabass) recall Eastern European and Middle East folk sounds. The outcome is a multicultural adaptation in which everyone can recognize either well-known words or melodies, but, at the same time, experiences them adapted in the arrangement of a musical culture different from their own, listening to them "through other ears".

Each show is connected to a specific universal theme, such as love, *In zwei Heimaten zu Hause* (having two homes), *Kesin Dönüş - Eine Sehnsucht* (nostalgia and return), *Hadi Bakalım – Wanderung* (let's go) and the musical performance is followed by a short discussion and confrontation between audience and performers, on social and music related topics, starting from the comparisons of plots and characters between Western and Middle Eastern music tradition. Every topic has its specific repertoire, i.e. *L'amour est un oiseau rebelle* from Bizet's *Carmen* and Claudio Monteverdi's *L'incoronazione di Poppea* (the "Pur mi tiro" duett in particular) are in the repertoire of *In zwei Heimaten zu Hause*, while for *Kesin Dönüş – Eine Sehnsucht* the dialogue between German and Turkish music is much deeper with Beethoven's *Fidelio* and Kurt Weill's operette *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny* juxtaposed to the song of wandering *Uzun, ince bir yoldayım* (I'm on a Long and Narrow Road) from the early '60s by the popular blind folk singer Aşık Veysel Şatiroğlu.

In this case, arias and duets are almost never translated into other languages, even though a Turkish version of the *Habanera* has become one of *Operndolmuş*' most requested hits.[40] On the other hand, the repertoire, with its Verdi and Offenbach snippets, shows a continuity with the Komische Oper's long-time tradition.

One of the latest stops of the *Operndolmuş* was realized in cooperation with the contemporary art museum Hamburger Bahnhof on the occasion of the retrospective exhibit *Singing in Full Color* dedicated to the Turkish painter and opera singer Semiha Berksoy (1910–2004). Berksoy, who studied melodrama in Berlin and spent her life between Istanbul and Germany was a crucial exponent of the Turkish-German cultural dialogue. On March 29th, 2025, the ensemble of the *Operndolmuş* performed at the Hamburger Bahnhof a selection of Rossini's arias, and Turkish operettas; on the same day the museum offered guided tours both in German and in Turkish. In this case, a major achieved goal of the Komische Oper, in order to pursue the mission of spreading the operatic culture "beyond German educated

40 Komische Oper Berlin 2014, 106.

Klavierhaushalten",[41] fostering intercultural and intergenerational involvement, was to be able to grant free access to the museum to 'its audience', i.e. participants of *Selam Berlin!* events coming from disadvantaged Berlin neighbourhoods, unable to afford a train and a museum ticket to take part in the event.

4 *Fatma & Fatoş* and *Opernreise*: An Operatic Travel Through Private and Collective Turkish and German Memories

The special invited guests, who finally received their free entrance tickets, were the real protagonists of one of *Selam Opera!*'s most recent productions *Fatma & Fatoş* (2024–ongoing), a series of operatic performances dedicated to the women *Gastarbeiter*[42] who, alone, reached Germany to work.[43] Fatma and Fatoş are doppelgängers: the first has just arrived in a new, foreign country to work in a factory, she is homesick and hoping for a better life. On the other hand, her friend Fatoş is independent and unconcerned. In a tight operatic dialogue, which reflects the peculiarities of each character, the two Turkish friends reflect about their present, their past and their future expectations. The project was realized by the *Selam Opera!* team in cooperation with the Berliner social centre for women support *UĞRAK - Beratung, Kurse und Treffpunkt für Frauen* (Neukölln), with the association against discrimination *The Berliner Register* and with the artist Türkan Kentel, author of the biographical exhibit *Allein in einem fremden Land – Gastarbeiterinnen aus der Türkei* 1962–1973 (Alone in a foreign country – Women *Gastarbeiter* from Turkey 1962–1973) and is the result of a long research process, during which direct testimonies, private and family memories, along with popular anecdotes concerning the lives of women who left Turkey alone as *Gastarbeiterinnen* were collected and became the frame of the music dramaturgy. Core of the repertoire are in this case famous Turkish pop-songs from the 1960s until the 1990s, starting with *Burçak tarlası* (1964), sung by the popular singer of Turkish traditional songs Tülay German,

41 The German term (literally 'families who own a piano') indicates already since the 19th century the elitarian music educated bourgeoisie.

42 The term literally means "Guest Worker". On October 30, 1961, the Third Adenauer cabinet signed the first Guest-Workers-Program between the Federal Republic of Germany and the Turkish Government, which officially lasted until 1973.

43 This was, for example, the case of Emine Sevgi Özdamar, as she tells in the autobiographical work *Die Brücke vom goldenen Horn* (1998).

or *Hababam Sınıfı* (1975), soundtrack of the homonymous popular film series. Paradigmatic are *Gurbet* ('Away from Home', 1972) by Özdemir Erdoğan, a song of migration and nostalgia, where the main voice, forced to migrate because of the war, asks for news of the homeland:

> Söyleyin, memleketten bir haber mi var?
> Yoksa yârin gözyaşları mı bu yağmurlar?[44]

and *Hadi Bakalım* (1991) by Sezen Aksu, a track highlighting the epochal change of the fall of the Soviet bloc, with its famous incipit:

> Yerimiz mi dar yoksa yenimiz mi dar
> Ne var?
> Uçurmuş herkes, o da kim oluyor
> Sen kimsin, kim bunlar
> En büyük kim?[45]

In *Fatma & Fatoş* popular Turkish songs and melodies mingle with famous operatic arias, alternating the nostalgic drama associated with the character of Fatma and the playfulness and frivolity attributed, on the other hand, to Fatoş. Cherubino's aria on the turmoil of love 'Non so più, cosa son, cosa faccio' from *Le nozze di Figaro* (1786), or the poignant love duet 'Ah perdona al primo affetto' from *La clemenza di Tito* (1791), and *Rinaldo*'s 'Lascia ch'io pianga' (1711) by Georg Friedrich Händel find a counterpart in 'La calunnia' from Gioachino Rossini's *Il barbiere di Siviglia* (1775), or 'Verflixt und zugenäht' (Damned to Hell)[46] from the contemporary German operetta *Messeschlager Gisela* by Gerd Natschinski, and 'Ich bin eine Frau, die weiß, was sie will' (I am a woman who knows what she wants) from the music comedy *Eine Frau, die weiß, was sie will!* (1932) by Oscar Straus, both also in the *PopUp-Opera* repertoire and on the main stage of the Komische Oper between 2022 and 2024. Furthermore, the original song *Gözlerinde* (2023) by Nihan Devecioğlu was composed on this specific occasion.

As Julia Oesterreich and Mustafa Akça explain, every time the performances of *Fatma & Fatoş* become a new occasion to gather and share memories with family and community members: "It is not unusual to receive letters and phone calls after a show, with people telling us that *Fatma & Fatoş* made them ask their family

44 Are these rains perhaps the tears of my beloved? / Tell me, are there news from the homeland?
45 We're out of space or we're out of new / What is it? / Who are you, who are they / Who is the greatest?
46 Literally 'damned and sewn up'. Here the play on words with the idiomatic expression refers to the fact that the two protagonists are dressmakers.

members about their migratory past".[47] *Fatma & Fatoş* is the final episode of a wider, intermedial research and operatic work dedicated to the Turkish-German dialogue and, in particular, to Turkish-German migration, in a perspective that Barrie Kosky very well and simply explained in 2016: "It is dangerous to say 'I am german', 'I am Turkish-German', every story is different and unique",[48] therefore, the only possible format is to intertwine operatic music with personal remembrances and testimonies. A further credo, which guided the work of Mustafa Ak-ça's team, especially in the case which is now going to be analysed is "music is a home",[49] sometimes the only home and cultural roots that one can carry with when forced to abandon his or her homeland.

The recent history of the *Türkisch-Deutsche Beziehungen*[50] is also the protagonist of the documentary of 2016 *Eine Opernreise. Auf den Spuren der Gastarbeiterroute* ('An Opera Journey. Following the trail of the *Gastarbeiter*'), directed by Jörn Hartmann, and created by Mustafa Akça, with the dramaturgical support of Johanna Wahl within the framework of the project *Selam Opera!* It is a proper post-migrant operatic travel from the German capital to Istanbul through south-eastern Europe, which was awarded the BKM Prize for Cultural Education in 2017. Indeed, as both the director and the involved cultural institutions remarked on various occasions, it happens very seldom that experiences of migration told by the voices of their direct protagonists are involved in high-culture performances, such as opera.

From May 29 to June 8, 2016, the *Operadolmuş* embarked on a journey of more than 3000 km along the route that many migrant workers who worked as *Gastaerbeiter* in West Germany have used every year since the 1960s to return to their original hometowns for a few weeks on vacation. In a 45-minute musical theatre revue created especially for this trip, the external motivations and emotional movements that drove people to seek their fortune in faraway places are traced, albeit at the price of longing for their abandoned homeland. The program is also a short trip through the history of musical theatre: from the beginnings of opera in the Italian Renaissance to the Berlin jazz musical of the wild 1920s, such as the Turkish popular song *Dağlar, dağlar* ('Mountains, mountains', 1970) by Barış Manço, performed in Turkish by the Komische Oper soprano Julia Domke, and *Man muss ab und zu verreisen* ('Everyone must leave home once in a while', 1930) from Nico Dostal's operetta *Clivia*. Also the standard repertoire of *Operadolmuş* was directly

47 From the interview with Julia Oesterreich from May 14, 2025.

48 Komische Oper Berlin 2025c.

49 Komische Oper Berlin 2025c.

50 The 'Turkish-German international relationship' has a long tradition, heading back to the 18th century. See Schönig/Bayraktar/Calik 2011.

involved, in particular on the third theme, *Ev – Heimat* (home), here with the meaning of 'having two homes', with all its challenges and contradictions, and the popular aria 'Largo al factotum' from Rossini's *Barbiere di Siviglia*, sung in Italian, and *Carmen*'s 'Habanera', here portrayed as a factory worker, as *leitmotif*.

The trail met Munich, Vienna, Belgrade, Sofia and Istanbul, all crucial cities in the memory of both Turkish migrants, and German history of the 20th century. As some interviewed Berliner with Turkish background tell in the documentary, these were the obligatory stops to rest during the long journey, a true epic through the GDR (for those who lived in West Berlin), then West Germany, the Soviet bloc, until reaching the Bosporus, along the so-called *Gastarbeiter* route. In each city the *Operadolmuş* organized a performance in partnership with a local institution or cultural entities, such as the GB*10 cultural centre in Vienna, the *Center for Cultural Decontamination* in Belgrad and the Goethe Institut of Istanbul, trying to involve people with Turkish migratory backgrounds. During the journey, relatives, descendents and Turkish-German migrants were interviewed, and told their memories and anecdotes in front of the camera, such as the brick put on the car pedal to help the tired drivers after many hours of road trip, or the bribes requested to cross some frontiers. Also the audience and Mustafa Akça himself, who also experienced the *Gastarbeiterroute* in person, belonged to the interviewees. On the 11th, final day of the journey, one last site-specific operatic event was performed in the district of Beyoglu in Istanbul, where, suddenly, the Komische Oper tenor Johannes Dunz stepped out onto the street from the entrance of a barber shop and invited passers-by to enter and watch a pop-up performance of the *Barbiere di Siviglia*, with an explicit intercultural reference to the well-established cult of the Turkish grooming, which has its roots in the Osman Empire.

At the end of the adventure all the heard stories were brought back to Berlin with the *Operadolmuş*, creating a multiple cultural exchange and, again, fostering multicultural community awareness in Germany's capital city. In fact, the final stop of the journey was the hospital Vivantes Klinikum am Urban, in Kreuzberg. As Mustafa Akça recalls: "It is the hospital where many children of Turkish *Gastarbeiter*, including myself, were born, and where many people with Turkish background are taken care of."[51] Here the documentary had its premiere in June 2016, with a final discussion with the audience, also made of patients of the hospital, i.e. direct witnesses and protagonists of the summer journeys between Germany and Turkey. The feedback from the audience, as in every production of *Selam Opera!*, played a

51 Komische Oper Berlin 2025c.

very important role already during the shooting of the documentary.[52] Significant is here the statement: "I feel the stories even if I cannot understand the words", said by a moved spectator in Istanbul, underlining the striking power of music as an eternal transcultural language.

5 Conclusions

In conclusion, *Selam Opera!* is undoubtedly sharing Lawrence Kramer's approach towards "keeping classical music alive" by encouraging doing things with opera, so that "opera can do things for us", such as language and cultural education, community building and fostering a new self-perceiving in one's social and urban context.[53] Of course, analysing a phenomenon that is still in the process of evolution, involving subjective feelings and constantly changing sociocultural landscapes is extremely challenging. If it is already a matter of fact that the number of participants with migratory background to the *Kinderchor* and to the pedagogical activities of the Komische Oper has been increasing in the last ten years, only time will reveal the actual impact of *Selam Opera!*'s activities on the diversification of the Komische Oper's audience. In the meantime, what can be said is that the reactivation of memory and intercultural dialogue in urban spaces, especially in the gentrifying areas of large metropolises, and opening the opera houses to new diverse audiences is more necessary than ever. It is also crucial to remember that outreach practices impact both on the audience and participants and on musicians and practitioners, opening new worlds and new shared perspectives, with the words of Barbara Balba Weber:

> Musicians [...] are constantly changing themselves by exposing themselves to artistic encounters with unfamiliar worlds. These can be other social classes, music scenes, professions or people in special situations. To do this, they leave their familiar surroundings and enter unfamiliar situations with their art. These experiences change their attitude towards other social groups and thus also their behaviour as artists.[54]

52 As for all the *Selam Opera!* formats, the Komische Oper Berlin does not disclose the collected feedback, with specific exceptions included in the documentary *Eine Opernreise*.

53 Kramer 2007, 14–31.

54 Petri-Preis/Voit 2023, 208.

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Federica G. Pedriali

The Global Utopia of Art: Operatic Containers, Broken Pacts, and the Politics of Dispersal

Abstract: This chapter examines *Invisible Cities* (2013) and *Hopscotch* (2015), two operas staged by The Industry under the direction of Yuval Sharon, as case studies in the evolving ecology of media and symbolic environments. Drawing on McLuhan's media theory and recent work in media ecology, it explores how literature and opera – once central to modernity's cultural infrastructure – are being reconfigured through intermedial practices. While *Invisible Cities* stages the logic of "stationed representation" in a site of transit, *Hopscotch* disperses the operatic form across the urban fabric, testing the limits of liveness, authorship, and symbolic labour. Together, these works expose the paradox of the global utopia of art: its promise of inclusion is sustained by architectures of sorting, and its most radical gestures emerge not from coherence, but from breakdown.

Keywords: The Industry; *Hopscotch*; Italo Calvino; Mobile Opera; Media Ecology.

When the last fire goes out,
time too will be finished.
Italo Calvino[1]

Warm thanks to Sarah Wass at The Industry for her generous willingness to entertain the questions of a narratologist moonlighting in operatic terrain – not out of depth in depth, but certainly not fluent in the technical. Her openness to this cross-frequency exchange helped tune the chapter's signal. This work grows out of ongoing research on the making (and disposing) of worlds from containers – Calvino, Berio, and the "fortress" always in view. Interstices, in this context, are not just gaps but media in their own right: the in-between that borders on sets of media and, by that very logistics, becomes medium. (The beginnings of this idea lie in a reading of WWI no man's land through Agamben, but that's another story.) If this chapter finds its way between disciplines, it is because Sarah helped keep the interstices open – and the media just managed enough.

1 The epigraph is taken from Calvino's short essay "The Flames within the Flames", originally published in *Collezione di sabbia* 1984, translated into English by Martin McLaughlin 2013, and reprinted in *The Narrative of Trajan's Column* (Calvino 2020, 81–88, here 88). Written during a visit to Iran, the piece reflects on the sacred fire as both a cosmic and human technology. Fire, Calvino suggests, is the medium through which humans sustain their symbolic infrastructure: it must be tended, preserved, and passed on. Recalling Jean Cocteau's famous reply to the question, "If your house was on fire, what would you save?" – "The fire" – Calvino affirms it as the very condition of human continuity. This chapter is dedicated to the memory of Martin McLaughlin, whose translations have long illuminated Calvino's texts with clarity, care, and enduring insight.

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1 Introduction: The Global Utopia of Art

Around the 1920s, as technologies like radio and cinema were first branded as "media", it became clear that these were not simply channels for transmitting content, but environments engineered to shape perception and behaviour at scale. From that point on, the question was no longer what art communicates, but what it conditions – what kinds of attention, access, and conduct it orchestrates. This chapter takes up that transformation, tracing the evolving ecology of media as a system of symbolic and material pressures – what Marshall McLuhan famously called "massages" – that shape, select, and bind human behaviour. Media are not neutral vessels; they are volumetric selectors, containers of symbolic power that orient and recompose human collectives. In this sense, media are not just environments – they are habitats, and increasingly, they are the architects of the future human.

This inquiry moves through the cultural architectures where that conditioning has been most enduring – literature and opera – two forms once central to the symbolic economies of modernity, now reconfigured through intermedial practices. These new forms do not merely update or preserve older genres; they transform them into new environments, new volumes that bind audiences through novel biases and affordances. The utopian promise of art as a humanising force persists, but it is now mediated through technologies that dislocate presence, fragment authorship, and recompose experience in ways that are both liberating and delimiting – imposing new thresholds, filters, and rhythms that govern how attention is distributed, and meaning is accessed. What emerges is not just a shift in form, but a reorganisation of the stage itself: a choreography of containers and interstices, where even the gaps between media function as media – logistical zones that sort, amplify, or silence. The live, the archived, the immersive, the gamified: all now operate within this expanded ecology, where performance is no longer simply staged, but "stationed".

The chapter's third section focuses on *Invisible Cities*, the 2013 opera by Christopher Cerrone, based on Italo Calvino's 1972 novel and staged by The Industry in Los Angeles' Union Station. Directed by Yuval Sharon, this production does not merely illustrate the morphing of traditional media into new ecologies of performance and perception – it enacts it. It is a work that stretches the operatic form across space, signal, and infrastructure, transforming a site of transit into a site of aesthetic habitation. The station becomes both medium and message: a container of movement repurposed as a container of meaning. And yet, for all its innovation, *Invisible Cities* remains a deeply human work – an industry in the original Latin sense of *industria*: active, diligent, and productive. It is thus also an *opera* in the

fullest expression of the form: both a work and a working, a composition of material effort and symbolic labour.

Such works, while extraordinary, expose the deeper logic of contemporary media ecologies: the recomposition of unity through fragmentation, the creation of new god's-eye perspectives through dislocated mediation, and the binding of audiences through the very technologies that promise decentralisation. The opera's wireless intimacy, its curated estrangement, its algorithmic afterlife – these are not exceptions but symptoms. What appears as innovation conceals continuity; openness, meanwhile, rehearses enclosure under the guise of access. To make sense of this paradox, the chapter draws on McLuhan's understanding of media as environments, Strate's account of how communication technologies bias our experience of time, and Appiah's analysis of identity as a set of organising fictions – "the lies that bind". These frameworks help illuminate how intermedial art, far from dissolving boundaries, reasserts them in subtler, re-aestheticised forms. What binds us now is not the opera house, but the interface; not the stage, but the stream.

The fourth section turns to *Hopscotch*, the 2015 mobile opera that followed *Invisible Cities* and marked a radical escalation in The Industry's ambitions. If *Invisible Cities* reimagined the station as operatic volume, *Hopscotch* dissolved the volume altogether. Staged across twenty-four cars moving through Los Angeles, the work did not merely extend the logic of intermediality – it detonated it. The opera was no longer housed, streamed, or even stationed; it was scattered, broken, and reassembled in transit. The Industry, emboldened by the success of *Invisible Cities*, set out to stage the impossible: the liberation of the everyday. And for a moment, they nearly did. In one of *Hopscotch*'s most haunting chapters, a woman sings while preparing food in a caravan being washed – her voice contending not just with the scrape of sponge and hose, the blade of her knife, and the breath of the city, but also with the silent proximity of a perplexed, four-strong audience seated uncomfortably close. The text – spoken more than sung, read by the narrator and only partially vocalised – cuts through the operatic fabric like a signal from another register. The medium does not support it; it collapses. And in that collapse, the message intensifies. *Hopscotch* does not offer resolution; it stages the extremity of the message, purified by the breakdown of form. It is not a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, but a fugitive ritual – assembled from fragments, driven by necessity, and held together by the urgency of a single idea: that another life, another city, another use of time may no longer be possible – may, indeed, never have been.

Calvino's words – "when the last fire goes out, time too will be finished" – frame the threshold we now approach. After *Hopscotch*, the fire no longer glows as metaphor: it seethes beneath the surface of exhausted forms, consuming the scaffolds of coherence. What we witness is not evolution, but combustion – a collapse of

symbolic orders and temporal architectures long held to uphold the human. Literature and opera do not endure intact; they are reconstituted under pressure, drawn into systems that simulate engagement while programming containment. The futures they gesture to are not more connected, but more contingent – fragile assemblages tethered to the spectacle of their own survival. The fire persists, but its glow is refracted through loops of perception, intensities of repetition, and the porous edges of deferred collapse. The question is no longer whether art will adapt, but whether it can still ignite – still rupture the circuitry. And if so, for whom – and for how long. The passage remains uncertain. The companions are not given. But already, we are seeking them – in winter and night. This search leads us not only through the ruins of form, but into the architectures that once held it – into volumes where symbolic life was not simply shaped but sorted, and secured through the logics of attention and access.

2 Media as Volumes: Binding, Sorting, and the Politics of Form

To think of media as environments is to recognise them not as neutral channels, but as volumetric forces – symbolic and material architectures that shape how we move, perceive, and relate. This spatial turn in media theory builds on McLuhan's foundational insight that "the medium is the message" but extends it into a broader ecological register: media are not just transmitters of content, but habitats that choreograph behaviour. They are not passive containers, but active selectors – biasing perception, privileging certain rhythms, and scripting the conditions of engagement.

This volumetric view is further developed through a range of theoretical perspectives. Strate's distinction between "space-binding" and "time-binding" societies reframes communication as a technology of transportation – reshaping "structures of interest" and sustaining collectives through shared information. Building on this, Rancière's "redistribution of the sensible" and Latour's model of networked activation help frame media as selectors – technologies that sort, bind, and reassemble the social through architectures of visibility and participation. In contrast, Nancy's and Agamben's "inoperative communities" offer counter-models of unbinding – forms of collective life that resist enclosure and remain open to indeterminacy. Ingold's "life of lines" similarly unsettles containment, proposing a relational ontology of movement, trace, and entanglement. Media, in this view, are not only environments that bind – they are contested terrains where the politics of binding and

unbinding are continuously negotiated, and where the very conditions of futurity are at stake.[2]

The word "volume" is deliberately polysemic. It refers to a three-dimensional form, a textual artefact, and a measure of intensity – whether of sound, force, or presence. Each register is active in the ecology of modern media. A novel, for instance, is a volume in all three senses: it occupies space; it encodes symbolic content; and it exerts force – on the reader, on the culture, on the future. As a cultural technology, the printed book has long operated as a central infrastructure of modernity – curating identity and social cohesion through its material and symbolic affordances. This function is not incidental but deeply embedded in its design and circulation. Portela's account of the book's "simulations" foregrounds its role in enforcing cultural norms through iterative modelling; Tabbi complements this by identifying the book's stabilising function in producing a "constancy of reference" that anchors epistemic continuity; Miller extends the argument by framing literature as a mechanism of "value segregation", sorting readers through encoded hierarchies; Stockwell adds a cognitive dimension, showing how textual texture disciplines perception and response; and Puchner synthesises these insights by positioning the book as the container of "our" story – a symbolic vessel of collective memory, identity, and becoming. These perspectives converge on a crucial insight: literature is not merely content to be consumed, but a selector of subjectivity, a binding medium that organises the social through form.[3]

Opera, too, is volumetric: it saturates architectural space with sound, synchronises bodies in shared attention, and orchestrates meaning through the interplay of voice, gesture, and scenography. These volumes, however, were never disinterested. Like the printed book, the opera house operated as a symbolic engine of modernity – an environment that did not merely reflect identity but actively produced

2 Following Carey, Strate 2011 reframes communication as a technology of "transportation" that reshapes "structures of interest" (Strate 2011, 69) and sustains collectives through shared information, extending McLuhan's 2001 insight into media as environments that condition perception. Rancière's 2004 "redistribution of the sensible" and Latour's 2005 model of networked activation position media as selectors of visibility and participation. In contrast, Nancy 1991 and Agamben 1993 propose inoperative communities that resist enclosure, while Ingold 2015 introduces a relational ontology of movement and trace. These perspectives collectively frame media as terrains where the politics of binding and unbinding shape the conditions of futurity (Berardi 2017).

