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A Collection of Italian Opera Libretti in the Syracuse University Libraries

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EDISON RECORD LABEL

From the Syracuse University Audio Archive and Re-recording Laboratory

THE COURIER

SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY LIBRARY ASSOCIATES

VOLUME XIV, 1 & 2

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A Collection of Italian Opera Libretti in the Syracuse University Libraries

by Aubrey S. Garlington, Jr.

The opera libretto and librettist alike enjoy an unenviable reputation among both scholars and opera-lovers. When an opera is a success, it is the composer who gains the credit; occasionally, the music is praised for being able to overcome the libretto's shortcomings. When an opera is a failure, however, it is the librettist more often than not who receives the lion's share of the blame for having caused the composer to err. Such composers as Giuseppe Verdi and Richard Strauss were fortunate in having, on occasion, some of the best poets of their time as collaborators, Arrigo Boito and Hugo von Hoffmanstahl, respectively. Richard Wagner wrote his own poetry thereby avoiding such tensions as must exist between poet and composer.

As a rule literary historians and critics have also very nearly unanimously ignored the librettist as a creative intelligence and the libretto as a literary genre. When outstanding poet-dramatists write a libretto, such as the work W.H. Auden and Charles Kallmann did for Igor Stravinsky and Hans Werner Henze, their work may be respected but not necessarily considered quite up to the standards of their "serious" writing. Thus, the libretto and librettist are seen as but necessary evils insofar as the worlds of letters and opera are concerned.

Dr. Aubrey S. Garlington, Jr. is an associate professor in the Department of Fine Arts, Syracuse University. This article is adapted from his introduction to *Sources for the Study of Nineteenth-Century Italian Opera in the Syracuse University Libraries—An Annotated Libretto List* issued in typescript format by the Syracuse University Libraries in 1977.

Dr. Donald Kibby, vice-president for Research and Graduate Affairs at Syracuse University, Mr. Metod Milac, assistant director for Collections at the Syracuse University Libraries, Mr. Donald Seibert, head of the Fine Arts division of the libraries, and Dorcas MacDonald, head, Inter-Library Loan division, provided supplies, maintenance, space, encouragement, advice, support, and invaluable assistance to the author in preparing the libretto list. Without them the collection could not have been catalogued. The library administration made funds available to support two student assistants, Jane Kropa and Margot Fassler, who worked conscientiously on a variety of assignments.

Such was not always the case. Pietro Metastasio was universally acclaimed as the greatest Italian poet and dramatist of the eighteenth century; his "drammas per musica" were set countless times by innumerable composers. One can search in vain in Lorenzo de Ponte's memoirs for a detailed critical appraisal and appreciation of W. A. Mozart with whom he collaborated. Such will not be found, however, because while Mozart's star fell in the years immediately following his death, da Ponte maintained a high regard for his own significance. As adulation for the composer has increased since the beginning of the nineteenth century, respect for the librettist has fallen. It is only in such modern studies as Patrick Smith's book, *The Tenth Muse; A Historical Study of the Opera Libretto* (New York, A.A. Knopf, 1970), that the tides appear to be turning. Like it or not, the librettist is fundamental to the opera; without a libretto, in fact, there can be no opera, and it is time that we began to come to grips with the unique role of librettist and libretto in the creation of the opera. The rare times when the composer is his own successful librettist are so few that they are the exceptions which prove the rule.

Scholars have long demonstrated another kind of bias with respect to the opera libretto. There is a tradition in musicology which recognizes the importance of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century libretto for the study of opera. Materials since then have been slighted because musicology was concerned with older music and not that which was new and "modern" at the time musicology became an academic discipline in the last century. Thus, the great opera libretto collections found in various libraries in the United States and Europe may have printed catalogues of their pre-1800 materials but no indication at all of their post-1800 holdings. Such is in keeping with the long accepted norms of musicological scholarship, and the cutoff date is, of course, in keeping with standard bibliographic practice as well. The situation is changing, however, and opera historians especially are beginning to be more and more interested in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century opera. With this interest in more modern materials, there has come an increased awareness of the significance of the nineteenth-century opera libretto. There is also a greater interest than ever before in opera libretto collections, especially those pertinent for nineteenth-century materials.

Syracuse University is fortunate to have a valuable collection of Italian opera libretti housed in the George Arents Research Library for Special Collections. Thanks to the imagination and dedication of Wayne Yenawine, then director of the Syracuse University Libraries and dean of the School of Library Science, this collection was purchased from the firm of Broude Brothers, New York City, in 1962. The collection is almost entirely devoted to nineteenth-century materials. There is one seventeenth-century item, a few eighteenth-century libretti, and some libretti dating from the first two decades of the twentieth century. The collection includes not only original dramas intended for Italian composers, but also translations into Italian from French, German, Spanish, Russian, and English.