3 On literature as the "volume" of modernity, see Pedriali 2025. The printed book, as operator of the modern project, curated identity through its material and symbolic affordances. This view builds on Portela 2022, Tabbi 2002, Miller 2002, Stockwell 2012, and Puchner 2022, who variously frame the book as simulator, stabiliser, segregator, discipliner, and symbolic vessel of collective becoming.

it. Each form shaped subjectivity through its capabilities: the book through textual containment and sequential logic; the opera house through spatial hierarchy, acoustic design, and ritualised spectacle. These were not simply sites of cultural expression, but infrastructures of attunement – technologies that trained perception, regulated affect, and choreographed belonging. As Appiah has shown, the dominant coordinates of identity – "Creed, Country, Colour, Class, Culture" – are not innate categories but curated fictions, sustained by the environments that claim to elevate and universalise. What upholds these fictions, he argues, is not orthodoxy but "orthopraxy": correct practice, correctly performed. In this light, the volumes of modernity did not merely include; they sorted – through page and stage alike, binding subjects to the scripts of their becoming.[4]

This sorting, then, was not abstract. It was spatial, material, and historically sedimented. As Bourdieu has shown, symbolic power is embedded in the architectures of everyday life – in the seating plans of theatres, the margins of books, the acoustics of concert halls. The opera house, with its vertical stratification of access and spectacle, is a literal volume of social choreography. The printed book, with its pagination and paratexts, disciplines the eye and the mind. These are not inert vessels; they are infrastructures of symbolic labour. They do not merely exclude; they enact a subtler logic of expulsion – pushing certain subjects to the periphery of perception, beyond the reach of those safely stationed within the symbolic limits of the "state".

Strate's concept of "biased environments" helps clarify this dynamic. His notion of "binding biases of time" captures how media environments choreograph not only what is communicated, but how time and space are inhabited. This insight finds sharper articulation in Agamben's theory of the apparatus – not merely as a tool or mechanism, but as a generator of subjectivity, a structure that activates and configures the human through its embedded regime of capture. Heidegger's account of dwelling deepens this view: for space to become place, it must be humanised – transformed through labour, care, and symbolic investment. Dwelling, in this sense, is not passive inhabitation but an active process of world-making. These perspectives align with Foucault's insistence that even the ruins of power preserve their inscriptions, and with Hodder's archaeology of entanglement, where humans and things co-constitute each other through recursive dependencies. Together, they illuminate how symbolic environments are not only inhabited but enacted – how

4 Appiah 2018 – see especially the chapter on "Creed" (Appiah 2018, 35–67), where religion is framed not primarily as belief, but as behavioural regulation: "'acting' right", not "'believing' right" (Appiah 2018, 36).

media, in their symbolic architectures, bind us through choreographies of attention, activation, and exclusion-expulsion.[5]

The shift from print to digital, from stage to screen, is not a mere change in format. It marks a reconfiguration of the architectures that structure perception, redistribute attention, and govern symbolic life. This is not a neutral evolution. Each new medium inherits the logic of its predecessor while reprogramming its conditions of access, visibility, and endurance. McLuhan's recursive insight – that the content of any medium is always another medium – remains pivotal here: the digital embeds the typographic, the streamed performance the staged one, but in doing so, each also recalibrates the terms of engagement. What emerges is not just remediation, but a new regime of symbolic durability – one that is always provisional, always tethered to the lifespan of the hosting infrastructure.

The filmed version of Sharon's *Invisible Cities* (2018) exemplifies this shift. It does not merely preserve the live event; it reconstitutes it. The camera constructs a volume no audience member could inhabit – dislocated, omniscient, algorithmically curated. This is not the god's-eye view of transcendence, but of computation: selectively omnipresent, platform-dependent, and structurally fragile. What is seen, heard, and remembered is determined not by liveness, but by the logic of the frame. The viewer is no longer a body in a seat, but a node in a network – a desk-bound spectator of a mediated totality. And yet, even this view is precarious. Its viability – contingent on paywalls, codecs, and platform longevity – exposes the digital not as immaterial and enduring, but as perishable, unstable, and infrastructurally finite. The archive, like the performance it captures, is always at risk.[6]

Literature and opera have long served as binding media – technologies of cohesion that link individuals to publics, publics to nations, and nations to histories. They perform memory, ritual, and affect. But in their intermedial mutations, they

5 Strate's "binding biases of time" (Strate 2011, 70–71) foreground how media environments encode temporal experience into their structure. Agamben's apparatus (Agamben 2009) operates as a conceptual engine – an embedded system that preconditions subjectivity through mechanisms of capture. Heidegger 2001 reframes space as something not merely inhabited but actively transformed: place emerges when space is operationalised through acts of dwelling, care, and symbolic labour. Foucault 2004 and Hodder 2012, though writing from different traditions, converge in showing how power endures through material traces – whether as the residual inscriptions of historical regimes or the recursive entanglements of human and object worlds. Bourdieu 1991 and 1993 grounds these insights in the spatial routines of symbolic domination.

6 On the logic of media succession, see McLuhan 2001 and McLuhan/Fiore 2001, who conceptualise media as layered systems – each new form reconditioning the sensory and symbolic protocols of the last. This stratification suggests durability, but only within infrastructural limits: digital artefacts like *Invisible Cities* 2018 remain materially contingent, their persistence shaped by platform dependencies, access regimes, and the volatile lifespan of digital storage.

also expose the fragility of this binding. The opera in the train station, the novel reimagined as installation, the streamed performance: all reveal the seams of the volume. They disclose what Calvino called the "interstices" – the gaps between containers, the spaces where meaning leaks, lingers, or overflows. Yet even these interstices are not free. They are curated, aestheticised, absorbed. The homeless figures who appear in the background of *Invisible Cities* may seem like ruptures in the spectacle, but rupture too is choreographed. The interstice becomes part of the volume; the excluded are included as figures of exclusion. What emerges is not a liberated media ecology, but a recalibrated infrastructure – modular, mobile, and self-adjusting. The opera house, the book, the station, the stream: each is a selector of attention, a container of symbolic labour, a choreography of exclusionary participation.

Fragility, in this context, is not failure – it is signal. As Strate observes, new media disrupt settled technologies by rendering visible what had become infrastructural: the network, the *industria*, the ritual – the correct and repeated performance of connection. "We are binders of time", he writes, "bound up by our biases of time". Harari extends this logic, reframing the human not as the most collaborative species, but as the most connectivity-driven – wired to restore the "nexus" at all costs. Fragility, then, is not collapse but recalibration: the moment when symbolic environments stretch to accommodate their reconfiguration. Latour explores this in *After Lockdown*, where the post-pandemic subject, like a new Gregor Samsa, must learn to dwell again – reinhabiting delimitations that no longer conceal their scaffolding but demand to be reactivated, endured, and re-performed. Calvino's poetics of the interstice sustains this maintenance, staging it as fragile verticality: threading through the gaps, rising within the "fortress" against the weight of infrastructure and code – only to reassemble as aspirational *Gesamtkunstwerk*, where aesthetic fusion meets anthropological exposure, and the work reveals the matrix of power, as the "industry" stages its own *messa in opera*.[7]

To think of media as volumes is to understand them not merely as containers of symbolic life, but as infrastructures of perceptual governance – architectures that choreograph how we move, what we notice, and who we become. These volumes do not simply hold content; they hold us. They shape the conditions under

7 Fragility, in symbolic systems, is not dysfunction but a modality of governance. As Chun 2021 argues, disruption often re-routinises rather than liberates – functioning as a stabilising gesture that aestheticises contingency while preserving control. Strate's 2011 temporal biases and Harari's 2024 nexus imperative both encode this compulsion to restore symbolic continuity. Latour's 2021 post-pandemic subject must re-perform the scripts of dwelling, now exposed as scaffolding. Calvino's interstices (Pedriali 2006) do not rupture the fortress – they articulate its logic: a poetics of vertical maintenance where fragility becomes the very medium through which infrastructures adapt, persist, and reassert their claim.

which attention is distributed, meaning is made, and subjectivity is formed. Yet volumes are not fixed. They morph, migrate, and recombine, embedding older logics within new interfaces. As media shift from page to platform, from stage to stream, their volumetric function persists – often intensified. What matters now is not only what media contain, but how they circulate, how they sort, and how they bind. In this shifting ecology, the task is no longer to decode the message, but to inhabit the medium – to trace the architectures that govern attention, and to ask what forms of life they enable, and which they foreclose.

3 *Invisible Cities*: Operatic Drift and the Stationed Medium

Calvino's *Invisible Cities* (1972) endures not through narrative closure, but through its capacity to hold the human question in suspension. Life, time, love, loss, death – these are not resolved; they are refracted through a structure at once elusive and exacting. Long a staple in literature departments and celebrated for its resistance to finality, the book unfolds as a poetics of thresholds between memory and desire, language and silence, visibility and invisibility. Its recursive design and spare elegance have made it not merely a literary classic, but a generative engine – an open score for transmedial invention. From kinetic installations and sonic landscapes to dance, immersive environments, and opera, *Invisible Cities* has become a platform for creative transmutation. It does not simply persist. It proliferates – activating new architectures of attention, new volumes of symbolic labour.[8]

8 Structured as poetic dialogues between Marco Polo and Kublai Khan, framing fifty-five imagined cities, *Invisible Cities* both resists and delivers closure. Its recursive architecture – eleven thematic series across nine sections, partitioned by eighteen dialogues (Pedriali 2006) – has made it a catalyst for transmedial experimentation: from print art (Puente; Trignac 1993) to kinetic installations (*Bauci* 2019; LSBU 2008), animated popups (*Tecla* 2011; *Ersilia* 2011, 2019), dance and sonic storytelling (*Eutropia* 2020; *Leonia* 2021; XMTR 2024), and VR extrapolations (*Stones of Venice* 2020). Its staged afterlives diverge sharply: The Industry's 2013 production remains a landmark in operatic innovation; Warner's 2019 interpretation veers toward intermedial theatre (MIF Scenes 1–2). Beyond the arts, *Invisible Cities* has inspired urban regeneration projects (*Grafting Cities* 2023), where Calvino often goes unmentioned (Aberdeen 2025). Like a symbolic Las Vegas – sprawling, dazzling, awesome – the novel thrives not by resisting urban formlessness, but by enabling it: through the operations it sets, the interfaces it packages, the architectures it activates. Its afterlives are industriously bound.

Among these emanations, the Industry's 2013 production of *Invisible Cities*, directed by Yuval Sharon and composed by Christopher Cerrone, stands as one of the most conceptually audacious interventions in contemporary opera. Staged in Los Angeles' Union Station – a civic volume already saturated with symbolic charge – the work transfigured a functioning transit hub into a looping operatic habitat. Performers moved among commuters; the audience, equipped with wireless headphones, navigated concourses and patios, curating their own trajectories through a landscape of sonic drift and visual flux. The opera unfolded as a constellation of micro-events: loosely choreographed, never fully synchronised, and always exceeding the frame of real-time apprehension. The station remained open throughout – tourists, commuters, and unhoused individuals moved through the space, sometimes absorbed into the spectacle, often resisting its pull. The result was not a staging of Calvino's novel, but a staging of its epistemology: a choreography of fragments, thresholds, and mediated encounter, where the everyday was not suspended but repatterned through operatic signal.

This was not opera as architectural enclosure, but as infrastructural diffusion. Cerrone's score – lyrical, diaphanous, and composed for headphone intimacy – was distributed across two chamber ensembles in separate rooms, with singers miked and mixed live. The audience received a spatialised stream shaped by sound designer Nick Tipp, who orchestrated three simultaneous mixes – for performers, orchestra, and audience. The effect was immersive, yet partitioning. The headphones created a mobile acoustic envelope within the public space: a private auditory world overlaid on a shared visual field. What the audience heard was synchronised; what they saw was not. Each spectator assembled their own operatic encounter from fragments, echoes, and fleeting alignments. The opera became a palimpsest of sound and space – a dematerialised performance sculpted by the aesthetics of mobile media and the politics of perceptual drift.[9]

9 Steigerwald Ille 2024, 1–29, 30–70. *Invisible Cities* 2013 marked a turning point in The Industry's operatic philosophy – from architectural containment to infrastructural entanglement. Positioned between *Crescent City* 2012 and *Hopscotch* 2015, it was their first large-scale, site-specific, digitally mediated opera. Staged twenty-two times in Los Angeles' Union Station – a civic nexus layered with historical sediment and civic semiotics ("Spanish Colonial, Mission Revival, and Art Deco", PBS SoCal 2013) – the production embedded performance in a living matrix. Audiences, equipped with Sennheiser headphones, navigated concourses and patios, immersed in a spatialised soundscape while the visual field remained open and unpredictable. Performers began in street clothes, gradually transforming; spectators traced their own itineraries through ambient cues and sonic drift. "Some people came multiple nights to find different parts of the story", recalled tenor Ashley Faatoalia (Steigerwald Ille 2024, 36). The opera did not merely adapt to the station – it reprogrammed it. What began as a site of transit became a site of symbolic recursion, where Calvino's cities flickered

Steigerwald Ille's ethnographic analysis foregrounds the tension between immersion and control. Drawing on Jonathan Sterne's "audile technique" and Michael Bull's "filmic listening", she shows how the headphones activated spectatorial behaviours rooted in mobile music culture. The listener, cocooned in sound, aestheticised the environment – turning commuters into characters, architecture into *mise-en-scène*, ambient noise into narrative texture. But this aestheticisation was never neutral. It was choreographed by the apparatus. The headphones did not merely transmit sound; they modulated perception. They promised agency while prescribing a shared stream. They offered intimacy, but also segmentation. They conjured a sense of private discovery, while instituting a hierarchy of access. Only those with tickets and headphones could hear the full performance. The rest – especially the unhoused – were rendered as visual residue: present, but structurally unheard.

This is what, following musicologist Nina Eidsheim, Steigerwald Ille terms "sonic gentrification": the transformation of public space into a curated aesthetic experience for paying audiences, often at the expense of those who inhabit that space daily. The opera's immersive logic, she argues, mirrors the contradictions of the "experience economy". It promises freedom but delivers formatting. It invites participation but enacts sorting. It gestures toward inclusion but rehearses exclusion. The headphones, in this reading, are not just listening devices; they are instruments of symbolic labour. They delineate the boundary between audience and ambient public, between curated citizenship and infrastructural invisibility.[10]

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through the choreographic logic of the everyday: bodies in motion, sidelong glances, signals in flux, headphones briefly lifted to check on "reality". Steigerwald Ille frames this not as spectacle, but as a recalibration of civic perception – an operatic ecology that threaded narrative through infrastructure, staging attention itself as medium.

10 Steigerwald Ille 2024, 30–70, repositions *Invisible Cities* as a paradigmatic case of operatic rebinding – where immersion recalibrates control rather than liberates. Her ethnography, attuned to the politics of headphone intimacy, draws on Bull 2007, 1–24 and Sterne 2003, 91–130, to trace how the opera's sonic envelope choreographs perception, sorting bodies into curated and ambient publics. Eidsheim's "sonic gentrification" (Eidsheim 2019) sharpens this critique, exposing how aesthetic privilege maps onto infrastructural exclusion. The promise of agency – wandering, choosing, assembling – unravels under Ritchey's analysis (Ritchey 2019, 28–63, 99–124) of neoliberal enchantment, where personalisation becomes a proxy for participation. Penner 2020, 117–137 and Everett and Stevens 2024, 1–20 extend this reading, showing how fragmentation and flux operate as mechanisms of affective governance. Chattah 2020 anchors these strategies in postmodern operatic semiotics; Robin 2021, 1–17, 104–137 and Eikhof and Warhurst 2013 expose the institutional scaffolding that sustains them. What emerges is not rupture but patterned recursion: a media ecology that aestheticises inequality, packages exclusion, and sells it as experience – not of art, but of self-optimisation through symbolic distinction, where seeing others as marginal confirms one's own "station".

And yet, *Invisible Cities* is not a cynical work. It is a work of paradox – one that suspends resolution not to evade meaning, but to expose the architectures through which meaning is made. Cerrone's score is central to this suspension. Composed for headphone intimacy and shaped by the aesthetics of the studio, it resists the operatic grammar of presence. Instead, it constructs a sonic topology – layered, porous, and affectively charged – where amplification, reverb, and spatial drift are not embellishments but compositional logics. Cerrone's idiom, drawing from both classical and ambient traditions, unsettles genre as much as it unsettles space. The voice is often dislocated, the source of sound obscured, the listener enveloped in a field of sonic partials that demand interpretive agency. Described by the composer as "a studio album for headphones", the work invites not immersion as absorption, but immersion as navigation: a mode of listening that is at once intimate and estranging, contingent and curatorial.

This mode is deeply Calvinoesque. In the novel, Polo's cities are not destinations but operations – metaphorical engines that refract memory, desire, and time through iterative dialogue. The reader, like the Khan, is not offered a map but a method: a way of listening that privileges resonance over resolution, drift over fixity. The opera transposes this epistemology into the architecture of Union Station, where the audience becomes the Khan – wandering, overhearing, assembling their own constellation of meaning. The libretto, drawn from William Weaver's translation, preserves the novel's poetic opacity; the staging, by refusing visual coherence, amplifies the role of the listener as co-composer. "It is not the voice that commands the story: it is the ear", says Polo in the final set of dialogues – a line that becomes, in this operatic ecology, both invitation and constraint. For the ear, too, is positioned. What began as a poetics of openness becomes a choreography of perceptual roles – another medium enlisted to stretch, disrupt, and reimagine, only to be captured once more.[11]

11 Calvino 1997, 123 – "'I speak and speak', Marco says, 'but the listener retains only the words he is expecting […] It is not the voice that commands the story: it is the ear'". *Invisible Cities* lingered in the imaginations of both Cerrone and Warner – two artists differently trained but attuned to its operations. Warner, a student of English literature (MIF Scenes 1–2 2019); Cerrone, a college composer who first improvised its cities at the piano (PBS SoCal 2013). For both, the novel became less a text than a score: to be heard, inhabited, revoiced. That revoicing unfolds within a sonic culture where fidelity is fetishised and distortion disavowed. Sennheiser's claim of "the highest fidelity, without distortion" is not just technical – it is a politics of clarity, a promise of uncorrupted access. But what is curated as purity is not transparency – it is a gradient of access, tuned to confirm who listens without friction. The immersive rhetoric of headphone opera – marketed as natural, seamless – belies the fact that mobile music no longer stuns the social; it stations the listener in curated solitude. And yet, for those who have learned to listen – who, like Calvino's prisoner-king in *A King*

Sharon's directorial philosophy reinforces this logic. In *A New Philosophy of Opera*, he argues for a liberated spectatorship – one that resists legibility, embraces ambiguity, and foregrounds enchantment over explanation. Opera, for Sharon, is not a form to be preserved but a medium to be reconfigured. It is a site of ritual, immersive storytelling, invisible power. The proscenium, he writes, is both a frame and a barrier – a structure that precedes the scene and separates the audience from the stage. To dismantle it is to dismantle the routines of spectatorship, to open new configurations of encounter. *Invisible Cities*, in this sense, is not just a staging of Calvino's novel; it is a staging of Sharon's operatic philosophy. It is a work that stretches, untethers, and reframes the operatic apparatus.

But this reframing is not without its seductions. Sharon's enthusiasm for the medium – for the experiment, the site, the signal – is palpable. The opera house, the voice, the genre itself: all are ripe for disruption. The artist pledges to awaken the "aspirational glimmer" in all of us, to expand what opera can be, where it can go, whom it can reach. And yet, in this very pledge lies a deeper tension. The heroic voice – the soaring, unamplified or amplified operatic line – is not merely a technical feat; it is an anthropological gesture, a ritualised fiction of transcendence. As Appiah reminds us, the most enduring forms of belonging are sustained not by truth, but by the lies that bind – narratives that organise identity precisely by concealing their vested interests. Sharon's vision of operatic liberation risks becoming one such narrative: a beautifully staged fiction that reasserts, through its very aspiration, the hierarchies it seeks to dissolve.

The artist who would liberate may already be captured – by the dream he performs, the structures he inherits, and the audience he must still instruct. Sharon opened each performance of *Invisible Cities* with a guiding welcome, a spoken frame for the roaming to follow. Yet in the final archive – the film – he is conspicuously withdrawn. This absence is not incidental. The film opens with the overture played continuously, intercut with black frames, stills of natural and man-made phenomena, and elevated shots of the orchestra – images that signal montage, authorship, construction. The camera then descends, joins the players, enters the scene. Editing is everywhere visible, except where it might reveal the artist's own hand. Sharon is not erased, but absorbed – his authorship diffused into the apparatus he animates. The artefact is artificial, but cannot contain the artist's own

Listens (Calvino 1988), sit at the centre of the signal – the ear remains the last site of resistance. The king listens not for command but for the missed life. So too does the operatic ear: trained not to obey the voice, but to detect its absence – and in that absence, to hear the architecture of its own capture.

artificiality. The aspirational lie is too large to frame, and the final record goes silent on the voice that once set its terms.[12]

4 *Hopscotch*: Ritual, Exhaustion, and the Architecture of the Few

Before it fractures, *Hopscotch* astonishes. A mobile opera for twenty-four cars unfolding across the circuitry of Los Angeles, it does not merely extend the logic of *Invisible Cities* – it reimagines the operatic pact at the edge of its own viability. Gone is the station as container; in its place, a dramaturgy of drift, a choreography of dispersal without anchor. The audience is not gathered but scattered, not seated but boarded, not immersed but exposed. Each chapter begins anew: a different car, a different performer, a different medium stretched to its limit. The proscenium dissolves, along with the acoustic contract, the intimacy of the headphone, the illusion of sonic control. In their place: the volatility of traffic, the refractive surface of glass, the improvisational acoustics of steel and upholstery. The city does not frame the opera – it absorbs it, folding performance into its own logic of circulation. The car becomes a capsule of unstable liveness; the audience, a node in a mobile network of spectatorship without guarantee. All is nested yet unsettled: performance, reception, infrastructure – entangled in a regime of encounter that is as precarious as it is unprecedented. *Hopscotch* does not astonish because it succeeds, but because

12 Sharon's *A New Philosophy of Opera* (Sharon 2024) calls for liberated spectatorship – immersive, enchanted, unbound by the proscenium. Yet the proscenium, as he concedes, is not merely a barrier but a structuring condition: a frame that persists, however displaced (Sharon 2024, 86–106). His volumes – stage, station, book – do not dissolve this marker; they reconfigure it, intensifying the technicity of encounter. Directors, he argues, must lead as "relational artists", steering aesthetic choices that enlarge expectations and demand more of the audience, not less (Sharon 2024, 112–121). The risk is innovation becoming a demand for interpretive labour that exceeds what spectators can safely absorb. Sharon advises against pre-show lectures (Sharon 2024, 182), yet each iteration of *Invisible Cities* opened with his own instructions on "how" to spectate (Steigerwald Ille 2024, 34). The tension of the proscenium – now headphone – is not contradiction but structure. The social theatre remains visible: inscribed in the faces of those guided to understand, and in those who do not register the performance – or do, but only as its indispensable background. The director's framing moment – the lecture – is not archived; the film (2018) and *Artbound* documentary (PBS SoCal 2013) preserve only the spectacle of spectators, spectating as instructed while the apparatus-director recedes from view. For further documentation, see interviews with Cerrone, Tipp, Faatoalia, and audience members in the *Artbound* archive, and Sharon's latest lecture series, *Anarchy at the Opera* (Sharon 2025).

it accelerates into risk – relinquishing control, confronting the public not with spectacle but with exposure. It wagers that the operatic voice, stripped of architecture, amplification, and aura, might still resonate – that resonance, however fragile, might yet ignite in the interstices of a city in motion.[13]

To be stationed in a car is to be both mobile and held. *Hopscotch* stages immersion only to expose its constraints: intimacy is orchestrated, mobility assigned, participation reduced to function. The audience is not wandering but conveyed – routed through a system that simulates choice while scripting encounter. The city passes, but the window is a screen; the performers are proximate, but proximity is buffered, routinised, endured. Each scene, repeated twenty-four times a day, tests not just vocal stamina but spatial tolerance – performance as attrition, presence as strain. This is not the station as site, but stationing as condition: a logic of placement that persists even in dispersal, tethering bodies to roles, routes, and repetitions. There is no *Gesamtkunstwerk* here, only iterations – gestures toward a form that cannot yet hold, a ritual not yet ritualised. The audience does not spectate; it labours. It is tasked with absorbing the excess of a spectacle that refuses to stabilise. In *Hopscotch*, stationing is not architectural – it is existential. The operatic form is not dissolved; it is stretched to the threshold of legibility.

What does it mean to be live in a system that routes, loops, and streams? Liveness in this context is not presence but process – glitch-prone, contingent, recalibrated in real time. There is no illusion of perfection, only the persistence of

13 *Hopscotch* was conceived in the wake of logistical complications with *Invisible Cities* – a moment of speculative relief that became a radical escalation. Directed by Yuval Sharon and produced by The Industry, the opera unfolded across 24 cars, each hosting one of 24 ten-minute chapters, distributed across 3 thematic routes: Red (nostalgic), Yellow (surreal), and Green (transcendent). Each route comprised 8 chapters plus a shared finale, with 4 audience members per car, rotating through scenes performed repeatedly. A total of 96 spectators experienced each performance, with additional viewers accessing livestreams at the Central Hub – a circular installation of 24 screens broadcasting footage captured by audience members. The opera featured 10 composers, 6 librettists, and over 120 performers. The production reached 3,072 audience members in cars and over 6,000 at the Central Hub, while also drawing "countless accidental viewers" – all without causing "traffic jams" (*Hopscotch* 2015). Though nonlinear, the narrative draws inspiration from Julio Cortázar's *Rayuela* (*Hopscotch* 1963), whose episodic structure and recursive logic inform the opera's own architecture of drift. The *Hopscotch* archive retains a customisable interface, with an additional 10 animated chapters – marked in blue – serving as narrative milestones. While users may choose where to begin, the work insists – quietly but persistently – that ritual requires recurrence, and enchantment, plot. *Hopscotch* delivers both – delicately, deliberately. A young artist finds love, loses it, searches, and finds again – not the same love, but a different one, shaped by time, loss, and the city. The quest is diverted, but not abandoned. The story remains, embedded in the woman's body, even as the opera refuses to settle. For documentation, see the *Hopscotch* archive 2015, Steigerwald Ille 2024, 71–113, and Sharon 2024, 221–243.

effort. The audience is not simply watching; they are switching feeds, scanning QR codes, assembling fragments. They are not passive but enlisted – tasked with curating coherence in a system that withholds resolution. This agency is not emancipatory but extractive: the labour of making meaning under conditions of perpetual deferral. Presence, too, is instrumental. Seated in limousines, armed with smartphones, participants function as both conduit and editor – nodes in a circuit of symbolic relay.

As Steigerwald Ille notes, following Sterne, this act of filming constitutes symbolic labour: a choreography of mediation in which the viewer becomes a "vanishing mediator", effaced in the very act of transmission. But this docility – this willing absorption into the apparatus – is not without cost. The freedom to frame is also a burden: to perform attentiveness, to manage proximity, to orchestrate one's own spectatorship. The audience is not liberated; it is operationalised. Meanwhile, performers are subjected to their own routinisation: repetition, fatigue, the erosion of embodied presence through assembly-line performance. In *Hopscotch*, both audience and performer are drawn into the mechanical – into the recursive labour of per-forming and re-producing. What is tested is not only the spectacle, but the human: its thresholds, tolerances, and capacity to persist under the iterative strain of fragmentation and demand.

In Chapter 18, *Hopscotch* condenses into a scene of domestic compression: a woman sings while preparing food in a caravan being washed. Her voice, buoyed by tuba and bass, contends with sponge, hose, and blade – utensils rendered instruments, routine rendered score. The visible audience – two figures seated uncomfortably close – are not spectators but conscripts, drawn into a ritual that is part invocation, part exorcism. Outside, the caravan is scrubbed in a mechanical wash, its windows fogged and rinsed like screens. The scene is not immersive but allegorical: a baptismal cleansing of the dream of mobility, now exposed as architecture of capture.

The text, spoken rather than sung, is drawn from Debord – not as critique, but as dramaturgy of disillusionment. A mid-century patriarch delivers it seated, assured, voicing systemic failure with rhetorical clarity: "They did not see the deficiency of their city. They thought the deficiency of their life was natural". The singer echoes fragments, not to interpret but to register. Her voice, stretched between aria and utterance, marks presence, not meaning. The caravan becomes a chamber of exhausted futurity; she leans into the table, watching the rear window flicker with the projection-film of the eternal young couple – perhaps themselves once, perhaps no one – driving off into the fiction of customised life choice. Her gaze interrupts; her voice discloses. No rupture – only recursion. *Hopscotch* does not transform; it loops. The wash, the reset, the voice: not progress, but modulation. What is staged

is not renewal – not of opera, and certainly not of life as Passage, the sacred crossing of the few – but the exhaustion of its form.[14]

The next scene shifts from ritual to confrontation – not between companions, but between philosophies. Chapter 19 stages no singing, no score: only speech, exchanged across traffic. A man in a limousine, a motorcyclist riding parallel – two passengers, two readings of the city. One invokes T.S. Eliot: "Hell is the place where nothing connects with nothing" – a city of voids, not networks. The other replies with Milton: "The mind is its own place, and in itself can make a Heaven of Hell, a Hell of Heaven" – a city of projection, not relation. Their exchange is not a duet but a fugue: two tonalities of despair, two registers of resistance, neither capable of further articulation. If Chapter 18 exposed the failure of companionship, Chapter 19 reveals a deeper fracture: even among the select "few", accord is elusive. Passage falters not from distance, but from dissonance. The city moves, but the passengers remain out of sync – each following an insulating rhythm, unable to connect.[15]

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14 Debord's *On the Passage of a Few Persons Through a Rather Brief Moment in Time* (Debord 1959), composed at the founding of the Situationist International, stages a youth already formatted for revolt – gestures of dissent rehearsed within the architecture of circulation. The Situationists diagnosed the city as spectacle: a space where desire is managed, not mobilised; where movement is simulated, not enacted. Yet even then, they were "we": those who sought Passage, not knowing yet what seeking would entail. In *Hopscotch*, the Airstream domesticity sings the same desire – mobility mythologised, stasis aestheticised, aspiration looped. "We" are all who have ever sought: Parisian youth, car wash narrators, performers in rotation. "They" – eternal, unchanging – are those who never sought, who never perceived the need to seek. They do not see the "deficiencies" of the city. They do not imagine otherwise. That difference is not historical but ontological. It is the only definition of Passage we have: "we" seek; "they" do not. But what "we" call Passage is not movement. It is ritual. It is the choreography of non-arrival. Capital no longer narrates, as Han 2020 observes; it requires no story, only belief. And belief is not conviction – it is trust extorted from a world without coordinates. The system does not liberate. It schedules. In *Hopscotch*, audiences "vanish" only to be rotated. Performers loop through shifts of 8 to reach 24 repetitions a day. What appears as aesthetic passage is logistical throughput.

15 Milton's "The mind is its own place […]" (*Paradise Lost* I.254–255), spoken by Satan in the wake of his fall, is not a declaration of freedom but a performance of entrapment – an assertion of autonomy staged within a system already lost to him. His defiance is not resistance but complicity, a self-authored fiction that masks the absence of exit. Eliot's "Hell is the place where nothing connects with nothing" – often misattributed to his *Introduction to Dante* (1929), as in Lehrer's epigraph (Lehrer 2012) – distils motifs from *The Waste Land* (III.296–305 – echoed nearly *verbatim* in "I can connect | Nothing with nothing", vv. 301–302), *Murder in the Cathedral* (II, Chorus), and *King Lear* ("Nothing will come of nothing" – Eliot 2015, 679). In Eliot, Hell is not fire but the horror of disconnection: "the Void, more horrid than active shapes of hell […] where the soul is no longer deceived". The polarity established here between Miltonic projection and Eliotic void is not dialectical but recursive – two registers of the same apparatus. Both expose the city as a symbolic prosthesis: a fiction that defers the deeper horror of there being nothing even in the mobilities that animate the

We crave plot – love, destiny, revelation. We long for the soaring voice, the rupture that lifts us from the everyday. But this longing is not innocent; it is infrastructural. Opera, even at its most transcendent, has always been a capturing engine – its rituals designed not to liberate, but to bind. Today's "opera for all", with its immersive interfaces and modular archives, does not undo this logic; it refines it, embedding it in the global imaginary of the experience economy. Ritual does not vanish – it mutates, tightening its grip. The new sensorium we seek – a reset of everything – fails to arrive. What remains are exhausted gestures in upgraded skins: simulation without risk, circulation without rupture. The voice still rises, but carries no epic. The plot still unfolds, but binds as only fiction can – a choreography of signs that mimics transformation while securing stasis. And yet the drive persists: the recursive demand for meaning, the faint thread of voice through the circuitry. The pact, however unfinished, still gestures toward a commons – not as destination, but as provocation, above all of maintenance.

The architecture of the few is not a failure of ambition, but the logic of selectivity. In *Hopscotch*, as in *Invisible Cities*, dispersal is shadowed by design. The audience is not gathered but gated, not summoned but sorted. Numbers impress, but the system is built for scarcity, not scale. What appears as openness is orchestration: an interface that stages access while preserving hierarchy. This is not the opera house, but its mobile echo – an apparatus that reasserts the limits of inclusion through logistical aesthetics. The few are not simply those who attend, but those formatted to attend – positioned by infrastructure, routed by code, recognised by the archive. The architecture is not spatial but symbolic: it governs not only entry, but legibility – who counts, who circulates, who is seen to be seen. Ritual becomes repetition, presence becomes throughput, participation becomes labour. In this ecology, the commons is not extended – it is simulated. The pact is not fulfilled – it is deferred. And yet the search continues – not for resolution, but for resonance. The companions are not given. But we continue to seek them – through architectures that sort us, and the interstices that still, however briefly, let us presume passage.

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city of the living. *Hopscotch* stages this bind: not a confrontation of philosophies, but a collision of enticements.

5 Conclusion: The Fire and the Frame – On Maintenance, Mediation, and the Unfinished Pact

We do not pass; we are passed through. The system does not offer transit – it circulates us. To presume passage is to mistake the loop for a line, to confuse repetition with progression. What endures is not movement but the labour of symbolic survival: bodies routed, gestures repeated, meaning extracted under the sign of the hope for duration in and through mobility. Passage, in this economy, is not a journey but a function – performed, not lived.

Opera, in its most radical form, has always rehearsed the impossible: voices rising where they should not, bodies withstanding what they cannot, meaning tested through duress. Today, that rehearsal continues – not in the house, but in the loop; not on the stage, but in the stream. The genre does not dissolve. It reconstitutes. It does not conclude. It persists.

Yet this persistence is not benign. It is infrastructural. The operatic form, once anchored in architectural grandeur and ritualised cohesion, now circulates through interfaces that simulate openness while operationalising exclusion. The promise of "opera for all" – immersive, mobile, intermedial – is not a rupture but a reprogramming: a choreography of sorting that reasserts hierarchy through curated permeability. The genre evolves, but its transformations are shaped by the apparatus – by the politics of mediation, the economics of attention, and the aesthetic logistics that govern symbolic life.

The companions are not given – not in this circuitry. But we continue to seek them – through architectures that indeed sort us, and the interstices that still, however fleetingly, allow us to project a semblance of passage. Not because we believe in the system, but because we refuse to let it close – for good. The inferno, as Calvino reminds us, is ambient. It is what we build together, every day, to hold the void – the nothing that connects nothing. But so too is the fire. It must be kept – not for warmth, but for continuity. Not for spectacle, but for care (of ourselves).[16]

16 Calvino's final dialogue in *Invisible Cities* is often mistaken for a metaphysics of hope. It is, more precisely, a politics of selection. "'The inferno of the living [...] is what is already here [...] There are two ways to escape suffering it. The first is easy for many: accept the inferno and become such a part of it that you can no longer see it. The second is risky and demands constant vigilance and apprehension: seek and learn to recognise who and what, in the midst of the inferno, are not inferno, then make them endure, give them space'" (Calvino 1997, 147–148). Like Debord's youth, Calvino's "we" is a filtered cohort: it is the "we" behind the artist's pledge, the immersive interface, the

The artist, meanwhile, is seduced – by the promise of reach, of resonance, of renewal. But the aspirational glimmer they pledge to awaken is not without design. It is connivant, compromised – a mix of desires shaped by milieu: love, life, adventure, nostalgic sunsets, promising dawns. This upward gaze into destiny is what captures us, makes us serviceable citizens, docile domesticates. The artist may seek elevation, but the apparatus seeks organisation. The operatic voice may be restrained, hybridised, compressed – but it still signals. It still soars, verticalising the dream of escape. Even when reduced to a single switch, it remains a call to supreme heights.

Technology does not liberate. It reroutes. It knocks societies off course only to reinstate them – reformatted, not reimagined. It generates means, and thus media. Sites are superseded, decommissioned; yet the new volumes where humans are found at work merely inherit tasks. Opera expands, but its conventions are not dismantled – they are repackaged. The genre goes intermedial, and the audience is trained for the mechanical: conditioned to crave gadgetry, to mistake immersion for agency, to perform responsiveness as ritual.

The hype of immersivity may confound, but opera compacted for expansion is no less operatic, ambitious, or "mega" than its more conventional incarnations. Whether these productions recalibrate scale through fragmentation and drift, or reassert magnitude through site-responsive, total-sensory immersion, their ambition remains undiminished. The voice still threads through the system – but the stakes have shifted. What was once a ritual of transcendence is now a choreography of endurance, a performance of symbolic labour under infrastructural constraint. The companions are not given, but "we" continue to seek "them" – if not in the plot, then in the pause; if not in the spectacle, then in the signal.[17]

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car wash ritual, the festival of best intentions – opera for all, belief for all, commodities for all – each staging a choreography of presumed futurity. Inclusion, in this schema, is not a gift but a sorting mechanism. Calvino's Thekla – the city of endless construction (Calvino 1997, 115) – offers a further warning. Its scaffolding never comes down; its plan is always deferred. The city builds not to complete, but to forestall collapse. Thekla is not utopia – it is a management system. Only those who can be scripted into its logic are preserved. The rest are consigned to the preambles of the void. And the void, as Eliot 2015 and Agamben 2001 remind us, is not fire but disconnection: the horror is not punishment, but the absence of relation. Care, in this schema, is not sentiment but stance. It is conditional, evaluative, infrastructural. As Latour/Schultz 2022 argue, even ecological solidarity is not about universal inclusion, but strategic separation – about recognising who and what must be defended, and who and what must be opposed. Maintenance begins with stakes in the ground – and proceeds through the drawing of lines.

17 In contrast to Sharon's interstitial dispersal, Warner's 2019 *Invisible Cities* offers a centripetal counterpoint – transforming Calvino's poetics of drift into a megastructure of immersive spectacle. Conceived as a "global ambassador" for intermedial reinvention, the Manchester International Festival staging drew on the novel as a generative device rather than a script, reabsorbing its symbolic

To presume passage is not naïve. It is insurgent: the wager that even within the circuitry, something still flickers – that the loop can be bent, the frame held open, the companions found. For we do not relent. "We" can't help ourselves – our pronoun already queued, already rehearsing its next installation.[18]

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impulse into the logic of the spectacular. Mounted at Mayfield Depot and designed for international touring, the production fused choreography, architectural projection mapping, and cinematic scoring to produce a sensory onslaught calibrated for "the *Game of Thrones* generation" (MIF Scenes 1–2 2019). The audience, though nominally mobile, was choreographed into zones of fixed reception. The city became backdrop, not interlocutor. Planned tours to Brisbane and Hong Kong were disrupted by the pandemic, prompting a VR extrapolation (*Stones of Venice* 2020) to preserve the work's global ambitions. What remains is not failure, but a cautionary artefact – a glimpse into a future where symbolic performance survives by mimicking the industries that threaten to erase it; where the invitation to listen is replaced by the attack on the senses, and the event becomes indistinguishable from the immersive theme park.

18 The "we" that presumes passage is not the commons but a cohort of the formatted few gathered for the ritual of best intentions – a truly global "economic imaginary" (Steigerwald Ille 2024, 113). Sun Yuan and Peng Yu's *Can't Help Myself* (2016) stages this bind with brutal clarity: a robotic arm, programmed to contain a spreading pool of viscous, blood-like liquid, performs its task endlessly – jerking, sweeping, recalibrating. The spectacle mesmerises, but the gesture is futile. The machine does not clean; it loops. It does not progress; it performs containment. Audiences watch, moved by its apparent exhaustion and uncanny choreography of care. But the arm is not resisting – it is executing. The installation does not liberate; it aestheticises the labour of making and maintaining worlds. Like the operatic apparatus, it stages symbolic endurance under the guise of agency.

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Carmen Ceschel

Christine Sun Kim's *Face Opera II*: Opera Beyond the Borders of Sound

Abstract: Opera as an art form brings together several elements: music, singing, acting, movement, set and costume design each contribute to create a performance. Among these elements, however, music plays a predominant role. In Western cultural contexts, music is considered to be audible sound, and so opera can be seen as a product of Western musical culture values. In this cultural landscape, Deaf artist Christine Sun Kim proposes her work *Face Opera II*. Although the work is presented as opera, with reference to the context of melodrama, it breaks the confines and definitions of audible sound, which are overcome and replaced by elements of American Sign Language, such as facial expression. These features then recall the strong expressiveness of the face in theatrical contexts, and broaden the definition of music as audible sound, as well as renewing the concept of melodrama. Audible sound is still found in *Face Opera II*, but in a context, culture and experience of Deaf people, with a non-pitched sound. Opera, with Kim, overcomes the need for the pitched sound and takes the political value of an artistic form belonging to a majority culture, such as the hearing culture, which is reborn within a minority cultural context such as that of the Deaf culture.

Keywords: Deaf Culture; Opera; Christine Sun Kim; American Sign Language; *Face Opera II*.

> An expanded notion of music is intertwined
> with our concept of who music belongs to.
> Music belongs to whatever culture it comes from.
> Music can be composed and experienced through
> a variety of senses and enjoyed by all.[1]

1 Introduction

In this paper I discuss the work *Face Opera II* and its relationship with lyric *opera*. The author of *Face Opera II* is Christine Sun Kim, an American Deaf[2] sound artist,

1 Cripps/Lyonblum/Small 2022, 206.

2 In the Deaf Studies literature, a distinction is made between the use of the term deaf (with a lower case initial) and Deaf (with a capital letter). As Paddy Ladd points out in his book *Understanding*

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performer and activist. In her works, which include drawings, videos, installation and performances, the artist explores sound, decentralizing the primacy of hearing as the unique, or primary, way of experiencing sound.

Composer Tiziano Manca, in *Before Sound: Re-Composing Material, Time, And Bodies in Music*, investigates the possibility that music is not just sound. He comments that "The relationship between music and sound has always been a constant concern in the Western tradition".[3] Lyric opera is a form of Western music performance in which music plays a predominant role.

The title of *Face Opera II*[4] refers to lyric *opera*, but the work lacks what is considered to be the essential element of *opera:* pitched sound. The lack of pitched sound in a work that qualifies as *opera* may be read in the light of studies on vocal technique: Jessica Holmes, citing Stras's *Organ of the Soul* and Davids and LaTour's *Vocal Technique*, clarifies that "Although certain popular and avant-garde musics welcome and even cultivate out-of-tune singing as part of a larger aesthetic tradition of vocal affect, "correct" intonation is a basic technical requirement and aesthetic tenet of classical singing".[5]

Kim's *Face Opera II*, performed by a chorus of nine Deaf performers, is divided into two parts. In the first, sound is completely absent, and performance comprises of a succession and series of facial expressions. In the second part, sound is present, but is without defined pitch.

Deaf Culture: In Search of Deafhood "The lowercase 'deaf' refers to those for whom deafness is primarily an audiological experience. It is mainly used to describe those who lost some or all of their hearing in early or late life, and who do not usually wish to have contact with signing Deaf communities, preferring to try and retain their membership of the majority society in which they were socialised. 'Deaf' refers to those born Deaf or deafened in early (sometimes late) childhood, for whom the sign languages, communities and cultures of the Deaf collective represents their primary experience and allegiance, many of whom perceive their experience as essentially akin to other language minorities" (Ladd 2003, xvii). On the basis of this reading, some authors (see Holmes 2017, 173) use the term *d/Deaf* when they want to refer to both people diagnosed with deafness and culturally Deaf people. In some cases, a partially different distinction is also made between the terms *deaf* and *Deaf*: according to this second distinction, the term *Deaf*, with a capital letter, is used to refer to all persons diagnosed with deafness and *deaf*, with a lower case, exclusively to describe a medical diagnosis or an adjective related to it, e.g. in the sentence "is deaf due to an illness contracted when he was two years old". Throughout this paper, I will use the terms *deaf* and *Deaf* following the second reading, thus always using the capital letter, unless I am referring to pathology.

3 Manca 2023, 11.

4 The number *II* refers to the fact that the artist proposed a series of works on sound of which this is a part, but there is no *Face opera I* among Kim's works.

5 Holmes 2016, 543.

The title *Face Opera II* then, refers to lyric *opera*, but lyric *opera* consisting of facial expressions, and not of audible and pitched sounds. As George Veditz, President of the National Association of the Deaf, remarked in 1910, Deaf people are, first and foremost, *people of the eyes.* This view was later echoed by Benjamin Bahan, scholar and lecturer at Gallaudet University, who defines Deaf people as *a visual variety of the human race*.[6]

In this paper I will consider the following questions:

– Can a work in which the sound is absent or without defined pitch be defined as an *opera*?
– In what sense is *Face Opera II* ascribable to a context related to melodrama?
– If it can be traced back to melodrama, how does it differ from it?

NB Ethical disclaimer: As a hearing person, I would like to underline that the views, interpretations, and conclusions presented here are my own, and arise from my work as a musician and interpreter of Italian Sign Language (LIS). They are not intended to represent the views of Deaf people or the demands of Deaf culture.

2 To Make Deaf People Part of the Western Musical World

The desire in the musical world to make music accessible to Deaf people has prompted artists, teachers and translators to work on translation of vocal works (from pop and rock music to lyric *opera*) into a sign language.[7] As Anabel Maler notes, "'Song signing' is a traditional form of storytelling found in Deaf cultures around the world. The act of song signing involves translating a pre-existing song's lyrics into a signed language, or composing an original sign language song":[8] we speak, therefore, of *signed songs* or *song signing* when a pre-existing song is translated into a sign language and is realized either by performing both the vocal and sign components at the same time, or is composed and performed by integrating the sign and vocal component.

6 Straus 2011, 167–168.

7 There is no single sign language used by Deaf people all over the world, but there are many sign languages, just as there are many spoken languages. In this paper I will use the capital letter to indicate a specific language (Italian Sign Language, American Sign Language) while I will use the lower case when referring to languages in general, without specifying the reference to one of them (e.g. 'speaking sign languages presupposes some knowledge').

8 Maler 2013, par. 1.1.

Although *signed songs* are a well-established art form with their own artistic standing, literature[9] on translation and musical adaptation techniques, it has not always met with favour among Deaf people. Cripps and Lyonblum, in their article *Understanding Signed Music*, remark that hearing signers and translators believe that signing songs to be a positive act for Deaf people which helps them to participate in a musical performance. However, for the authors, a translated song, or one that is born bilingual, is no more than a form of accommodation.[10]

Cripps again writes that:

> Some hearing individuals who have only started studying ASL perform translated songs in front of a Deaf audience. Inadequate skills in signed language frequently undermine the work and some hearing performers think they are doing a 'favor' for Deaf people (i.e., Deaf people deprived of music deserve "help" accessing it). The sound of the music would be turned on and a hearing performer signs the song. Some hearing people in the audience may be entertained by the performance for its novelty (i.e., watching the signed performance and hearing it at the same time). Deaf people in the audience are left with the signed portion of the performance that is tied to and limited by the structure of the auditory component of the music. The musicality of the translation tends to not be embedded within ASL grammatical structure, movement and rhythm of the signs as it would be when derived from within Deaf culture.[11]

For Cripps, then, a translated song is no more than an accommodation, often made by hearing people unsuited to the task, in the belief that they are doing Deaf people a kindness. A hearing person might find Cripps's interpretation unduly harsh. What if the interpreter is a native sign language speaker, or does not intend to behave with condescension? If that were the case, would the dignity of *signed songs* be preserved? Here it is worth noting that many interpreters of *signed songs* are native sign language speakers or CODA,[12] with high levels of competence in sign language. Two such examples in Italy, Nicola Della Maggiora and Argentina Cirillo, are both Deaf and both interpreters of *signed songs*. Other notable authors and interpreters of original *signed songs* are Sean Forbes or Signmark, both Deaf, with considerable expertise and a respectful approach.

It is clear that *signed songs* are a studied and established genre which is recognized and respected in the musical world. Cripps argues that every culture has a right to its own musical expression. If a musical form is bilingual, vocal, and signed, it is not an expression of the Deaf culture. A musical form can only be an expression of Deaf culture if it is born within the Deaf culture and its own characteristics, i.e.,

9 For example, Listman/Loeffler/Timms 2018.

10 Cripps/Lyonblum 2017, 82.

11 Cripps/Small/Rosenblum/Supalla/White/Cripps 2021, 2.

12 Child of Deaf Adults, a person who has one or both parents who are Deaf.

people of the eyes, as George Veditz defines Deaf people, for whom music passes through the eyes, without audible elements. Also importantly, in many cases for Deaf people, the use of a vocal language revisits oralism, i.e., a type of Deaf education based on the use of lip reading, hearing aids or cochlear implants, or speech therapy, limiting (or even excluding) the use of sign language. The use of vocal language is thus experienced in many cases, as an imposition of the hearing majority and a form of deprivation of Deaf people's natural language, which is sign language. Cripps's position is therefore, in my view, both aesthetic and political and should be read in a context of Deaf studies which as Ladd also makes clear, is closely related to Minority Studies, Post-Colonial Studies and Cultural Studies.[13]

If, on the one hand, audible sound has recently lost its centrality in Western cultured music even for hearing musicians (we can think of the studies by composer Tiziano Manca[14] or the works of Sofia Gubaidulina, in particular *Stimmen … Verstummen*[15]), the increasing awareness and consciousness-raising of Deaf people as a cultural minority rather people with disabilities who need help has led to the development of musical performances that focus on rhythm, sign languages, and gesture. Some examples are the *signed music*[16] and the works of Deaf sound artist Christine Sun Kim, as we saw, *Face Opera II*.

3 Music Belongs to Whatever Culture it Comes From

Deaf culture is no stranger to music and Deaf people do not necessarily need the medium of a hearing interpreter, or a translation, to enjoy it. Neither does music need audible sound to be defined as such. As Cripps writes, "An expanded notion of music is intertwined with our concept of who music belongs to. Music belongs to whatever culture it comes from. Music can be composed and experienced through a variety of senses and enjoyed by all".[17] Music is beyond mere audible sound and

13 Ladd 2003, 215.

14 Manca 2023.

15 Sofia Gubaidulina, *Stimmen … Verstummen*, 1986, symphony in 12 movements for orchestra.

16 *Signed music* is a musical genre developed and performed by culturally Deaf people, which does not involve audible elements. The precursor of signed music is the percussion signed song. "These performances operate according to a distinct artistic style, incorporating elements of signed languages; rhythmic hand, facial, and/or body motions; and media video arts" (Cripps/Lyonblum/Small 2022, 191).

17 Cripps/Lyonblum/Small 2022, 206.

sound is not at the centre of the musical experience. On the contrary, since music is an expression of the culture in which it is born and develops, in a cultural context in which the message passes not orally and audibly but through the visual/kinesthetic channel, music uses channels other than the auditory one and the musical experience takes on specific and different characteristics compared to those of Western sonocentric musical culture.[18]

Christine Sun Kim, author of *Face Opera II*, reflects on the relationship between music and sound and the existence of music (and a concept of sound) beyond the borders of audible elements in a *Ted Talk*.[19] Kim focuses in particular on the relationship between music and American Sign Language – ASL. In both the *Ted Talk* and the work that is the subject of this paper, the relationship between music and ASL is not one of translation. Kim does not deal with ASL as a language to translate vocal English into, or to translate into vocal English, but in it, in its visual and artistic aspect.

Christine Sun Kim says:

> I was born deaf, and I was taught to believe that sound wasn't a part of my life. And I believed it to be true. Yet, I realize now that that wasn't the case at all. [...] I actually know sound. I know it so well, that it doesn't have to be something just experienced through the ears. It could be felt tactually, or experienced as a visual, or even as an idea.[20]

Sound is an essential part of Kim's artistic life: in her works, she explores a non-auditory and political dimension of sound. In several visual works, Kim traces the spatial expression of ASL, giving it a graphic form. For example, in *All Day* and in *All Night*[21] (*All Day All Night* is also the title of one of the artist's exhibitions), she graphically realizes the sign in ASL that indicates the day (non-dominant arm placed in front of the body in a horizontal position with the elbow bent, dominant arm placed perpendicular to the non-dominant arm, elbow of the dominant arm on the hand of the non-dominant arm, movement with the dominant arm overlapping the non-dominant arm)[22] tracing the line that the hand of the dominant arm would trace but at the same time giving the idea of duration, of continuity, of the passage from dawn to noon to sunset, the idea of day as temporality, as *all day long*. It then

18 About sonocentrism, see Manca 2023, 128.

19 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Euof4PnjDk.

20 *The enchanting music of sign language,* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Euof4PnjDk. See also Straus 2011, 167, citing Padden and Humphries.

21 Whitney Museum of American Art, *Christine Sun Kim: All Day All Night*, https://whitney.org/exhibitions/christine-sun-kim-all-day-all-night.

22 www.spradthesign.com.

realizes, in reverse, the night, continuity and time relative to its duration, with a line that is specular to that of the day. In these works, however, there is not only ASL as visual art, but as time, rhythm, and duration which are also essential parts of music. In works such as *Too Possessive for Score* (2015), *TBD TBC TBA* (2015), *Fort of Fortes* (2015) and *Almost a Score* (2015) Kim graphically expresses her vision of sound, of *piano* and *forte*, of music and silence. The artist argues that music is more than audible sound alone and that the audible sound is not necessarily the centre of musical experience.

Before continuing, a small parenthesis should be made, about the link between deafness and culture, which has been commented on recently.

> The term 'Deaf Culture' emerged very recently from (mostly hearing) academic circles during the late 1970s, although there is also a limited literature on cultural features which stems from sociological writers, under such headings as 'subcultures' (Lunde, 1956), 'Deaf community life' (Higgins, 1980) or 'social aspects of deafness' (Christiansen and Meisegeier, 1986).[23]

The existence and presence of *Deaf culture* have now been established. However, the relationship between deafness and culture is broad and multi-faceted. Deaf scholar Paddy Ladd, in his *Understanding Deaf Culture: In Search of Deafhood*, discusses extensively why deafness should be regarded as a culture rather than merely a disability. Deafness has no country of origin, is no common religion, no common traditions, and no common genetic origins. Neither are there common family origins, because a Deaf person can be born in into hearing family and vice versa. There is not a single sign language, because every country has its own sign language with strong local characterizations; in Italy, for example many regional variants exist. These aspects highlight the complexity of Deaf culture and its relationship with art. Perhaps, writes Ladd, it is also difficult to define the concept of *culture*: "Kroeber and Kluckhohn identified a minimum of 164 definitions of culture as long ago as 1952."[24] The topic is clearly beyond the scope of this paper but to know more about this the interested reader is invited consult to *Understanding Deaf Culture: In Search of Deafhood*. Here Ladd, examines the concept of culture in various disciplines, from anthropology to linguistics, and concludes:

> Nevertheless, as indicated in the text, several aspects of cultural theory within each of the disciplines cited have relevance in initiating a model of Deaf culture. The relative usefulness of each can only be fully assessed after an examination of the work so far carried out on Deaf culture, as described in the next chapter. However, we should re-emphasise the vital conclusions of the section on sub-cultural theories, where the linguistic arguments put forward

23 Ladd 2003, 233.

24 Ladd 2003, 197.

> appear to make a very strong case for validating the Deaf culture concept – that if a group of people have their own language, then they will also have their own culture.[25]

It could also be argued, as already mentioned, that there is not one sign language but that many sign languages exist. However, what Deaf signers in the various countries of the world do have in common is their visual approach to language, the political discourse concerning Ladd's *subaltern Deaf discourse*,[26] the transmission of common artistic forms.[27] These are the elements which make up Deaf culture.

Let us now return to Christine Sun Kim, who identified the points of contact between ASL and music: "For example, a musical note cannot be fully captured and expressed on paper. And the same holds true for a concept in ASL".[28] If we think of performance of a piano piece, the ten fingers have to move all together and the use of the body (the position of the back, the way of breathing, the use of the elbows and the weight of the arms) is fundamental to obtain the desired sound. In the same way, in sign language, each finger can have a different movement and communicating in a sign language involves the use of different parameters at the same time (manual configuration, facial expressions, body movements and so on).

In spoken language words are linear, meaning that a person can only say one word at a time. Sign languages are not linear[29] and are more similar to a piano chord. A piano performance and sign languages require a plurality of non-linear actions and gestures to be enacted simultaneously. Similarly, as far as signs and chords are concerned, one person can perform several elements together. Olga Capirci and Chiara Bonsignori clarify:

> The main distinction between spoken and signed languages is the different usage of articulators: in the first case, the leading one is the vocal trait, while in the other the entire body encodes phonology, lexicon, and grammar. The use of visible articulators, instead of audible, allows signers to load of linguistic value the three-dimensional space in which signs are produced, a unique feature of sign languages not shared by speech. This is not the only peculiar trait of using another modality: sign languages can display several blocks of linguistic content

25 Ladd 2003, 230.

26 Ladd 2003, 232.

27 Such as those outlined by Ben Bahan in *Face-to-Face Tradition in the American Deaf Community: Dynamics of the Teller, the Tale, and the Audience, in Signing the Body Poetic: Essays on American Sign Language Literature*. See Bahan 2006.

28 *The enchanting music of sign language*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Euof4PnjDk.

29 See Fontana 2013, 42. Loeffler also reports that music and sign languages also share another aspect, namely temporality (Loeffler 2014, 444).

> at the same time, encoding different pieces of information using simultaneously different articulators.[30]

If a parameter changes, whether in music or in a sign language, the meaning of what is being performed may change completely: "I then started thinking, what if I was to look at ASL through a musical lens? If I was to create a sign and repeat it over and over, it could become like a piece of *visual music*".[31] During the *Ted Talk*, Kim shows how she represents, in a drawing, the gestures and signs that create her visual music. The staff, for example, is made by drawing four lines and not five, because the sign that translates the word *staff*, in ASL, consists of an open hand with the thumb bent inwards and the other four fingers open, which, in the air, moves horizontally "tracing" the lines of the pentagram. Kim notes that, just as one does not need to be Deaf to learn a sign language, one does not need to be hearing for music.

4 *Face Opera II*

We see that *Face Opera II*[32] is relevant to the subject of this paper because of word *Opera* in the title, referring to lyric *opera* or melodrama. But in this opera, there are only facial expressions and, in the second part, the use of the voice without a defined pitch prevails. Is it, however, enough to classify a work *opera* to put it in a lyric context, given the absence of audible sounds and defined pitches?

> Kim and her collaborators defy the customary coupling of singing with audibility, and temporarily sever the related associations between the voice and vocal cords in order to "sing" using silent facial expressions belonging to the American Sign Language (ASL) lexicon. Kim's opera further interrogates the legacy of voice in American Deaf culture by highlighting the slippage between aestheticized and pathologized vocal sounds.[33]

Kim, then, uses the pathologized vocal sounds, the voice that is used during a speech therapy session by giving it an aesthetic role: the life of Deaf people, including therapy sessions, became art and music.

30 Capirci/Bonsignori 2022, 71.

31 *The enchanting music of sign language*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Euof4PnjDk.

32 *Face Opera II* is on Vimeo, https://vimeo.com/68027393. Viewing the video is possible after registration and access to the platform.

33 Holmes 2016, 542.

Thus, *Face Opera II* contains elements that can be traced back to *opera*. Firstly, there is a choir: the choir sings using silent facial expressions. In order to clarify the concept of choir in soundless contexts, a brief reference to signed music is necessary.

Signed music, as Jody Cripps writes, is a musical genre developed and performed by culturally Deaf people that does not involve audible elements: "These performances operate according to a distinct artistic style, incorporating elements of signed languages; rhythmic hand, facial, and/or body motions; and media video arts".[34] It should be clarified that, specifically, Cripps does not always refer to *signed music* as a "musical genre": he also writes that "Signed music is an inter-performance art that demonstrates musical elements by culturally deaf individuals who have explored creating musical performances with their hands and bodies"[35] or "signed music is an artistic technique that includes non-lyric (or less lyric) and non-audible-based pieces as well as signed language lyrics".[36] However, "signed music is an emerging genre of its own"[37] and I think that is correct: talking about 'artistic technique' or 'inter-performance art' does not fully convey the idea that signed music constitutes a real musical genre.

The ancestor of *signed music* can be found in *percussion signed songs*, or *percussion signing*,[38] performances that involve the use of ASL not as a mere translation of a text sung in English but rather of original signed texts, accompanied, at times, by the rhythm given by a large drum, an instrument used in schools for Deaf students.[39]

> Signed music is not composed, performed, or recorded with audible sound, and it does not interpret preexisting musical pieces. [...] [Signed music is] ... wholly autonomous from the auditory experience. While it is pleasing to the eyes, just as conventional music pleases the ears, it has parameters that are completely different from musical forms hearing audiences are used to, such as audible pitch. Specifically, a high-quality music performance (without words) includes handshape variations along with unique movements like circles, motioning up-and-down, back-and-forth, or to-and-fro representing possible notes. Some performances also include lyrics or "words" in ASL [...].[40]

34 Cripps/Lyonblum/Small 2022, 191.
35 Cripps/Lyonblum/Small 2022, 191.
36 Cripps/Lyonblum/Small 2022, 196.
37 Cripps/Lyonblum/Small 2022, 191.
38 In Deaf studies, we sometimes talk about *percussion signing* (see Bahan 2006, 34) and other times about *percussion singing* (see Cripps/Lyonblum/Small 2022, 198). I prefer to use *percussion signing*.
39 Cripps/Lyonblum/Small 2022, 198. About *percussion songs*, see also Bahan 2006, 34, and Loeffler 2014, 447.
40 Cripps/Lyonblum/Small 2022, 196.

As we have seen, *signed music* is not merely an accommodation in which sound maintains a primary role. In the context of *signed music* there are choirs and singers, but without audible sound: Christine Sun Kim makes use of singing and choir as in lyrical *opera*, but in the sense ascribed to them in Deaf culture.

Secondly, the voice is present. It is a voice without a defined pitch, a voice that is not heard by the speaker but is there and is an expression of the life and context in which a Deaf person lives. Just as lyric *opera* has been a part of the social and cultural life of the West. Such as Verdi's melodrama and the need for national unity, or in Mascagni's *Cavalleria Rusticana*, based on Giovanni Verga's novel, telling a story of jealousy in a small Sicilian village, Kim's opera shows Deaf cultural life, with its greatness and sorrows. *Face Opera II* lacks the storytelling we find in lyric *opera*, but this lack is compensated for by telling the story of Deaf culture's relationship with voice and music: the story is not fiction but a window into the lives of Deaf people. *Face Opera II* does not stage kings, gods or literary characters, but the real lives of Deaf people.

Finally, *Face Opera* is an *opera* of facial expressions and, as we shall see, facial expressions are not only elements of ASL, but also of the *opera* context: opera is acting, it is theatrical performance and exaggerations of expressions are an integral part of this type of performance. In the case of Verdi's operas, for example, facial expressions are an essential part of the opera. Think, for instance, of the *duet* between Otello and Jago in *Otello*'s Act II, *Ciò m'accora … Che parli?*, while Jago instils the suspicion of betrayal: Otello's face as the poison of jealousy is slowly served up, the growing fear of losing the beloved woman and at the same time the friend he believed to be faithful, the incredulity that struggles with suspicion, the pain of the search for confirmation must be reflected not only in the voice but in the expression which must necessarily be tormented so that it is visible even in the back of the theatre. Without voice, the expressions would show these feelings just the same and it is a part of *opera* that remains in Kim's work.

Let us now see, in detail, how *Face Opera II* is structured. In the first part (from the first to the fourth act) Kim, using a tablet, shows the choir director some words in English that indicate feelings, moods, emotions, ways of being (*face-glow*, *presence-shine*, *obsessed*, *sick*, *masturbate* etc.) but also words like *technology* or *why*, alternating them following different visual rhythms and repeating some of them: the director 'translates' the words into facial expressions and proposes these expressions to the choir, which imitates them. Subsequently, it is the director himself (the director changes each time: the choristers alternate between them in the role of chorister or director) who reads the words to be performed from a cell phone. After this phase, one chorister at a time (the others are turned away) holds the tablet with the words in his hand but does not see it as he turns it towards the director.

The director "translates" the words into facial expressions for this chorister who reproduces them. Finally, the stimuli are proposed directly without a written word that offers the cue for the expression.

Facial expressions, in a context related to Deaf culture, are not only an artistic or expressive element, but an essential part of the grammar of sign languages.[41] Just as words can be broken down into letters and syllables, sign languages (here I am referring in particular to LIS and ASL) can be broken down into these parameters: handshape, palm orientation, body location where the sign is articulated[42] and the hand movement. Furthermore, there is a fifth component of the phonological structure of LIS, also present in ASL, which, unlike the other components, is not linked to the hand: this is the non-manual signals, including facial expressions, head tilt, head nod, head shake, shoulder raising, mouth morphemes, and other non-signed signals that influence the meaning of the signs. In ASL facial expressions are a very important part of the grammar: they can have a meaning linked to prosody but also indicate the degree of intensity of the adjective. For example, if the sign for the word *beauty* is combined with a particularly intense expression it means *very beautiful*. If I ate something I don't like, the expression combined with the sign can make it clear whether I simply didn't like that certain food or whether I found it completely disgusting.[43] Both in LIS and in ASL, facial expressions distinguish between different types of questions: raised eyebrows indicate a yes/no question, while lowered eyebrows indicate an open question, for example, "what's your name?". Consequently, facial expression is not an accessory to language, but part of grammar itself: using it in the context of *Face Opera II* means not denying the use of a language in a Deaf cultural context but making the parameters of ASL the centre of the *opera* itself and removing it from the oralist use of the voice.

In the second part of *Face Opera II*, starting from the fifth act, the choir performs audible vocalizations without a defined pitch, an activity possible because the vocal apparatus of Deaf people is intact and not affected by deafness. The director, using different manual configurations and gestures, invites one of the choristers to use the voice by emitting sound. This chorister, following the indications, then performs the emission of voice in relation to which the other choristers (who are positioned not to see the director) respond by replicating the posture assumed

41 Although it is now well established, it is worth remembering that sign languages are true, natural languages with their own grammar, syntax, and structure, just like spoken languages, although they use the visual/kinesthetic channel and not the vocal/auditory channel (Stokoe 1960).

42 For example, in LIS signs linked to the intelligence, like *conoscere*, *intelligente*, *difficile* are performed near to the top of the head and signs like *amore* or *peccato* near to the chest.

43 About facial expressions in LIS see Branchini/Mantovan 2022.

in the emission of the sound, the position of mouth and the duration of the emission as perceived by the first chorister.

5 "Sonic Rupture"

Jessica Holmes writes that, compared to the first part, from the fifth act the style of the work suddenly changes,

> when the foregoing "silence" gives way to a moment of deliberate sonic rupture in which the singers use their audible voices for the first and only time in the performance: the conductor signs purposefully without facial expressions, leading the chorus in a story from Deaf folklore [...]. In the absence of NMS[44] to contextualize the meaning of the conductor's signs, an intermediary supplements the signing with his own improvised facial expressions and vocalizations, projecting his voice through a microphone. The singers assemble in a line facing the intermediary, laying their right hands on one another's backs to gauge the volume of their neighbour's voice as it vibrates along the spine, while simultaneously observing the intermediary's mouth shapes. They integrate this information to establish their own individual voices in a chain of sonic transmission. Their nonverbal vocalizations occur in fits and starts, ranging from abrupt, guttural, intoned noises to sustained howls and yells. These sounds straddle the boundaries between speech and song, recalling the practice of extended vocal techniques.[45]

It is interesting to note that "This passage of Kim's opera at once recalls and inverts the performative dimensions of a speech therapy session".[46] The use of voice in the fifth act is not a mere use of the voice by Deaf performers, but a reference to the speech therapy sessions that many Deaf people attend, especially if they are children of hearing parents. Thus is *Face Opera II*, while drawing on melodrama proper to the Western musical context, redefines its elements in a Deaf cultural context.

The titular reference to opera In *Face Opera II* "is misleading, since the piece does not have characters, a narrative, or conventional vocalized singing. Instead, Kim adopts the opera format to show the visual and grammatical aspects of American Sign Language (ASL) and how most of its content is conveyed through the face"[47] or, if there are audible sounds in the *Face Opera II*, they show sounds without a defined pitch. As Jessica Holmes writes, in relation to the first part of the work "In certain radical instances, visual cues and silent coordinated gesture are wholly

44 These are the non-manual signals, such as facial expressions.
45 Holmes 2016, 546.
46 Holmes 2016, 547.
47 Holmes 2016, 544.

constitutive of musical expression, as in the case of the silent facial singing in Christine Sun Kim's *Face Opera II*."[48]

In the first part of *Face Opera II*, the choir performs the succession of expressions requested by the director with a rhythmic structure that does not appear 'forced' by a score, but seems almost casual and extemporaneous. The choir, through its performance, expresses the relationship between music and ASL that Kim describes in her *Ted Talk*, a relationship in which music is beyond the audible, in which ASL, its parameters, the characteristics of sign languages, facial expressions like elements of grammar, become music. The written word from which the director draws inspiration contains within itself the musical experience of Kim's ASL: just as a written note does not fully represent all the parameters of music, a written word in a vocal language cannot fully convey the idea of the complexity and non-linearity of ASL but requires an activity of interpretation.

In the second part of Kim's work, sound and voice are not absent but take place with the characteristics of the use of the voice in a Deaf person. The sound is the voice of the Deaf community not mediated by the obligations imposed by the hearing, a sound that is not heard by the person who emits it, that is not emitted to submit to an obligation of audible communication. The Deaf performer, therefore, does not need to domesticate this sound. This is the sound emitted by those who experience it with their own body, through the resonance given by the emission and not because you can feel what effect it has through hearing. Kim's work is not only an artistic choice, but using the term *opera* in a context linked to the parameters of the ASL and the use of the non-tuned voice, it takes on a political meaning. As Holmes points out:

> The singing voice also embodies a unique expressive paradox as it relates to the political dimensions of voice in Deaf culture: in its distinctness from speech it escapes some of the aforementioned problems associated with "voicing," yet as a form of vocalized utterance it arguably aligns with oralist ideals, whether as texted or nonverbal singing. Finally, there are certain musical conventions, or "conformational standards," that might seem incongruous with d/Deaf singing – especially intonation. Although certain popular and avant-garde musics welcome and even cultivate out-of-tune singing as part of a larger aesthetic tradition of vocal affect, "correct" intonation is a basic technical requirement and aesthetic tenet of classical singing.[49]

The use of the voice in a Deaf person is always linked to an oralist context, that is, as we have seen, a context in which the approach to communication with a signing

48 Holmes 2017, 211.

49 Holmes 2016, 543.

Deaf person favours the vocal channel. When in one of the most representative artistic forms of Western sonocentric musical culture the composer excludes the centrality of sound in favour of an approach specific to Deaf culture, we are faced with a political act, the subversion of the categories of the majority culture to create that same form but with the categories specific to a minority culture. Christine Sun Kim's approach to music, in my opinion, is not only political but also deeply personal and intimate. It is an externalization of the experience of sound as lived by Deaf people. Kim does not build a bridge between Deaf and hearing people[50] but it opens a window onto the experience of sound specific to Deaf people.

6 Conclusions: Beyond the Borders of Sound

Jessica Holmes writes:

> Kim notes that one of her Deaf friends suggested that such dramatic overemphasis was insulting to Deaf signers, as it potentially reinforces misconceptions about the ostensibly "primitive" nature of sign language. She clarifies her motivations: "this [facial exaggeration] is one of the ways expression is communicated in opera," and "I didn't trust the hearing audience enough to be able to properly read our 'normal' faces." Though her reasoning stems in part from a place of mistrust, it also evinces a desire to establish common ground with her hearing audience; she reveals for the viewer that facial expression and bodily movement together coincide in phonetic, visual-spatial, and musical-linguistic systems, helping to articulate and stabilize meaning. Moreover, in likening the heightened emotional display in her piece to that characteristic of opera, Kim distinguishes it from regular poetic utterance and also highlights the fact that facial expressions already serve a crucial expressive function in conventional vocalized singing.[51]

So, with these words, Kim is not referring to her specific work, but to *opera* as an art form: the exaggeration of expressions plays an essential role in conventional vocal singing. The singers' make-up is exaggerated, the expressions are made extreme to allow the audience to understand them even if far away. The exaggeration of the performers' expressiveness, therefore, is part of the very definition of *opera* in the Western musical context: but it is an expressiveness linked not to the use of vocal language and intoned singing, but to the use of ASL and its parameters made extreme in a musical context.

50 Maler and Komaniecki write about *signed songs*, and in particular *dip hop*: "Sean Forbes is a Deaf rapper from Detroit who performs his raps simultaneously in voiced English and ASL. One of his motivations in performing rap music is to reach both the Deaf and hearing communities through his art, 'creating a bridge between deaf and hearing worlds'" (Maler/Komaniecki 2021, par. 1.4).
51 Holmes 2016, 544–545.

We have seen that Deaf culture has developed musical forms that do not focus on sound but on rhythm, elements and parameters of sign languages and gestures, such as *signed music*. And we have seen that *Signed music* and *Face Opera II* have in common the lack of primacy of sound and the act of creation in a context of not adapting musical sound material from hearing people but creating music that is specific to the Deaf culture. The difference between *signed music* and *Face Opera II* is that *signed music* is a musical genre with its own rules and characteristics. In *signed music* performances Cripps finds the parameters of musical compositions born in a hearing environment, namely rhythm, timbre, melody, texture and harmony: in traditional Western music rhythm consists in the succession of durations, timbre is the characteristic sound of a certain instrument or voice (which allows us to distinguish the sound of the violin from that of the human voice), melody is the succession of pitches of sounds, texture is, in my opinion, closely linked to intensity and harmony is the vertical combination of sounds. Cripps, in *signed music*, recognizes these characteristics in the succession of signs and/or gestures, in the characteristics of the sign and the gestures specific to each performer, in the breadth of the gesture. In my reading I recognize harmony in the combination of multiple performers or in the use of video editing.

My reading of *Face Opera II* is that it is not and does not want to be a separate genre. Rather, it is a reinterpretation of traditional *opera* to go beyond its confines and break its borders. In Kim's work we see the exaggerated facial expression typical of traditional *opera* but without the corresponding related singing. It has singers and a choir, but here meaning is given in *signed music.* The voice is used but it is not a pitched voice, it is a voice almost like that used in a speech therapy session, a painful and almost rejected sound because it is emitted for the hearing and not for the Deaf, who listen to it by placing their hands on their backs. There is no narrative, but instead the life and relationship with sound, music and voice of Deaf people is expressed there. *Face Opera II* is the breaking of the borders of sound in the melodrama of Western musical culture, it is the breaking of the confines of traditional Western *opera* to show a world in which sound is experienced beyond the audible and in which the voice does not have to, and does not want to, follow the tracks of the musical rules of a sonocentric world.

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Jesse Rosenberg

Opera and Race: A Bulletin on an American University Course

Abstract: In 2021 a new course was offered at Northwestern University titled *Opera and Race*. A revised version of the same course was given in 2023, this time as part of *Decolonizing Opera*, a larger series of special events and curricular offerings extending across a number of departments at the university, funded by a grant from the Mellon Foundation. A third iteration of the course is scheduled for the Autumn of 2025. Throughout this history, several goals have been retained as of particular importance: 1) to identify and analyze the dramatic and musical depiction of racial difference in a number of operas either presently or formerly part of the standard performance canon; 2) to explore how these depictions of race have been played out in live performance, both historically and at the present time; 3) to connect these depictions to broader political and social phenomena such as colonialism, imperialism, and misogyny; 4) to explore solutions to the problematic aspects of these operas, and 5) to venture beyond the aforementioned canon to consider works, both older and more recent, that – for whatever reason – have been excluded from it. This essay summarizes the history and organization of the course, the various readings and written assignments given to students, and the current prospects for instructional innovation in this field in a period of reactionary backlash.

Keywords: Opera; Race; Canon; Music Education; Theater; Performance Studies.

1 Introduction

An essay on a course that I am teaching represents a departure from the kind of topic I usually address in publications and conference papers. Although my work involves music, and certainly falls into the education sector, I lack all training in Music Education as a research discipline, with its evolving methodologies and parallel fields of inquiry like psychology, cognition, and sociology. Accustomed to working on historical documents, I feel far less at home when citing the social media posts, YouTube comments, the blogosphere, or recent newspaper articles where so many current debates are carried out. On a still more personal level, I wondered if a white person was the right person to teach such a course. What motivates me to devote time and energy to the project is, first, a growing sense of alarm at the state of the world and the consequent need to meet the challenges of the present

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moment in the field of opera, the principal area in which I work, and second, the recognition that without the direct involvement of the young, nothing significant will change. It was, in fact, this urgency – the sense that it needed to be done (none of my musicological colleagues, even those with a lively interest in opera, was interested in doing so). Recognizing that the student population of today will be decisive in confronting the pernicious social legacies still evident in the world of operatic performance, I concluded that a course was needed to acquaint students with the historical roots and aesthetic ramifications of the issues involved in depicting race in opera, and to help ensure that their decisions be thoughtful, historically informed, and balanced. The course, moreover, would be much more than an historical survey: it needed to address contemporary aesthetic, ethical, and practical issues that arise when we negotiate the vast gulf between how non-European characters were dramatically, musically, and visually conceived at the time these works were created and our present-day awareness of their limitations in this regard. How to adjudicate the conflicting claims of audiences and directors who insist on a critical engagement with these questions and those whose assumptions continue to rest on a "tradition" defined respect for the authors' supposed "intentions" and the surviving documents of how the works were first given?

2 Why Race? A case study

Given the intimate historical ties between racism, misogyny, and colonialism, which have long been recognized, a word is in order on why "race" was selected as the primary lens through which to approach the course, first offered in 2021 and again in 2023 (at the time of this writing a third iteration is scheduled for the Fall of 2025), particularly when some of the most original research in the field has focused on the nexus of race and gender, as in Naomi André's work on *Porgy and Bess*.[1] A well-publicized episode in Verona had the effect of dramatizing the need for a course on Opera and Race. It unfolded in connection with the Arena di Verona Opera Festival, one of the best-established and most popular festivals in the operatic world for a number of reasons, not least of which is the formidable Roman amphitheater where it takes place, perfectly suited to the staging of monumental works such as Giuseppe Verdi's *Aida*, all the more suggestive in that space for the antiquity of the subject. But on July 24th, 2019, the American soprano hired to sing the role of Aida plunged the festival into controversy. Tamara Wilson objected to

1 André 2018, 85–119.

the application of dark makeup to her skin, the longstanding tradition by which performers who are not Black are made to appear so. Wilson had performed with such makeup on July 21st, in the first of her three scheduled performances in Verona that summer, but found it troubling, and was determined not to repeat the experience. Learning of her objections, the management agreed to alter her appearance for her two remaining performances on July 24th and 28th (for the opening performance of *Aida* that summer, the Neapolitan soprano Anna Pirozzi had, without demur, performed the role with dark makeup). But the agreement proved to be fragile. For the July 24th performance her request was only partly satisfied: dark makeup was applied to her, but not so dark a shade as she had worn on the 21st. She resolved to continue the fight for the third performance, but no further compromise was forthcoming from the management. In protest, Wilson canceled her third and last performance in the production, and the part of Aida was taken by the Uruguayan soprano María José Siri. (Not until January of 2020, a modernized production of *Aida* by the Houston Grand Opera, did Wilson get to sing the title role as she wished, without dark makeup, and her point was made all the more emphatically by the presence of the Black American tenor Russell Thomas in the role of Radames.) Wilson kept the operatic world informed of this controversy through her posts to social media, but these are now virtually impossible to access, since her Instagram account has been deleted. They can, however, be partially reconstructed on the basis of the mass of commentary that the controversy engendered.[2] With all that was said and written about the episode at the time, questions remain. Even those who are sympathetic to Wilson's position may be permitted to wonder what her cancellation accomplished in the world of opera apart from the firestorm of mostly negative publicity. The latter completely overshadowed any other issue, such as Placido Domingo's presence at the festival (hardly a word was written about the latter's outing by the *Me Too* movement) or, indeed, the racial depiction of Amonasro in the same edition of *Aida*, in which the Mongolian baritone wore the same darkening makeup as Aida but without a wig or adjustments to his hair that might make him less Mongolian in appearance, complicating the white-pretending-to-be-black framework within which such portrayals are typically discussed. And if, on the other hand, the visual distinction between Egyptians and Ethiopians is taken out of the equation, is it thereby suggested that race has nothing to do with the conception of the characters in the plot of the opera, in which case what appears be a principled objection to racism is transformed in the end to a denial of its presence?

This was hardly the first time that *Aida* had occasioned a social or political critique. Already in 1993, Edward Said's book *Culture and Imperialism* included a

2 Lebrecht 2019.

chapter which placed the creation of Verdi's opera squarely within the context of the conflicting imperial interests of France, Britain, Italy, and the Ottoman Empire.[3] Long misunderstood as an all-out attack on Verdi's opera, many aspects of which in fact receive the highest praise from the author, Said's analysis continues to resonate, in part because of its insights into various modern stagings as informed by Western attitudes regarding imperial powers and the people who are subjugated by them. But the animated discussion which resulted was confined to academic and intellectual circles.

By contrast, it was specifically race rather than empire which served as the locus of contention in later controversies concerning opera and race. Bartlett Sher's design for a Metropolitan Opera production of Verdi's *Otello* made headlines in 2015 when the decision *not* to use makeup received considerable publicity through the *New York Times*, *The Guardian*, and other news outlets.[4] But the United States is not Europe, where a great many critics and commentators expressed their opinions on *l'affaire Wilson*, nearly all of them contemptuous. According to the particular attack one was reading, Wilson was a puritanical American scold, a fanatic blinded by the ideology of political correctness, a mediocrity seizing upon a charged issue in order to advance her career, a delusional hag better advised to attend to her excessive weight than to shades of makeup, or simply ignorant of European performance traditions. Just as striking as the accusations was what the attackers omitted: none offered a suggestion as to how artists should engage with ethically problematic operas or performances besides stifling their conscience and bowing to "tradition". Notable also is the way in which the controversy of racial depiction is circumscribed to a kind of diva-related gossip, touching upon the title role while ignoring such factors as the visual appearance of the Ethiopian prisoners in Act II in the same production.

This controversy, I have said, was one of the motivations behind the decision to offer a new course on Opera and Race at the institution where I have taught for over twenty-five years, Northwestern University, located just to the north of Chicago. Like many American institutions of higher learning, Northwestern University has a well-developed program in musical performance, which differentiates it rather sharply from the educational systems which predominate in Europe and other parts of the world where training in musical performance is relegated to vocational schools generally known as conservatories. It seemed clear too that the aspiring singers, instrumentalists, and conductors at my institution, who constitute a large proportion of students required to take classes in Musicology, needed to have an

3 Said 1993, 111–132.

4 Cooper 2015; Woolf 2015.

historical and conceptual framework in order to understand the rocky terrain on which their careers will unfold, assuming that they are lucky enough to have careers.

Perspectives on that history, however, continued to shift in the winds of recent and contemporary events. The Arena Opera Festival was canceled in 2020 on account of the Covid pandemic, soon to be exploited as a galvanizing issue for political reaction. But the festival returned in 2021 with a regular season that included, as is customary by now, *Aida*. In that year's edition of the festival, both Angela Meade and Sonya Yoncheva sang the role of Aida in dark makeup without controversy. But then, in 2022, a second race-related operatic bomb was detonated at the Arena festival when another American soprano, Angel Blue, canceled her engagement shortly before her scheduled performances were to begin. The circumstances were quite distinct from those surrounding Tamara Wilson three years earlier. First, the soprano is Black; second, the role that she was to interpret was not the traditional "black role" but rather Violetta in Verdi's *La Traviata,* and third, while the question of makeup was still central to the controversy, it arose in connection with an opera in which Blue was *not* singing. The celebrity Russian soprano Anna Netrebko, cast as Aida in the same 2022 edition of the festival, had proclaimed – once again on social media – her determination to adhere to tradition by wearing dark makeup for the part, and to underscore the point, defiantly posed for a photograph in this way. Blue's cancellation was thus a protest, a refusal to participate in a festival where such calculated and provocative racial insensitivity was tolerated. This episode too stirred up considerable commentary, again mostly condemnatory. Responding to a request for comment by the online periodical *Operawire,* the management of the Arena Festival justified the continued insistence on dark makeup by claiming, unidiomatic English, that "Everywhere in the world used to have what you call Blackface", and that "so as long as we have a historical production, it is very hard to change them because it means changing something that was designed that way. Somehow, the Arena di Verona is a theatrical museum. We don't have New Productions [sic] every year. We want our history to feel like it is living".[5] The statement, accurate enough in its admission that the festival has long specialized in traditional stagings of familiar operas and has never been hospitable to innovation, failed to address Wilson's larger point about the need for singers of color to take on roles such as Aida, and in defining the tradition supposedly preserved in the "theatrical museum" of the Arena expressed a smug confidence that was far from

5 Hall 2022.

justified.[6] It was of a piece with the justification for dark makeup presented by Plácido Domingo, the director of the 2019 *Aida* in Verona that Wilson had quit:

> It's a very delicate subject: I think this sensitivity comes from the United States, but it's not right, because if there's a Japanese character in the opera, like Cio Cio San (*Madama Butterfly*), you must have Japanese clothing and oriental eyes. The same is true generally: Otello is Moorish; Butterfly, Japanese. A white soprano must wear black makeup to sing Aida, while a black tenor has every right to remain as he is if he sings Manrico.[7]

Domingo here invokes common-sense naturalism rather than tradition as a justification, but the difference is more apparent than real, since the latter is rooted in the former and the two are mutually reinforcing. But common sense is abruptly abrogated as a criterion by Domingo's acceptance of a Black Manrico in an opera set in 15th-century Spain.

It is important to note that a number of performers who expressed disagreement with Blue's decision to cancel her performances in *La Traviata*, or more broadly, have defended the use of racializing makeup, were themselves Black or Asian, such as the baritone Kenneth Overton and a number of singers interviewed by him for an article in *Opera News*.[8] As for Latonia Moore, who sang several performances in the title role of *Aida* during the same edition of the Verona festival that featured Netrebko, she had earlier gone on record as offering a qualified acceptance of racializing makeup in certain circumstances.[9] In the fascinating essay he contributed to the volume *Blackness in Opera*, George Shirley shares wide-ranging and subtle observations about his own use of makeup, racializing and otherwise, across a long and brilliant career, including the remark that he claimed it as his right "as an artist to portray white characters as Whites, in the same manner as white singers have portrayed black characters as Blacks".[10] The need for a realistic visual portrayal is frequently cited by those who defend this use of makeup, but the focus on realism can cut in more than one direction, as verified throughout a long and complicated history. Students in the class were required to engage with readings of varied outlooks in this regard, beginning with Kira Thurman's historical review of the controversies involving Black singers who performed "white" roles in postwar German-speaking Europe. When Leontyne Price sang Pamina in *Die Zauberflöte* at

6 Kumar 2023; see in particular the images of the first Aida (the Bohemian soprano Teresa Stolz) in costume as Aida, in which she is not perceptibly darkened, as well as Kumar's plausible argument that dark makeup was not applied until later productions.

7 Fuentes 2020.

8 Overton 2023.

9 Salazar 2020.

10 Shirley 2014, 272.

the Vienna State Opera in 1959, the casting was roundly condemned for the confusion it caused in viewing her interactions with a Monostatos in blackface, while Grace Bumbry, cast as Venus in *Tannhäuser* at Bayreuth two years later, occasioned similar criticism for the way in which she spoiled the theatrical illusion on account of her color.[11] In a similar way, Simon Estes has described the opposition he initially encountered when first taking on the roles of the Flying Dutchman and Wotan, also at Bayreuth.[12] Another negative by-product of the drive for visual realism is the depreciation of vocal quality. The Black tenor George Shirley described the frustrating career of Nat Boyd, hired to take on the role of Otello despite a voice far better suited to lyric roles.[13] Such examples demonstrate that racial realism is not the unassailably objective criterion often imagined by its proponents, who evidently never asked themselves how anyone could claim to know what mythical figures such as the Dutchman, Venus, or Wotan looked like.

The multiplicity of interlocking issues made it urgent to find a framework for exploring them within the confines of a ten-week university course. Four large areas were selected as an organizing principle for the course: 1) the dramatic and musical depiction of non-Europeans in European works such as Rameau's *Les Indes Galantes*, Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte*, Verdi's *Il Corsaro*, *Un Ballo in Maschera*, *La Forza del Destino*, *Aida*, and *Otello*, Delibes' *Lakmé,* and Puccini's *Madama Butterfly*, *La Fanciulla del West*, and *Turandot*; 2) the far more limited repertoire of American operas with roles created by, or written specifically, for Black performers, such as Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess,* Virgil Thomson and Gertrude Stein's *Four Saints in Three Acts*, and Robert Ward's *The Crucible*; 3) issues of casting (including "European" roles such as Tosca and Alfredo) articulated by defenders and critics of notions of "color-blind" as opposed to color-conscious casting in theatrical productions,[14] along with the broader idea that an operatic role should be undertaken by a performer with similar or identical attributes in such respects as body type, nationality, sexual orientation, or disability, when theater has always meant illusion and acting has always involved pretending to be someone that one is not; and 4) operas on racial or national themes by non-white musicians such as Carlos Gomes, Scott Joplin, William Grant Still, Shirley Graham, Langston Hughes, Neo Muyanga, Kazuko Hara, Jin Xiang, and Tan Dun.

11 Thurman 2022, 518–519.

12 Scorca 2022.

13 Cheatham 1997, 103.

14 Woltmann 2023.

3 An American Perspective

In 2025, not only do such issues remain far from settled, but have indeed become far more vexed, even dangerous. Although certain critics and opera goers have long expressed impatience with attempts to address historical legacies of racism, colonialism, and patriarchy in the arts, those who dismiss these concerns as "woke" (which has by now almost completely replaced the 1980s term "politically correct") have gained both political power and the cultural and institutional upper hand in many places – and have pursued their "woke" enemies with increasing fury and vengefulness. This is the sea which my students today will be navigating in the years ahead. A course on Opera and Race must be designed in a way which clarifies the issues of such controversies and, through a variety of readings and viewings of performances, exposes these students to varied perspectives, including national ones.

My own view of these developments necessarily mirrors my personal and professional situation in the United States. Tamara Wilson and Angel Blue are Americans who have clashed with an Italian festival in connection with an Italian opera, while my course on Opera and Race is conceived for an American university where students typically engage with the European art music repertoire and associated performance traditions. American sensitivities in this area, shaped by a national history with roots in the displacement and genocide of indigenous populations and the enslavement of Africans which continued until the conclusion of a civil war in the 1860s, are naturally different from other nations whose history took shape in different ways. A related consequence is that the course on Opera and Race is characteristically American with regard to several of the operatic works chosen for analysis. Operas such as *Treemonisha* by the composer and ragtime pianist Scott Joplin, *The Emperor Jones* by Louis Gruenberg after the play by the great American dramatist Eugene O'Neill, and *Four Saints in Three Acts* by Virgil Thomson, with a libretto by Gertrude Stein, have had a certain cultural resonance in the United States but are elsewhere little known and unlikely to be staged. The course in its basic workings also presupposes several conditions which are far from universal: an interactive teaching model involving extensive discussion in class and the regular submission of written assignments, the availability of supporting technology in the form of a course web page with links to videos and other digital media (a standard resource in an American university), and an academic structure sufficiently flexible to accommodate it. By contrast, conservatories with rigidly prescribed curricula in Music History may well be unable to provide for such a course, even if the idea were to arouse enthusiasm from faculty and students.

All of us, I think, need to consider the extent to which differences of national experience leave us vulnerable to the risk of cultural misunderstanding. It is possible for different countries and continents to misread one another, as indicated by Plácido Domingo in the quotation above. For example, many Americans, conscious of their vexed history of racial subjugation and violence, are rightly disturbed by the historical tradition of "Blackface" performance, by which the application of dark makeup to the skin of white entertainers was integral to an exaggeratedly grotesque caricature in racial depiction. The practice, common in American minstrel shows from the 1840s onwards, was kept alive in the first half of the twentieth century as witness the filmed performances of such entertainers as Al Jolson in *The Jazz Singer* (1927), Fred Astaire in *Swing Time* (1936), Judy Garland in *Babes on Broadway* (1941), and Bing Crosby in *Holiday Inn* (1942). But it remains an open and controversial question to what extent the application of dark makeup to white singers interpreting the roles of Aida, Amonasro, or Otello coincides with a clearly racist performing tradition in 19th- and early 20th-century America. This is not to defend the practice of darkening the skin, but to seek its appropriate historical contextualization amid its myriad of instantiations through the centuries.

4 Course Requirements

All students in the class were expected to submit regular written work, based on assigned readings as well as audio and video examples, to the course website. These materials were made available in online folders ("modules"), one for each week of the ten-week course. Assignments included specific questions designed to address pertinent issues concerning opera and race, but in no instance were students limited to considering those questions alone. This work was divided into two categories: 1) three "assignments" (extended essays between 1500 and 2000 words in length), and 2) two written "discussions" of 100 to 200 words. While the regular assignments were read and evaluated only by the instructor, the discussions, once submitted, were available to be read by all students in the class and formed the basis for a collective oral discussion in which students were expected to demonstrate familiarity with both the assigned materials and their classmates' responses to them. All students received grades for the assignments, the written discussions, and their contributions to oral discussion. The assignments supplemented the instructor's lectures, and were designed to deepen the students' awareness of the materials presented. For the final requirement, students could choose between a final examination and a short, original research paper on a topic chosen under the guidance of the instructor. The student population of the course was mixed in two respects. Most registered

students were music majors, but several were concentrating on other academic fields (biology, history, etc.), so that not all possessed a high level of musical literacy, let alone the ability to analyze scores from a technical angle. And although most students were undergraduates, several graduate students were also permitted to enroll on account of their interest in the course, which officially counted for them as an elective. The course consequently could not be run as a seminar, with the students taking on much of the responsibility for the content of the course through their developing research project, but took the form of lectures and discussions.

To ease students into the course, the initial requirement was a short written discussion of two eighteenth-century works, with a focus on musical style:

> *Discussion #1: Rameau's* Les Indes Galantes, *Mozart's* Die Entführung aus dem Serail, *and Timothy Taylor's observations*
> Read the synopsis of Jean-Philippe Rameau's ballet-opera *Les Indes Galantes,* and describe how the non-Western characters are depicted in the drama. What attitudes towards non-Europeans are reflected in the plot overall? For example: are all non-Europeans "bad", or are some of them "good" – and which personal or social qualities determine the answer?
> Timothy Taylor argues that only the "Turkish" part of *Les Indes Galantes* actually sounds as if intended to evoke exoticism. Do you agree? For example, do you hear anything in the "Inca" music which suggests the Incas of Peru, or at least a non-European people?
> In the "Turkish" part of the opera there takes place a dance for African slaves ("Act I: Air pour les esclaves africains", track 13 of the audio recording). What in Rameau's music for this dance suggests African slaves as distinct from the surrounding Turkish environment?
> Timothy Taylor evidently feels that Mozart's use of "Turkish"-sounding music in *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* is principally parodic in intent (Mozart is making fun of Turks). In the opera video from Schwetzingen, watch and listen to chapter 4 (the duet "Wer ein Liebchen hat gefunden") and the Janissary chorus (chapter 7, "Singt dem großen Bassa Lieder"). Do you perceive an attempt at musical parody on Mozart's part? Setting aside the verbal text, does the *music* tell us anything about 18th-century attitudes towards Turks?
> Please keep your remarks to 300 words or less.

Comments on Discussion #1

Several aims lie behind questions posed for this initial discussion. Amid a great deal of confusion which surrounds the word "canon", which has considerably colored the discussion of which operas are viewed as being within it rather than outside of it, the discussion draws attention to the significant distinctions between different *kinds* of canon. There is a performance canon in the sense of a standard repertoire of operas, those given most frequently, and *Die Entführung*, while not occupying so central place in the repertoire as *Le Nozze di Figaro* or *Die Zauberflöte*, is certainly part of it. *Les Indes Galantes* is a good example of a "critical" or "historical" canon insofar as it has been identified by many scholars and intellectuals as an opera of high aesthetic value and historical significance, which exist quite independently of popularity, however

the latter be measured. Yet its occasional stagings raise vital questions of assessment with regard to the kind of racial representations it contains. On a practical level, the need to consult a synopsis as a way of orienting oneself to the study of an opera may be obvious to most of us, but for many students it is a revelatory lesson, to be applied throughout their study. Likewise applicable to many other works beyond the two considered in Discussion #1 is intersectionality: "race" cannot be considered apart from that of a foreign nationality, culture, and religion. It remains an open question whether the negative characteristic of cruelty associated with Turkish character Osmin is, in the view of Mozart and his librettist Gottlieb Stefanie, rooted in racial difference or merely coincident with it. On this point, students are asked to reflect on the happy ending of the opera, and consider its relation to the fact that the Pascha is not really Turkish at all, but a European *Renegat* (convert to Islam), so that within the conceptual horizon of *Die Entführung* he was bound to show clemency and tolerance rather than indulge in the sadistic depredation he had earlier hinted at. Finally, questions which focus on music impart the crucial lesson that studying an opera is distinct from the study of the verbal text of a libretto. The music actively shapes our perception of the characters and dramatic themes.

The first longer written assignment focuses on two further operas with exotic characters, racially or nationally distinct from most of the rest. Mustafà is one of the principal roles in Rossini's *L'Italiana in Algeri*, while Mohammed is a minor, silent role in Strauss's *Der Rosenkavalier*, the classic young Moor whose exotic presence among the subalterns of an upper class household was a sign of the exalted social rank of their employers. Similar to the first discussion, this assignment is conceived as a way of directing the students' attention to the libretto and the music as these relate to race and exoticism, but the field is now expanded to examine how these elements come together in a live performance. No supplemental readings from the secondary literature were required for this initial assignment; it was enough for students to write down their observations in response to the various questions raised.

Assignment #1
(*Race in Gioachino Rossini's* L'Italiana in Algeri *and Richard Strauss's* Der Rosenkavalier)

Part I
Read two different synopses of Rossini's 1813 opera *L'Italiana in Algeri*: the one from the Metropolitan Opera website and any other you find on your own (please cite your source). Note any differences between the way in which they set forth the characters and the plot. Then answer the following questions.

1. The Metropolitan Opera synopsis does not refer explicitly to "race". But can you identify any racial characterizations *implied* in any aspect of the Isabella-Mustafà duet of Act I,

when these two characters meet for the first time? (This is contained in Chapter 17 of the 1986 Metropolitan Opera video starring Marilyn Horne as Isabella.) If so, explain where and how the characterization takes place. Is it audibly "coded" in the music – and if so, how? (If you are able to describe the musical effect in technical terms, feel free to do so by referring to the score which has been made available to you online, but it should be possible to answer this question on the basis of hearing alone.) Is a racially exoticism evident in the verbal *text,* i.e. the words sung by the characters? The *manner* of vocal performance? Does the *visual* presentation in this particular filmed performance contribute to the impression of a "racial" characterization of the Isabella-Mustafà duet? (1 or 1.5 pages, 5 points)

2. Another revealing scene takes place in Act II, when Lindoro tricks Mustafà into believing that Isabella is in love with him, and wishes to elevate him to the (non-existent title) of "Papataci". The recitative in which Lindoro communicates this (not composed by Rossini), and the number which follows it (the "Papataci" trio for Lindoro, Mustafà, and Taddeo, described in Oxford Music Online as "an excellent piece of foolery and one of the score's most diverting episodes") are in chapters 37 and 38 of the same 1986 video. Can you identify any racial characterizations *implied* in these passages? If so, explain where and how the characterization takes place (is it made explicit in the words, audibly coded in the music, some combination of the two? How does the visual presentation in this particular video contribute to that of the Isabella-Mustafà duet?). (5 points)

Part II

This part of the assignment concentrates on a character who, although his name is Mohammed, is generally designated "the little Black boy" ("der kleine Neger") throughout Hugo von Hofmannsthal's libretto for *Der Rosenkavalier*. The role is silent, and is considered so minor that it's often left out of synopses of the opera such as the one from the Metropolitan Opera website (which you should read anyway!). In the libretto you will find his character mentioned on pp. 7, 9, 99, 109, 239, 279, 280 (note that his brief appearances on stage are among the last things that happen in Act I and Act III).

3. How is this character presented *dramatically,* that is, in terms of what you can read in the libretto? What is his personality like, and might this relate to his national origins? How is this character presented *visually* in *two different productions* of the opera you watched? One of these should be the 1982 Metropolitan Opera production, and you are free to choose the other (*please identify the performance as to city, theater, and year*). Do these productions follow the indications in the libretto that Mohammed is a "kleine Neger"? If so, is this done via casting, makeup, or both? How does costuming contribute to the exotic effect of this character? (5 points)

4. Ralph P. Locke argues (Locke 2012) that exoticism in opera is not necessarily a matter of musical coding – that the music associated with "exotic" characters or scenes doesn't necessarily have to *sound different in style* from the "non-exotic" (European) characters in order to reflect a broader exotic framework. As you listen to the last scene in *Der Rosenkavalier*, do you hear anything in the music which accompanies Mohammed that suggests that he is essentially different from the other characters in the opera? What,

exactly, does the music tell us about that character as conceived by the librettist and composer? (5 points)

Extra credit: Compare the ending of Act III in the 1982 Metropolitan Opera performance with another video of the same passage of the opera from the last five years. How does the depiction of Mohammed in the recent performance compare to what you saw in the earlier one?

Comments on Assignment #1

Thanks to the variety of performances of *Der Rosenkavalier* on video that students found on their own, there was a great detail to discuss in class about the non-singing role of Mohammed and the music that Strauss provided for his scenes. Most students had no difficulty in catching the chromatic harmonies played by the celesta as signifying something "different" about Mohammed, but there were sharp disagreements about how to characterize this difference. To some it depicted him as a foreign element in an upper class Viennese household; to others it merely underscored the character as a young, innocent boy, blissfully unaware of the intensely emotional story unfolding around him as distilled in the final trio and love duet. There was variety, too, in the manner of presentation, with some productions making use of a Black boy, others applying dark makeup, and others still eschewing an African look altogether. The advantages and disadvantages of these approaches gave rise to a lively discussion. It was noted that Mohammed, as a silent role, is far easier to cast than a role requiring vocal ability, but opinion was divided as to whether or not it made sense, artistically or ethically, to attempt an "authentic" casting for this role. His Islamic name indicates that his presence in the Marschallin's household derives from a connection with Turkey; in historical terms he was likely a slave of the Turks (or the child of a slave of the Turks) captured in the course of their defeat in battle at the hands of the Viennese. This raises questions as to whether his primary exotic identity should be seen as "Turkish", as typically signified by his turban, or "African", in the sense of sub-Saharan Africa as explicitly indicated by the references to blackness in Hoffmannsthal's libretto.

Discussion #2: Giacomo Puccini's Madama Butterfly

Annilese Miskimmon, the director of the 2018 staging of Puccini's *Madama Butterfly* at the Glyndebourne Festival, expresses herself directly about the problematic nature of this "orientalist" opera, and describes her approach to staging it in a way which "grapples" with these difficulties rather than hide or downplay them (Miskimmon 2018). No complete performance of this staging is currently available online, but there are a number of brief clips on YouTube. A more recent attempt to confront these issues in a direct manner is that of Phil Chan, on whose 2023 staging of *Madama Butterfly* at the Boston Lyric Opera the choreographer Michael Sakamoto arranged for dance movements which ran counter to the standard depictions of Cio-Cio-San as meek and submissive. Sandra Kumamoto Stanley, tracing the development of the plot of Puccini's *Madama Butterfly* from Pierre Loti's novel *Madame Chrysanthème* through a short story by John Luther Long and a play by David Belasco, finds that the story

needs to be understood as documenting anxiety about race and "crossing racial boundaries" (Stanley 2007). In fact, the notion of "miscegenation" (race-mixing) comes up several times in Stanley's essay, and she focuses on a character who generally receives little attention in analyses of Puccini's opera, the son that Cio-Cio-San has with the American naval officer Pinkerton – described in the libretto as having Caucasian features (blue eyes, blond hair).

In a fascinating dispute between two eminent Puccini specialists, Michele Girardi strongly disagrees with Roger Parker's view of *Madama Butterfly* as embodying racist and colonialist attitudes.

In view of these three readings, do you find that *Madama Butterfly* is primarily about the brutal victimization of a powerless Japanese woman by a white American man, the anxiety of crossing racial boundaries – or neither one of these two interpretations? Do you agree with Miskimmon that a staging which updates the story to the 1950s can succeed in providing a way to appreciate *Madama Butterfly* "in the #metoo era"? Does your perception of the opera change depending on the racial background of the soprano who sings the role of Madama Butterfly (compare, for example, the effect of the love duet as performed at the Metropolitan Opera in 2016 and 2019, starring Kristine Opolais and He Hui respectively)? What specifically *musical* elements of the score are cited in Girardi's attempt to refute Parker's argument? Identify *one* musical passage sung by Cio-Cio-San which sounds "Japanese" to you, and try to explain in musical terms how Puccini attempted to give this effect. Identify a different part of the score which is *not*, in your view, intended to sound Japanese, and explain the musical contrast.

Comments on Discussion #2

This discussion was our first foray into issues of Asian representation which run through the critical discourse surrounding some of the most popular works in the standard operatic repertoire. It touches on two fundamental aspects of this discourse, scholarly disagreement and practical decision-making by those directly involved in staging an opera who are sensitive to the legacies of racism and imperialism. Stanley, contrary to readings of *Madama Butterfly* such as Parker's which focus on racialized power differentials, with the underage Cio-Cio-San servings as an object of the sexual fantasies of a western man, offers an interpretation which speaks to racial mixing as itself a source of social disquiet, while Girardi attempts to refute not only this interpretation of the drama but also the specifically musical arguments presented by Parker. The latter point touches on an element which has been described and commented on by a number of scholars, the presence of a thoroughly European musical idiom which exists alongside the Japanese-, Chinese-, or Indian-sounding music in the score, however authentically sourced. How the two styles coexist and interact in an opera can be surprisingly complex and is subject to highly divergent interpretations. On a practical level, Discussion #2 introduces the notion of a creative team specifically committed to confronting perceived racism in an opera, in certain instances to the point of altering the plot. Such experiments have been attempted in a number of stagings of *Madama Butterfly* in the United

States during the last decade: the Heartbeat Opera in New York (2017), a joint production by Pacific Opera Company in Los Angeles and Opera in the Heights in Houston (Spring 2019), the New Orleans Opera (March 2023), and the Cincinnati Opera (July 2023) (Hara 2023a, Hernandez 2023). The particular case study selected in this discussion was the staging of *Madama Butterfly* at the Boston Lyric Opera (BLO) in 2023, with a controversial history all its own. The opera had initially been planned for the 2020–2021 season of that company, but Covid intervened – along with a widely reported rise in hate crimes against Asian Americans and Pacific Islander people. For these reasons the company deferred the planned performances of the opera. In the following season, the BLO presented a series of public discussions under the name *The Butterfly Process*. The series featured guest speakers alongside artists who had been scheduled to perform in the 2021 production. The 2023 production, directed by Phil Chan, founder of the organization Last Bow for Yellowface, was informed by these exceptionally well-considered preparations, a model of how to undertake the responsibility for performing a classic "exotic" opera in the 21st century.

Assignment #2
(Representations of Asia and Asians)

> For this assignment you will examine one famous opera by Giacomo Puccini, *Turandot*, set in China, and two much less well known operas, one with Japanese characters (Pietro Mascagni's *Iris*) and one with Chinese characters (Franco Leoni's *L'Oracolo*).
>
> *Part I: Japan*
> Mascagni's *Iris* premiered in 1898, several years before Puccini's *Madama Butterfly*, and reflects the same vogue for "Japonisme", the interest in Japanese design, clothing, painting, etc. that spread over much of Europe in the late 19th century. Unlike Puccini's work, which juxtaposes Japanese characters to American ones, *all* the characters in *Iris* are Japanese, because it is set in a "legendary" period, predating contact with Westerners. Another difference is that Mascagni makes no attempt to employ authentic Japanese melodies (although he does take care to introduce certain characteristic instrumental timbres into the scene in Act 1 when the traveling players arrive to perform).
>
> On the other hand, the visual approach to the earliest productions closely mimics the Japanese style of dress and décor (see the photos on internetculturale.it of Guglielmo Caruson, the singer who created the role of Kyoto, as well as the photo of the singer who created the role of Kyoto, and the photo of Elvino Ventura, who created the role of Osaka) on the same website. The postcard reproduced on p. 146 of *The Autumn of Italian Opera* (Mallach 2007) is another example of the *visually* Japanese impression that seems to have been deliberately evoked by this production and its surrounding publicity, and you will find further evidence of this in other illustrations of that time related to *Iris*. The question of how Japanese the opera therefore becomes difficult and controversial. Mallach's view is that it isn't Japanese at all (he states that the librettist Luigi Illica's "pre-Western, timeless Japan is an otherworldly, metaphorical land, rather than an attempt to recreate a real time and place", and he speculates

that the original story had no Japanese origins, despite Illica's claim that it did). The 2016 staging at Bard College, available for viewing on YouTube, seems to reflect this view, as it is completely lacking in any specifically Japanese elements.

After reading one of the available synopses of the opera on Canvas (in the Week 6 module), *choose any aspect of the opera to explore from this angle.* You may choose to focus on a scene, an act, a character, or a dramatic theme (innocence, violence, sexual exploitation). You will argue *either* that race is a significant factor with regard to what you focus on, or that it isn't. Be sure in any case to include some consideration of why the opera is set in Japan.
(1–2 pages, 10 points)

Part II: China

1A. Similarly to *Madama Butterfly*, Puccini's *Turandot* reflects the effort made by the composer to introduce authentic (Chinese) musical material in keeping with the setting of the opera, as often noted in the literature; see especially the readings on "Chinoiserie" in the chapter on "The Four Colors" on pp. 89–114 in the book *Puccini's 'Turandot': The End of the Great Tradition* (Ashbrook 1991) and W. Anthony Sheppard's article "Puccini and the Music Boxes (Sheppard 2015). But these quotations and evocations of Chinese music are spread rather thinly throughout the work; only occasional musical passages show signs of it. The main tenor role, Calaf, is not himself Chinese. But the other two principal characters, Turandot and Liu, are Chinese. Listen to two arias by these characters: Turandot's "In questa reggia", where she explains her reasons for never wishing to marry, and lays out the severe rules which her suitors must follow, at risk of death; and Liù's "Tu che di gel sei cinta", which she sings during her death scene, as she explains her suicidal sacrifice for the sake of love (Chapters 21 and 32 of the video of the Metropolitan Opera performance of October 12, 2019). Do you hear any evidence of musical *exoticism* in these arias, and if so, where and how does it occur?
Aside from the musical style, is there anything in the *dramatic* depiction of these characters, as revealed in these two arias, which appears to reflect on their Chinese identity? In other words, if these are the main Chinese characters, then what does that tell us about Chinese characters?

1B. Another opera with Chinese characters is set not in China but in the Chinatown district of San Francisco. Franco Leoni's 1905 one-act opera *L'Oracolo* (The Oracle) deals with violence and criminality, as is clear from the libretto alone.

The observations on this opera by Nick Pearce (Pearce 2013) conclude with speculation as to why it did not enter the standard repertoire. Pearce points to the negative characters, none of whom truly arouses the sympathies of the audience. He also notes that Leoni made "limited use of so-called Orientalist devices, such as the pentatonic scale, open fifths and octaves" to evoke the Chinatown setting, musical techniques which are documented in detail in Chapter 6 of David Ik-sung Choo's doctoral dissertation on *L'Oracolo* (Choo 1998). At the same time, Pearce also quotes a contemporary review of the premiere of the opera, which claims that the musical score was "purely Italian", since Leoni was "quite incapable of making excursions to Chinatown". As you listen to the audio recording of *L'Oracolo*, which of these radically different views do you feel comes closer to the truth? Feel free to consult the piano-vocal score of this opera included in the Module for Week 7.

Comments on Assignment #2

Alongside *Madama Butterfly*, *Turandot*, and other operas long accepted as canonic are works which, following a brief vogue, failed to achieve a place in the standard repertoire, and are only sporadically revived or recorded. Franco Leoni's *L'Oracolo*. Following the premiere production at Covent Garden in 1905, it was given by the Metropolitan Opera in New York in the 1914–15 season, then during ten consecutive seasons from the Fall of 1916 through the Spring of 1926, reappearing several years later for two further consecutive seasons (1931–2 and 1932–3) before disappearing, according to the online archive of the company. No major house has revived *L'Oracolo* since 2011 (Oper Frankfurt). Piero Mascagni's *Iris* enjoyed a much broader diffusion during the three decades which followed the 1898 premiere in Rome, but recent years have seen only a handful of revivals at minor theaters. As works no longer present in the lives of most opera goers, the practical utility of their study is limited – but there are nevertheless excellent reasons to study them: passively, they document and reflect contemporary attitudes regarding race and nationality; actively, they may have worked either to shape or to reinforce those same attitudes. Leoni's opera was loosely based on a short story by the American writer Chester B. Fernald first published in 1896, fourteen years after the federal law known as the Chinese Exclusion Act went into effect in 1882, leading to a prohibition on Chinese immigration to the United States which remained in force for many years.[15] Set in the Chinatown of San Francisco, the repugnant mixture of opium, cruelty, deception, and murder set forth in the plot serves as an obvious justification for continued restrictions on immigration from China. Aside from its significance in clarifying Western views of Asians, the opera also affords insight into the role of music in depicting a foreign people, albeit in ways which are stylistically or linguistically inaccurate, as Choo illustrates. Through a kind of stylistic mish-mash including musical devices drawn from both Turkey and the Middle East, Leoni creates a vaguely foreign ambiance linked to the characters rather than representing them "authentically" (by means of direct quotation from Chinese sources). A lively discussion among the students concerned the cast of the Frankfurt production, which included the Chinese bass-baritone Wenwei Zhang as Uin-Sci, the lone Asian member of an otherwise European cast, as some worried that his participation lent an unfortunate note of authenticity to a work based on offensive caricatures. The more recent staging (2018) by the Wexford Festival Opera in Ireland, which as a matter of artistic policy specializes in opera rarities, featured three Korean-born singers (Leon Kim, Joo Won Kang, and Benjamin Cho), pointedly raising the question

15 Lee 2002.

as to whether distinctions among Asian nationalities are to be regarded as trivial when compared to the value of hiring Asians to sing Asian roles.

While neither the Frankfurt nor the Wexford staging of *L'Oracolo* is available on video, the case of *Iris* permits us to examine, via a filmed staged production, supplemented by a common expedient for the presentation of potentially offensive theatrical representations of culture and race: detailed commentary in the program booklet (or perhaps a dedicated page on the company website). Against the conventional view of Mascagni's opera as an example of exoticism and the late 19th-century vogue of *japonaiserie*, the conductor Leon Botstein, president of Bard College and artistic co-director of the Bard SummerScape festival, specifically downplays the Japanese element, insisting that the work

> is intentionally mythic in character. Although set in Japan, the story is neither exotic nor historical. It is not drawn from Japanese sources. The characters all have generic names: the female lead is named for a flower, and she is a symbol of nature, color, and beauty. The men bear the names of key Japanese cities. [...] Each character represents one dimension in a morality play.[16]

In such a reading, we need not object to an opera about a young, eroticized and victimized Asian woman, assimilated into the world of nature and beguiled by a puppet show, because the Japanese references are strictly superficial, unrelated to anything genuinely Japanese – and therefore dispensable. From this premise it is a short step to the conclusion that "one encounters in *Iris* a universal argument of redemption and transcendence and the triumph of nature over modern civilization".[17] In the Bard production this interpretation was rendered explicit in the abstract stage designs by Emily Anne MacDonald and the costume designs by Peabody Southwell; both rigorously exclude any hint of Japanese identity. There is no reason to suppose that casting decisions for the Bard production were likewise made on the basis of such an interpretation, but the lack of any soloists of Asian background had the effect of further reinforcing the interpretation outlined by Botstein. This stress on the putatively universal theme of the drama resonates with the abovementioned casting decision to hire a white[18] tenor to sing the part of *Otello* without dark makeup. Both decisions amount to an argument that the issue of racism can disappears if a work is visually presented in such a way that suggests that race simply doesn't matter, even if direct references to race are written into the libretto (a challenge which can easily be met by modified translations in the projected

16 Botstein 2016, 9.
17 Botstein 2016, 9.
18 Ashley 2008.

supertitles), as is the case in *Otello* or the character Monostatos in *Die Zauberflöte*. The latter is another role whose explicit blackness has been deliberately erased in some productions. A more interesting and thought-provoking solution was attempted at the Edinburgh Festival in 2008 when the white tenor François Piolino sang the part barechested, with only his face darkened while his torso retained its natural color, although this too was criticized as a cowardly retreat from confrontation with racism in this opera. The opposite approach, which assumes that it does indeed matter and should therefore be handled "authentically", is also part of the present world of operatic production, but carries risks of its own. Roger Parker criticized Anthony Minghella's production design for *Madama Butterfly* at the Metropolitan Opera in the 2006–07 season, with its "gestures towards classical Japanese theatre and Bunraku-style puppets", as a disingenuous camouflage for the same old Westernized take of the story. Parker argues that rather than attempt to evoke an authentically Japanese setting, it is imperative to stage the opera in a way which works against the strongly implied racist and imperialist attitudes embodied in the work via "fierce scenic counter-arguments" such as those which characterize Graham Vick's 1984 production for the English National Opera, in which Pinkerton blithely walks away from the dying Cio-Cio-San, of whose suffering he is oblivious, as he prepares to return to America with his small child.[19]

Whatever its flaws, the Bard *Iris* at least avoided falling into the delusion that some sort of disclaimer in the program booklet is sufficient to offset the racism in an operatic work: it is essential to take additional steps, whatever these might be. A related and equally inadequate solution is to precede the performance by a panel discussion in which such issues can be aired, but which have no real bearing on how the work is performed. Interviewed by Elizabeth Yntema, the president and founder of the Dance Data Project, Phil Chan specifically criticized this approach when explaining why the Boston Lyric Opera preceded its *Madama Butterfly* production with the "The Butterfly Project" series of events:

> So often these panel discussions are thought of as "education", a shield used to demonstrate thoughtfulness on the part of an organization, sometimes in direct conflict with a problematic artistic production. We didn't just want to say, "here is why Madama Butterfly is racist and sexist… now enjoy the opera the way it always has been done!" That's just lip service and is an insult to the audience you are trying to engage. We wanted the product of the discussion to guide us to making better art.[20]

19 Parker 2007.

20 Yntema 2024.

The indisputable fact remains that in the operatic world today, the depiction of Asian characters is especially visible due first of all to the continued popularity of *Madame Butterfly* and *Turandot*, and only secondarily to operas such as Bizet's *Les Pêcheurs de Perles*, Delibes' *Lakmé*, and Mascagni's *Iris* – works that never attained a firm place in the standard repertoire, but were successful in their day and continue to enjoy revivals. Critical analyses of these operas is no more confined to scholars than the debates swirling around the Ethiopians in *Aida* and the Moor in *Otello*, as the voices of performers figure strongly in the discussion. Especially prominent in this area are the ballet dancers who have banded together in the organization Final Bow for Yellowface, whose leaders Phil Chan and Georgina Pazcoguin have publicized various attempts to address the legacy of racism in the world of dance, but whose ideas are naturally relevant to operatic performance with equal if not greater force. Although Chan's starting point was the problematic representation of non-Europeans in Tchaikovsky's ballets *Sleeping Beauty* (a 2015 revival of the original designs by Leon Bakst) and *The Nutcracker* (including the prescribed Chinese-appearing dancers to impersonate tea and Arabian ones to depict coffee), and *La Bayadère* by Ludwig Minkus (which includes dancers in blackface),[21] his strong vision led to his being called upon to direct *Madama Butterfly* at the Lyric Opera of Boston. The Asian Opera Alliance is another organization dedicated to the cause of increased representation of Asians in modern opera performance, and together with the Black Opera Alliance, has partnered with companies such as the Dallas Opera and the Los Angeles Opera on how to present operas with non-European characters in a respectful manner.

Alongside costuming and makeup, the issue of casting for non-European roles like Cio-Cio-San, Turandot, Aida, Amonasro, and Otello continues to receive critical attention. Casting decisions, however, never take place in an ideal world, but in a world constrained by practical limitations. Even if a company were to proceed on the assumption that a Japanese (or Asian) soprano should be hired to sing Cio-Cio-San, the mostly white pool of sopranos complicates the agenda considerably. A similar problem arises with George Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* which, as the composer's brother Ira Gershwin stipulated in his will, must be performed by Black singers in all of the Black roles, effectively ruling out the use of blackface. This requirement, which has been rigorously enforced by the Gershwin estate, is tantamount to banning performances of the work by companies located in countries where an all- (or mostly) Black cast is simply out of the question, which led the management of the Hungarian State Opera to flaunt the requirement when producing the work with white singers in 2018 (this staging was revived in January and

21 Chan 2020, 3–5.

February 2025).[22] But the question of *how* white singers are to perform non-white roles, i.e. with or without racialized makeup, floats on the surface of issues considerably deeper and more fraught. First, an exclusive emphasis on "how" uncritically takes "whether" off the table by presupposing that certain operas will be performed regardless of whose sensibilities they offend, so that the modality of presentation remains the only matter to be determined. The problem goes well beyond the general condition which gives rise to the expedient of racializing makeup – the relative dearth, real or perceived, of singers of color (which naturally demands interrogation and creative redress rather than a resigned acceptance of the way things supposedly are). It is just as important to step outside of the comfortable assumption that certain operas should continue to be performed no matter what, because they have long been popular and were created by great musicians. Take, for example, the appalling depiction of the Native American roles Wowkle and Billy Jackrabbit in Puccini's *La Fanciulla del West*. At several points in the opera these characters express themselves with the grunting monosyllable "Ugh". It is difficult to see how any of the standard approaches hitherto considered – to utilize or forego a certain kind of makeup, to hire Native American singers for these roles (which, if anything, might even compound the offense rather than lessening it), to hire a stage designer capable of fitting out the scene with authentic Native American visual elements – can reconcile many modern audience members to the work. Yet even so committed a critic of the racist legacy of operatic performance as Phil Chan, addressing *Madama Butterfly*, limits himself to rueful speculation as to how different the situation might be "if we didn't have so much art that reinforced a hypersexual hypersubmissive 'Oriental' women [sic] revered as 'canon'",[23] foregoing any consideration of why indeed there is so much "art" of this kind and whether we might not adjust its proportion downwards.

Closely connected to the question of canonic self-perpetuation is our definition of the artwork. If an opera may be shorn of its original costumes, staging, and scenery, can we not extend the shearing to the libretto or (gasp!) the music? The latter two elements are regarded, of course, as sacrosanct; to modify them is to profane the operatic temple. The prevailing attitude in recent opera scholarship upholds the value of respecting the original musical and verbal text, restoring it, when necessary, from the depredations of censors, singers, or conductors who altered it. In traditional narratives of operatic history, censors in particular are villains whose victims are, first of all, the composers and librettists forced to modify their work, and secondly, the artworks themselves, which naturally suffer from such ignoble

22 Novak 2018, 772–773.

23 Chan 2024.

mistreatment. The heroes of this narrative are those who bravely defied the censors. The attitude, in brief, largely derives from exalted status of the artistic geniuses who created the great operas of the past, with all other participants being consigned to subaltern roles: directors and singers faithful to the notated scores and stage directions, critics commenting from the sidelines, and scholars buried in archival documents of whom few take note. In fact, it is precisely the latter groups which have a determinative role to play in moving the conversation forward. Yet there remains a significant and influential current of thought according to which the primary values, to which all other ancillary, are accuracy and faithfulness to the authors' intentions as verified through scholarly documentation. Scholarship has only recently come to grips with the question of what happens when the supremacy of these values, long considered to be self-evident, is challenged by others equally compelling, such as the ethical imperative to treat people of all backgrounds with respect, or to consider the effect on certain depictions upon audience members who are themselves part of a group subjected to an offensive caricature. Intriguingly, it is *Turandot* which has provided a positive way forward, thanks to what had earlier been seen as its greatest misfortune: the incomplete state in which Giacomo Puccini left the score, together with a general lack of satisfaction with the completion by Franco Alfano, in either its complete or abridged form, for the 1926 premiere. Of the numerous alternative endings that have been created for the opera, one in particular, composed by Christopher Tin to a libretto by Susan Soon He Stanton for the Washington National Opera in the Spring of 2024, offers an original way to move beyond the no-means-yes messaging that many have long perceived in the opera: in Stanton's ending, Turandot reveals that it was she, and not her remote ancestor, who suffered rape and humiliation, and it is she, not Calaf, who initiates the climactic kiss.[24] The charge that Tin interfered with the score cannot stick in a case where *some* such interference is a prerequisite for bringing the story to completion.

Assignment #3
Representations of Black Characters in Three American Operas

This assignment will examine the musical and dramatic presentation of Black characters in three categories:
- operas by Black creators (librettists, composers) in Part I
- operas by white creators in Part II
- operatic collaborations between Black and white creators in Part III

24 Lacroix 2024.

Part I

Shirley Graham Du Bois (1896–1977): Tom-Tom *(1932)*

Both the score and the libretto of *Tom-Tom* are by Shirley Graham, also known as Shirley Graham Du Bois following her marriage to the celebrated writer and activist W.E.B. Du Bois. The work enjoyed great success in Cleveland but received no further stagings, and until the recent discovery of musical materials (an incomplete piano-vocal score) it was not possible to hear or perform any of it.

After reading the libretto of this opera (Graham 1991), look into the background and rediscovery of the work in the essay by Lucy Caplan (Caplan 2020). The YouTube video "Listening to *Tom-Tom*"[25] is also an important source to consult, not only for the interesting interview/discussion at the end, but for the seven excerpts from *Tom-Tom* (preceded by brief spoken lines from the libretto by the pianist Kyle Walker); these are virtually the only recordings that we can hear at the present time. Read along with the text of each excerpt listed (the indicated page number refers to the libretto). As you will read in the libretto, Act I takes place in pre-modern Africa, Act II is set in the United States in 1865, and Act III is in New York around 1930.

Excerpt 1 Act I @2:00 ("Darkness") / @ 2:13
("Listen to the distant Tom-Toms") (p. 239)
Excerpt 2 Act II @5:00
("Fire! Light! River!") (p. 249)
Excerpt 3 Act II @ 7:18
("Come with me") (bottom p. 260)
Excerpt 4 Act II @ 8:43
("No! No! Not that!")(p. 261)
Excerpt 5 Act III @ 15:41
("No time") (p. 278))
Excerpt 6 Act III @ 18:55
("You kill him") (p. 284)
Excerpt 7 Act III @ 21:05
("It does not matter now, my boy")
(top p. 285)

1. A pride in African origins is evident in more than one of these excerpts. *Choose two of the excerpts which exemplify this,* and explain how it is expressed in both text and music. (5 points)
2. A performance of *Tom-Tom* as envisioned by Graham, and brought to life in Cleveland in 1932, will not be possible until the orchestration is re-created from the piano-vocal score and the work is completely staged. *Think of three practical challenges* that would make this difficult to achieve, and describe what you think would be the kind of solutions that could overcome these difficulties. (5 points)

25 Caplan 2020. All the following listed excerpts (1–7) refer to *Listening To Tom-Tom* by Shirley Graham Du Bois | Full Concert & Conversation.

Part II

Robert Ward's *The Crucible* (1961, libretto by Bernard Stambler) is based on Arthur Miller's famous play about the Salem witch trials in the 1690s. The characters are based on the historical figures who appear in the trial documents. The slave Tituba plays a small but significant role in the play and the opera on account of her "admission" (under intense pressure) of having had dealings with the devil along with others she names.

3. Veta Smith Tucker (Tucker 2000) has traced the complicated and evolving history of the historical character Tituba, who has been variously considered African, a Native American, or a member of the indigenous people of Barbados. In Ward's opera there is a lengthy solo for Tituba in the prison scene (beginning of Act IV) that did not appear in the play by Miller.
4. Why do you think that the composer and librettist decided to create a solo for this character at this point of the opera? (2 points)
5. Based on what you read in the libretto and hear in the music, explain your views on whether or not the creators of this opera conceived of Tituba as belonging to a particular race. Tituba sings on tracks 1, 4, 5 on CD 1 and track 6 on CD 2. (3 points)

Part III

Kurt Weill/Langston Hughes, Street Scene

Read the entry for this opera on Grove Music Online for this opera, which contains extensive background and a detailed synopsis. Elmer Rice's 1929 play *Street Scene* was adapted for both a 1931 film (for which Rice wrote the screenplay) and a 1946 opera (for which he wrote the spoken dialogues); the celebrated poet Langston Hughes wrote the lyrics for the musical numbers.

One of the many differences between the opera *Street Scene* and the earlier versions of the story is the presence of Henry Davis, the janitor of the tenement apartment building where the action takes place. Henry's blues aria in Act I, "I got a marble and a star", his only number in the opera, can be heard in various performances available on line: as sung by Creighton Thompson, the baritone who originated the role on Broadway, a televised version sung by Andrew Frierson with piano accompaniment, and various performances of the complete opera. Viewing the complete opera is not necessary for this assignment, but certainly wouldn't hurt. The text is below.

6. The character of Henry Davis who sings this aria was not part of the original play by Elmer Rice on which the opera is based. Why do you feel that this character was added to the drama when for the operatic adaptation?
7. How do the composer (Kurt Weill) and the lyricist (Langston Hughes) suggest that Henry Davis is Black?
8. How successfully do you feel that a white Jewish composer from Germany was able to draw on a musical style appropriate to this character?
9. Why do you feel that Henry Davis is simply called "Henry", while he is invariably polite addressing the tenants in the building as "Mr." or "Mrs." followed by their surname? (5 points)

Henry

I got a marble and a star
And the star is in my pocket, too
Got a marble and a star
The star is in my pocket, too

If you'll be real good
I'll show that star to you

Mrs. Jones
How about that kitchen faucet of mine, Henry?

Henry
I'll tend to that first thing in the morning, Mrs. Jones.

Mrs. Jones
Ah, says you!

Henry
I got a halo and a hat
But my halo I don't wear
Got a halo and a hat
My halo I don't wear
I'm gonna save that halo
Until I get up there.

Comments on Assignment #3 and Conclusions

A central paradox in operatic performance today is the simultaneous shrinking and expansion of the performance repertoire. At the same time that an ever-increasing number of operas are made available to audiences through performance and recordings, and studied by scholars, a number of major performance organizations concentrate ever more exclusively on fewer and fewer popular favorites. While the largest companies have a budget sufficient for taking risks with new works or lesser-known operas from the past, the management of smaller and regional houses are understandably fearful of presenting works with zero name-recognition. But a fuller and more nuanced understanding of race in opera can only be possible if we expand our view to encompass works which lie far off the beaten path, often through no fault of their own. During the course students had the chance to familiarize themselves with two such works, *Il Guarany* (1870) by the Brazilian composer Carlos Gomes (1836–1896) and *Treemonisha* (1910) by the American ragtime pianist and composer Scott Joplin. Assignment #3 focuses on three American operas, only one of which is well known: Kurt Weill's 1946 opera *Street Scene*, based on the 1924 play by Elmer Rice, with song lyrics by the great American poet Langston Hughes. That work, however, occupies the border region between opera and musical theater, the genre in which Weill enjoyed most of his success during the American phase of his illustrious career. In addition to song lyrics by a celebrated Black poet, the opera also contains a Black character, Henry. Following its premiere at the Teatro alla Scala in Milan, *Il Guarany* was performed in many theaters in Europe and the

New World during the 1870s and 1880s, it drew attention to the theme of miscegenation previously touched upon in works like *La Forza del Destino* and *Madama Butterfly*. Graham's *Tom-Tom* illustrates the challenges we sometimes face when attempting to bring to light little-known works: the lack of complete musical sources, and the consequent need to reconstruct what was missing, in the same way that Joplin's *Treemonisha* needed to be orchestrated from the published piano-vocal score by the composer T. J. Anderson before it could be given its premiere performance in 1972. Robert Ward's *The Crucible* exemplifies how a composer and his work can reach a high level of professional accomplishment – the work was awarded the 1961 Pulitzer Prize for Music – and still largely disappear from the professional repertoire (although it is occasionally revived on college campuses and smaller companies). Similarly to *Street Scene*, the cast of *The Crucible* includes an extended vocal solo for the Black character Tituba that was not part in the dramatic source for the libretto, Arthur Miller's play of the same title. The three operas addressed in this assignment provide a variety of angles from which to consider the representation of Black characters in operas by composers from the United States, a country in desperate need of a thoughtful reckoning with a troubled past.

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Afterword: Polimnia and Opera for All between Musicology and Lifelong Learning. An Artistic Project for Social Change

1 Introduction

Polimnia: Opera for All! is an international project launched in response to a call from the Ministry of University and Research, aimed at promoting the excellence of Italy's Higher Education System in Art, Music, and Dance (AFAM) abroad. The call, directed at Conservatories and Academies, was part of the implementation of Italy's National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR).[1]

The project centres on a cultural experience that Italy proudly claims as its own and has shared with the world: opera. Although opera is a symbol of Italian heritage, it remains accessible to a limited audience – primarily those who can afford the high cost of theatre tickets and, more importantly, those with the specialized knowledge needed to fully appreciate it. The project seeks to explore opera as a language that transcends cultural and geographical boundaries, expanding its accessibility and impact through digital innovation.

In addition, the *Polimnia* project investigates how the opera tradition can evolve in a global context, making it accessible to a broader and more diverse audience. It explores how new technologies – such as live streaming, augmented reality, and digital platforms – can transform the opera experience, enabling participation even for those without access to physical theatres or traditional cultural venues.

The project explores the interdisciplinary dynamics between opera, image, stage, performance, representation, and digital transformation. It examines how these elements interact in a global and multidisciplinary context, particularly in the international dissemination of Italian opera. The interplay of word, image, and stage in contemporary opera is reimagined through the lens of digital innovation, fostering new artistic experiments that enrich both the visual and musical narrative while engaging audiences in novel ways.

Polimnia. Opera for All! aims to demonstrate how opera can promote an inclusive and global vision, breaking down physical and social barriers. By leveraging digital technologies, the project fosters new forms of intercultural dialogue and

1 https://www.mur.gov.it/it/news/venerdi-21072023/pnrr-dallarte-applicata-alla-musica-30-milioni-promuovere-conservatori-e.

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accessibility. Aligned with this vision, the Community Opera approach offers an innovative perspective on education through beauty, positioning art as a powerful tool for experiential learning. Creating opera in a participatory context makes it accessible to all, allowing individuals to engage with and appreciate it throughout their lives. In this way, opera becomes not only an artistic product but also a medium of communication and shared experience that continually renews itself through the technological and cultural transformations of the 21st century.

Building a partnership with six conservatories, an Academy of Fine Arts, and two universities[2] was a complex and demanding process. However, the project's innovative and distinctive focus contributed to its success in securing funding. This text presents the project and its foundational principles.

2 Community Music, Community Singing: An *Overture for Duo*

A central aspect of the *Polimnia* project is its engagement with Community Music – a practice that fosters inclusive, participatory music-making at the local, grassroots level.[3] Community Music promotes collaboration, diversity, and social cohesion. Within the context of the project, it offers a transformative opportunity to dismantle the barriers that have traditionally framed opera as an elitist or inaccessible art form. By integrating Community Music principles, the project seeks to empower individuals and communities, inviting them to participate not only as audiences but also as active contributors to the opera process[4]. Community Music is the "generative"[5] force behind music as a tool for social change, and it can be meaningfully integrated into the digital transformation of opera.

Digital platforms – such as live streaming, virtual rehearsals, and online collaboration tools – enable communities to engage with opera across geographical and social divides.[6] For example, a community from a metropolitan city in one

2 IUL University of Florence, University of Modena and Reggio Emilia, the Conservatories of Modena, Reggio Emilia, Gallarate, Potenza, Pescara, and Frosinone, and the Academy of Fine Arts of Frosinone.

3 Higgins 2012.

4 Coppi 2020.

5 'Generative' is a term here used in the Generative Pedagogy approach. It is an educational approach that emphasizes active, student-centred learning, where students are encouraged to generate ideas, knowledge, and understanding through dynamic, collaborative processes.

6 Coppi/van der Sandt 2021.

country might participate in a global virtual choir, while local music groups could collaborate digitally with professional opera singers and musicians to create hybrid performances that blend community involvement with professional production.[7] By extending opera into these virtual and digitally mediated spaces, the project aims to create a more inclusive and accessible form of opera that resonates with a broader audience.[8]

The focus on Community Music also supports the development of new participatory opera forms. These may include community-led productions that incorporate local themes, stories, and voices into the traditional operatic structure – infusing the art form with fresh perspectives and greater relevance for contemporary audiences. This approach allows opera to evolve from a top-down, staged performance into a collaborative process that fosters creativity and dialogue between artists and audiences as co-creators.[9]

Through these new modes of creation, opera becomes a tool for community empowerment and expression, fostering a sense of ownership and pride among participants. Workshops and collaborative performances around the world demonstrate how communities can engage with opera in ways that reflect their own cultural and social contexts. This engagement includes a wide range of roles: choirs, orchestras, scenographers, designers, actors, and non-musical contributors all participate in transforming opera into a living, community-based art form that adapts to its environment.[10] Community Music and Community Opera break down barriers between professional performers and community members, fostering cultural exchange, learning, and shared artistic expression.

A specific focus of the project is to explore opera's transformative potential and guide it toward becoming a truly global and inclusive art form. Through the inclusion of Community Music practices – such as community singing – diverse musical traditions can be represented. This was a key element of the complex experience of *Polimnia*. By bridging the gap between elite cultural institutions and everyday communities, and by embracing diverse approaches to music-making, community singing amplifies the project's integrative goals. It enables people from varied social and cultural backgrounds to engage in a shared cultural experience – free from the barriers of distance, cost, or limited access to traditional performance venues.[11]

7 Silverman/Elliott 2018.
8 Fabris/Cauzillo 2020.
9 Clift/Hancox 2001.
10 Hallam 2015.
11 Bartleet/Dunbar-Hall/Letts/Schippers 2009; Higgins 2012.

The focus on Community Music also supports the development of new participatory opera forms. These may include community-led productions that incorporate local themes, stories, and voices into the traditional operatic structure – infusing the art form with fresh perspectives and greater relevance for contemporary audiences. This approach allows opera to evolve from a top-down, staged performance into a collaborative process that fosters creativity and dialogue between artists and audiences as co-creators.

Community Singing is a powerful form of participatory music-making that strengthens social bonds, fosters creativity, and promotes inclusion.[12] It involves groups of individuals coming together to sing collectively, serving as a meaningful way to bridge cultural, social, and generational divides. Within the *Polimnia* project, Community Singing is integrated through an online music practice experience – based on a platform designed to engage the wider public with opera.[13] Through the organisation of workshops, choirs, and vocal ensembles, *Polimnia* encourages local communities to engage directly with opera, reimagining it as an art form that is collectively created and experienced. These community choirs may reinterpret classic opera works, perform selected sections, or contribute to new compositions that reflect local cultures, traditions, and contemporary issues. This inclusive model breaks down traditional barriers often associated with opera – typically viewed as elite or inaccessible – and makes it more approachable for people from diverse social and cultural backgrounds.[14]

Community Singing prioritizes inclusion, collaboration, and shared musical experiences. These participatory singing events provide opportunities for people not only to actively engage with Opera, but also to experience the therapeutic effects and social benefits that come from collective music-making.[15] Singing together has been shown to enhance feelings of belonging, improve mental well-being, as well as strengthen community identity. By integrating Community Singing into the *Polimnia* project, Opera becomes a tool for fostering social cohesion, unity, and intercultural understanding. A further contributing factor is the impact of the digital age on Community Singing, as technological innovations now enable virtual choirs and online singing workshops.

Through live streaming, virtual rehearsals, and digital platforms, *Polimnia* makes it possible for people from around the world to join in singing, creating a global, inclusive opera experience. These digital platforms enable communities –

12 van der Sandt 2017.
13 Yekel 2012.
14 Coppi/van der Sandt 2021.
15 Harries 2020.

whether in urban centres or remote regions – to participate in the opera process without needing physical proximity to professional opera venues. Virtual performances and collaborative digital singing events bring the opera experience into homes and local communities, democratizing access to this art form.[16]

Moreover, Community Singing within the *Polimnia* project encourages creative reinterpretations of opera. Community singers, alongside professional artists, collaborate to co-create new works that blend operatic traditions with the contemporary concerns and voices of their communities. These works may incorporate local languages, folk traditions, and themes that resonate with the lived experiences of the singers, making opera more relevant and relatable to a diverse range of participants. This kind of community-led creation opens new possibilities for opera to become a living, evolving art form that reflects the world's changing cultural and social landscape.

By highlighting the integrative aspects of Community Singing, *Polimnia* seeks to redefine opera as not only a performance art but also a collective, participatory practice that belongs to everyone. These community-driven projects help break down barriers that typically separate 'professional' from 'amateur' music, placing value on the voices of ordinary people as vital contributors to the opera tradition. By fostering environments where individuals come together to sing, learn, and create, the project enhances a sense of ownership and agency within communities, empowering them to shape opera in ways that are meaningful to them.[17]

Finally, it is important to reflect on the artistic and health benefits of Community Singing, which also offers social opportunities for participants from marginalized communities, young people, and individuals from diverse socio-economic backgrounds. Community Singing uses Choral singing as a tool for social inclusion, empowerment, and cultural exchange. Community choirs and opera performances can serve as platforms for addressing social issues, telling untold stories, and giving voice to underrepresented communities.[18]

3 Community Opera: An *Assolo*

Opera, traditionally perceived as an elitist art form removed from everyday experience, has in recent decades undergone a process of democratization that has

16 Harries 2020; Bellini/Raglianti 2023; Palazzetti 2023.

17 Clements 2016.

18 Willingham 2020.

made it increasingly accessible and meaningful to a broader audience. This transformation has been driven by initiatives that place active community participation at their core, fostering social inclusion and lifelong learning through music and theatre. This philosophy and approach are indicated as "Community Opera".

The origins of Community Opera can be traced back to the broader and more articulated Community Arts movement which emerged in the 1960s and 1970s in English-speaking countries and particularly in the United Kingdom. This movement developed as a response to profound social and economic changes at the time, including deindustrialisation, rising social inequality, and the cultural marginalisation of large segments of the urban population. Within this context, Community Arts established itself with a set of artistic practices aimed at fostering direct participation by local communities, with the intention of democratising access to culture and restoring an active role to citizens in artistic production.[19]

Community Arts was not simply a means of bringing art to the people. Rather, it represented a form of cultural activism that saw art as a tool for empowerment, inclusion, and social transformation. According to Owen Kelly (1984), one of the movement's leading theorists, communities should not be mere spectators, but active agents in the creative process. From this perspective, art was not to be consumed passively, but rather experienced as a participatory process capable of strengthening the social fabric and fostering a sense of belonging. Art thus became a political and relational act, challenging entrenched aesthetic hierarchies and addressing cultural and educational inequalities.[20]

Initially, opera remained on the periphery of this creative ferment, because the operatic form, widely perceived as elitist, formalised, and distant from everyday life, seemed incompatible with the horizontal and democratic aims of Community Arts. However, as the movement evolved and the very notion of *participatory art* expanded, some artists and institutions began to explore opera's potential as a collective expressive medium. Due to its synthesis of language, music, gesture, scenography, and narrative, opera was gradually rediscovered as an accessible theatrical and musical form capable of addressing universal themes, love, death, identity, and justice, from contemporary and shared perspectives.[21]

The influence of community theatre was pivotal in this transformation. Grassroots theatrical experiences, based on co-creating performances with and for local communities, contributed significantly to altering the perception of opera. Increasingly, opera began to be viewed not as a finished product to be replicated,

19 Kelly 1984.
20 Goldbard 2006.
21 Pitts 2005, 257.

but as a dynamic process that could emerge from people's lives, their stories, and their aspirations. Artists and organisations started experimenting with hybrid forms that fused opera and participatory theatre, inspired by Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed*,[22] as well as by British initiatives such as *Welfare State International* and intercultural work led by companies like *Battersea Arts Centre*.

During the 1980s and 1990s, the movement found fertile ground in the UK, where public cultural policy and institutional support facilitated the development of the first genuine Community Opera projects. Institutions such as Opera North Education, Glyndebourne Education, and the Baylis Programme of the English National Opera began collaborating with schools, associations, and local communities to create original operatic productions. These projects were characterised by the direct involvement of non-professional citizens, often from marginalised contexts, in the writing of librettos, music composition, stage design, and performance. Works such as *The Voyage* (1992) by Jonathan Dove, realised in collaboration with residents of London's Tower Hamlets neighbourhood, exemplify how opera can serve as a vehicle for community expression without sacrificing artistic integrity.[23] As the transition from Community Art to Community Opera unfolded, many of the foundational principles of the former remained central: *creative process* was valued as much as, if not more than the final product, and the aim was not a perfect performance, but the construction of a shared experience capable of generating meaning, awareness, and social bonds.[24] *Accessibility* was redefined not only in economic terms, but also in symbolic and linguistic dimensions: Community Opera sought to overcome the cultural and structural barriers that had historically excluded many citizens from engaging with the operatic tradition.

At the same time, community operas were marked by their *interdisciplinary and collaborative nature*: directors, composers, playwrights, artistic facilitators, and social workers collaborated closely with community members to build a shared expressive language. Participation was never treated as ornamental or secondary; rather, it was the core of the entire endeavour. In this respect, Community Opera diverged significantly from traditional opera-making models, which had long been dominated by rigid hierarchies and specialised expertise.[25] Thus, the emergence of Community Opera can be understood as the outcome of a long cultural process rooted in the desire, at the heart of the Community Arts movement, to make art a shared, transformative, and universally accessible experience. This paradigm continues to

22 Boal 1977.
23 Kennedy 2013.
24 Matarasso 1997.
25 Goldbard 2006; Pitts 2005.

evolve and expand today, finding diverse expressions across the globe while remaining faithful to its original impulse: to make opera a space for encounter, mutual listening, and collective meaning-making.

The intersection of Community Opera and lifelong learning represents a powerful synergy, capable of transforming both individuals and communities.

4 *Polimnia*: The Project in a Nutshell

By adopting a fresh approach to *Opera Lirica*,[26] the *Polimnia* project aims to enhance public appreciation of Italy's cultural, artistic, and musical heritage, boosting its appeal and international recognition. This performative music production serves as a quintessential representation of Italy's national culture, artistic, and musical heritage. The approach to this musical repertoire is rooted in Community Opera, an innovative *style* of opera. Emerging from the UK and developed in many Countries around the World, Community Opera is a way of understanding opera production from an inclusive, co-constructivist perspective, with cultural growth and social change at the heart of the project. The socio-cultural phenomenon of 'Opera for all' is more evident in Italy than in other countries of the world,[27] so much so that it has led numerous recent studies to search for its causes. Among these, the modest knowledge of music and the opera form on the part of Italian society emerges, a deficit traced to the Italian educational system. For these reasons, opera tends to be considered an outdated art form, far removed from the artistic-musical experiences of young people, who see it as a niche, elite spectacle, too expensive and difficult to understand. The *Polimnia* project aims to intervene in two ways. Firstly, with action-research on the aspects of analysis and knowledge of Opera, analysing the different angles that make it a rich musical product from multiple perspectives. Secondly, to offer innovative 'facilitating' tools that develop the education of the public through 'doing' and 'co-constructing', enabling individuals to become 'actors and protagonists' of the opera experience.

The project implements a range of actions tailored to each partner venue, with a focus on acknowledging productions by local composers and repertoires specific to the areas where the different performers are based. The selected repertoire will include lesser-known works, rarely staged pieces, and new compositions by

26 *Opera lirica* is the Italian term for lyric opera or simply opera. It refers to a dramatic stage work that combines singing, orchestral music, and often acting, scenery, and costumes to tell a story usually with emotional or dramatic themes.

27 Di Giovanni/Luchetti/Turrini/Raffi 2022.

contemporary authors. The repertoire will be adapted or created to suit the various contexts through transcription, elaboration, arrangement and composition, reduction, historical-musicological and pedagogical-social analysis, literary and historical-linguistic analysis and application and reinterpretation of the present and the past. These actions will promote the rediscovery of historical archives, of others that have not yet been comprehensively catalogued and digitised and are therefore not easily accessible, providing unique opportunities to bring to light and share Italy's extremely rich musical and artistic heritage. The implementation of the Italian model will be based on its adaptability to diverse international contexts, leveraging cross-pollination and customization while fostering collaborations to strengthen ties with institutions and organizations active in the respective field.

The *Polimnia* project constitutes an innovative tool for comprehension and aesthetic fruition of opera, with the aim of strengthening the collaboration between Artistic Institutional partners (AFAM), researchers (MUR), performance venues and communities from an international perspective. The project, promoted by the Italian Ministry of Education, was prompted by an idea of the author of this text to meet the need for more networking among Italian Conservatories and Universities. These had suffered for many years from an institutional division between theory (entrusted to universities) and practice (entrusted to conservatories). Another important goal was to incentivise Conservatories to promote internationalisation activities, both from the standpoint of cultural exchanges such as those of the Erasmus project, which traditionally experience little take-up from Conservatory students, as well as from the standpoint of music productions. These were accompanied by another important objective from my own experience. I have repeatedly witnessed how the enjoyment of opera in Italy has increasingly become the domain of adults and the elderly, while it is much less appreciated by younger generations.

The initiative – which was started in April 2024 and will close in April 2026 – has thus offered an opportunity to rethink opera, as an historical musical production from the distant past that becomes relevant again through the co-construction of a shared and participatory experience. This takes place also on an intercultural and intergenerational level, through networking with the different institutions of the partner cities involved.

Polimnia is based on specific targets. Firstly, the enhancement of the Italian cultural heritage of opera, increasing its appeal for young people, comprehension and aesthetic pleasure, from a perspective of inclusion, training and education, according to the principles of the international model of Community Opera. This approach is important because it reframes opera as a participatory and socially relevant art form, capable of fostering cultural citizenship, collective identity, and intergenerational dialogue. This integration of artistic practice with educational

and community engagement contributes to the democratization of cultural access and the development of transversal skills.[28] Another equally important focus is to shed light upon new aspects of opera such as repertoire, interpreting, arranging, transcription, analysis – including the linguistic and textual processes involved in artistic-musical products that have not yet received attention or have never been staged. The aim is to deepen understanding and appreciation of Italy's rich musical heritage. By emphasizing the investigation of unexplored or previously unstaged operatic works through diverse methodological lenses, the project advocates for a holistic and interdisciplinary approach to music heritage. Such an agenda aligns with broader scholarly efforts to decentralize the canon and to re-evaluate the margins of operatic production, often shaped by historical, socio-political, and institutional forces. Moreover, the focus on 'artistic-musical products' not yet brought to scholarly or performative light speaks to a growing recognition of the vast, and often neglected, corpus that lies beyond the established operatic canon. This approach can contribute significantly not only to the expansion of academic discourse, but also to the enrichment of contemporary performance practices and cultural identity. The explicit goal of increasing knowledge of the national musical heritage further situates this research within heritage studies and cultural policy frameworks, where reclaiming and revitalizing neglected repertoires can serve both academic inquiry and public engagement.

A further core objective of *Polimnia* is the revival of opera through critical reflection on the modernity of its musical language and the dramaturgical structures envisioned by the composer. Equally important is the opportunity offered to communities to engage with the complexities inherent in interpreting an unpublished autograph manuscript, which constitutes a further core objective of the *Polimnia* project. The initiative aspires to reframe musical theatre as a living, accessible, and collectively experienced art form, capable of engaging diverse audiences through participatory methodologies, multimedia instruments, and innovative educational practices.

In addition to promoting the accessibility of opera for all – by staging and experiencing new operatic works – the project also aims to design and implement a multimedia platform capable of engaging younger generations, educators, musicians, and artists from the fields of music, the arts, and the humanities, thereby fostering a deeper connection with musical theatre. The project further seeks to cultivate skills relevant to future employment prospects and to develop internationally coordinated responses through digital transformation – a process which, by its very nature, transcends borders and operates on a global scale. In close alignment with these objectives, the project envisions the creation of several key outputs.

28 Gross/Wilson 2020.

Most significant is the development of a highly participatory Opera Model, inspired by the international Community Opera framework, designed to facilitate broad accessibility and understanding through a co-creative and inclusive approach. In particular, the project aims to develop a highly participative Opera Model, based on the international model of Community Opera, aimed at facilitating widespread access and understanding, because it is co-constructed with the local community with the different professional skills, resources and specificities of the local area, and based on the use and re-use of repertoires, places, spaces and infrastructures not currently utilized for these purposes.

Connected to this, another important output expected is the implementation of Internationalisation actions through the export of the model to other countries. The aim of this is to develop international mobility experiences for students, teachers and musical productions, to encourage exchanges, cross-pollination and adaptations of the Italian model in different contexts, through the dense international network of related partners. Another expected output is the creation of an innovative educational model to introduce children to opera by apps and new digital resources. The objective is to create an innovative educational model for Italy to train new professional profiles in the arts and music with a high socio-cultural impact on the local community.

Overall, the project aims to foster greater awareness and appreciation of Italy's cultural and musical heritage. It also seeks to develop a participatory artistic-performative model that supports internationalisation and encourages the involvement of a more musically educated and engaged public.

5 Community Opera and Lifelong Learning: A *Suite* for All!

The concept of Community Opera is grounded in the co-creation process between professional artists and community members, with the aim of producing operatic works that reflect local stories, cultures, and realities. This approach not only enriches the operatic repertoire but also fosters active citizen participation, promoting a sense of belonging and shared cultural identity. Initiatives like those undertaken by the theatrical company *L'Albero*, through the Community Opera format, have demonstrated how opera can serve as a powerful tool for social inclusion and cultural innovation. Projects such as *Silent City* and *Carmen and the Other Extraordinary Girls*, co-created in Matera in 2020, are concrete examples of how opera can address relevant social themes and also serve as a significant instrument for social

development within a lifelong learning, life deep, and life wide perspective, actively involving the entire community in an artistic creation process capable of triggering mechanisms of co-construction and personal life project development.[29] The promotion and development of lifelong learning, based on aspects of reciprocal learning, significantly impact the growth of social capital. Indeed, Community Opera experiences constitute a powerful tool for collaborative opera creation, contributing to the establishment of strong bonds among community members and strengthening the sense of belonging and solidarity. Active participation enables individuals to develop social skills such as teamwork, negotiation, and conflict management – competencies that are now considered indispensable in citizen education, and fundamental for social and professional life. Additionally, the potential for developing a training programme (and performative) model capable of promoting new professional figures in the specialized artistic-musical field (community artist and community musician) should not be overlooked. These profiles are capable of integrating innovatively, sustainably, and in line with international work perspectives in this field.

In the *Polimnia* project, the Community Opera experience found a well-defined space, embraced as a means to engage diverse communities, promote social inclusion, and facilitate educational opportunities throughout life. As previously noted, the concept of Community Opera emphasizes collective participation, collaboration, and the integration of local cultural elements, also assuming a new role as a powerful tool to promote lifelong learning (LLL). Indeed, experiences within the project by IUL University strongly highlight how Community Opera can be utilized as an educational tool, examining its potential to enhance personal growth, stimulate collective creativity, and contribute to lifelong skill development.[30]

Preliminary studies leading to the action-research experience conducted by some project partners revealed that through a participatory approach – where community members are not merely spectators but co-creators – shared learning processes can be established that go beyond mere musical performance. Participants, in an intergenerational perspective,[31] have the opportunity to engage with music, singing, set design, and dramaturgy actively and engagingly. Each individual becomes a protagonist in the creative process, contributing their experiences and

29 External partnerships of the *Polimnia* project include: RESEO (European Network for Opera, Music and Dance Education); LA Opera Connects (Los Angeles, USA); Center for Community Music, University of St. John, York (UK); and More Music. Among recent relevant initiatives: Community Opera projects run by Opera North, English National Opera, Opera Holland Park and Glyndebourne (UK); L'Albero Association, Silent City (Matera 2020, Italy); and Bridging the Gap, University of Bolzano.

30 Coppi 2020.

31 Coppi 2020.

perspectives to the realization of a work that carries significant symbolic and community value.

Regarding the concept of Lifelong Learning, it is important to remember that lifelong education is based on the idea that learning should not cease at the end of the school cycle but should continue throughout life.[32] Community Opera naturally fosters this approach, creating an environment where every person, regardless of age or cultural background, has the opportunity to learn and grow from shared experience. In particular, this learning model offers opportunities for the development of multidisciplinary learning, as participating in a Community Opera involves individuals in activities ranging from performing music to acting, set design to writing, and all the generative aspects that characterize a complex performative production like opera. This stimulates the acquisition of non-cognitive and transversal skills, enriching the individual through the interaction of different artistic languages and allowing the development of new expressive modes, fostering creative and critical thinking.

Furthermore, the access to culture for all, offered by Community Opera practices, challenges the cultural and social barriers that traditionally separate opera from the general public. By including individuals from diverse backgrounds, this form of opera contributes to the democratization of culture but also increasing cultural democracy through increased ownership and cultural agency in participatory processes, making art an experience accessible and understandable to all. In this way, it introduces educational interventions capable of countering the tendency to perceive opera as an art form distant from daily concerns, thus promoting an inclusive and open cultural education.

Finally, within a Lifelong Learning perspective, Community Opera practices are an effective tool for stimulating collective creativity. The collaborative aspect of Community Opera encourages collective creativity, countering the individualistic view of art. Community Opera promotes a shared creative process, inviting participants to contribute their ideas, collaborate, and experiment, engaging their creativity in a learning context that stimulates reflection and innovation. Naturally, the opportunities related to the educational-musical perspective should not be overlooked, offering a new way to approach "art music", understanding its structure and forms. Such competence becomes lifelong learning when participants are aware that they can apply the new knowledge and skills acquired to other musical productions, perhaps from the past, enabling them to understand and appreciate their aesthetic value.

32 Dozza/Ulivieri 2016.

In this dimension, the *Polimnia* project aimed to create a new opportunity for developing the musical potential of opera, also bringing young people closer to operatic culture – a form of art that risks remaining confined to an adult audience or a niche of enthusiasts. Through structured educational pathways, which include practical-theoretical training moments, the experiences of various partners connected to Community Opera have served as a catalyst for renewed interest in the operatic repertoire, providing tools to understand works from musical, historical, and cultural perspectives.

In an innovative perspective, the production techniques inherent in Community Opera are also noteworthy. Using technology such as apps and digital resources helps reach a broader audience, adapting the educational experience to the needs of different groups. The use of online platforms, video tutorials, and interactive applications can facilitate access to musical and theatrical learning, creating new ways to experience culture and art. Moreover, the use of technology has proven to be a tool that promotes inclusivity, allowing even people with disabilities or from remote contexts to participate remotely. Therefore, Community Opera can be seen as a dynamic model of cultural education that leverages technology to achieve inclusion and accessibility goals. Within the partnership actions of the project, the work carried out by the Conservatory of Pescara stands out in this dimension, dedicated to developing an educational path on opera aimed at developing children's musical skills and knowledge of the repertoire in Italy through a new app designed inclusively, with the aim of creating an educational journey for opera knowledge.

6 Conclusions

Polimnia, as previously outlined, is grounded in robust musical, musicological, and educational foundations rooted in the experiences of Community Music and Community Opera. The partnership has provided a valuable opportunity for the exchange and connection of best practices, elements that contribute to the project's distinctive identity and uniqueness. The international collaboration has fostered an interdisciplinary perspective on the research subject, generating the interest of numerous international institutions, which in turn have proposed new opportunities for exchange and indicated additional pathways for investigation

and in-depth study.[33] These relationships, and the use of unexplored repertoires represent a significant opportunity to export an Italian model beyond national borders: internationalization, supported by the widespread dissemination of global communication enabled by digital technologies, renders the project's mission both thematically innovative and timely a direction that contemporary cultural promotion can no longer afford to overlook. Alongside these outcomes, the project foresees the establishment of an innovative national network on the subject, capable of interfacing with leading international networks and of facilitating the dissemination of a performative-educational model aimed at social change, supported by digital technologies.

These actions are designed to refresh and innovate the central theme explored through the project's action-research framework. They serve as a strategic lever for promoting Italian cultural heritage internationally, within a broader context of lifelong learning for all participants. The diverse clusters developed through project partnerships will, in the future, offer new opportunities to leverage technology for training, education, artistic production, and cultural dissemination. This complex and multifaceted model places strong emphasis on human relationships – an essential dimension that the project actively fosters and enhances. These relationships, built through collaboration among professionals from varied backgrounds, transcend social and cultural boundaries, transforming shared processes and outcomes into collective heritage.

Within this framework, *Polimnia. Opera for All!* has established a new environment in which every artistic potential may be expressed – through mutual sharing and learning drawn from the experiences, professionalism, competences, and artistic sensibilities of all those who, in various capacities, collaborate across the multitude of actions envisaged by the project. These actions build valuable human capital that enriches the quality of every artistic and performative endeavour, fostering both individual and social growth within our country.

33 Here we refer to previous research carried out by scholars at the University of Waterloo (Canada), York, (UK), NYU (USA), who report important references and analysis. Certainly, we imagine that those collected by the *Polimnia* Project may offer a new path of inquiry.

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