LE FINTE RIVALI

DRAMMA GIOCOSO PER MUSICA

DA RAPPRESENTARSI

NELL' IMPERIAL TEATRO

DI VIA DELLA PERGOLA

LA PRIMAVERA DEL 1813.

SOTTO LA PROTEZIONE

DI SUA MAESTA'

NAPOLEONE I.

IMPERATORE DEI FRANCESI

RE D'ITALIA

E PROTETTORE DELLA CONFEDERAZIONE
DEL RENO.

Romanelli



FIRENZE

PER GIUSEPPE FANTOSINI E FIGLIO.

Napoleon was in Florence only once, in 1796. After he took over Tuscany and incorporated the grand duchy into metropolitan France in 1808, his name and titles appear on almost every libretto until his downfall in 1814. The signature may be that of Luigi Romanelli, the librettist. The composer was Simone Mayr, one of the most popular of opera composers in the early nineteenth century. Mayr was born in Bavaria but spent the greater part of his life in Italy, residing in Bergamo. Donizetti was his pupil. The Syracuse University collection contains fourteen libretti for Mayr operas and thirteen libretti by Romanelli.

Lacunae in university correspondence files do not permit identification of the original collector. (Broude Brothers has also indicated it can find no record of either the original collector or the agent through which they acquired the collection.) That the collector was from Tuscany and more likely than not a Florentine is a deduction based on the collection itself. The original collector had little interest in Venetian and Roman opera, but he had spent time in the Marches and had connections in Milan and Turin to judge from the materials at hand. That he was a “true” Florentine seems likely since in the entire collection there is only one libretto from Siena, Florence’s long-standing traditional rival. In fact, a major strength of the Syracuse University collection lies in the three hundred fifty libretti with verifiable Florentine performances and in the three hundred twenty-nine libretti published by different firms in Florence. (Often, there is no indication that a performance in Florence is related to a libretto published specifically by a Florentine printer; hence the discrepancy in the numbers cited.)

There were 1369 items in the original collection when it arrived at Syracuse. When it became apparent that an annotated catalogue of these materials would be of value — there is to date no annotated general listing of nineteenth-century opera libretti — some of the items were removed because they were not opera libretti at all. Placed in the general collection, these materials were tracts, pamphlets, essays on miscellaneous subjects, etc., pertaining to other fields. In turn, a few nineteenth-century libretti already in the university’s uncatalogued reserves were considered important enough to be added to the libretti collection. Thus, there are now 1349 items in the Syracuse University opera libretto collection.

As the collection was reorganized and examined, an unexpected dividend came to light, the presence of the ballet libretto. The nineteenth century is one of the great eras in the history of the dance. Ballets were often scheduled for performance with specific operas during a given season. Sometimes these ballets were given a libretto of their own, bound either integrally with the opera libretto or gathered into the libretto at hand. Varying amounts of information with respect to personnel, plot synopsis, introductory essays, scenic descriptions, etc. were included. There are 109 such ballet libretti in our collection, and these should prove of inestimable value in future research.

Of the 1349 items in the collection, 1300 turn out to be opera libretti proper; the remainder is a fascinating miscellany of full scale ballet libretti (separate from opera performance), oratorio and cantata texts, occasional pieces for ceremonial occasions, etc. We can account for libretti written by 590 librettists related in turn to operas by 435 composers. This discrepancy can be explained by noting that librettists often worked in teams, especially insofar as translation is concerned, while composers almost never collaborate. (The situation is somewhat analogous to that of the modern Broadway musical where a number of people collaborate on the book while generally

A MA Z I L I A ,
DRAMMA PER MUSICA IN UN ATTO ,
Rappresentato la prima volta in Napoli
NEL REAL TEATRO DI S. CARLO
al 6 Luglio 1825
RICORRENDO IL FAUSTO GIORNO NATALIZIO
D I
S U A M A E S T A'
MARIA ISABELLA
REGINA DEL REGNO DELLE DUE SICILIE.

Pacini



N A P O L I ,
DALLA TIPOGRAFIA FLAUTINA
1825.

This libretto title page is an example of the specially printed libretto designed for the important occasion, in this case, the birthday of the reigning queen. Giovanni Pacini was the composer, the librettist, Giovanni Schmidt, a poet attached to the royal theatres in Naples. This opera is one of several dating from the early nineteenth century which calls for Florida as the locale.

speaking only one or two work on the music.) It is worth noting that not all librettists and composers represented in the collection can be identified at the present. Contrary to popular expectation, neither the librettist nor the composer will always be listed in the specific libretto. Names of singers, hair dressers, stage directors, dancers, orchestral musicians, scenic designers, painters, copyists, and the like, can be found in great profusion, but one can often search in vain for the names of the two most important creators involved in the opera. Identification of composer and librettist must be made in many cases from sources outside the libretto. To date research has not supplied all the necessary names.

The major Italian composers in the nineteenth century—Rossini, Bellini, Donizetti, and Verdi—are well represented in the collection. Yet, the bulk of the material belongs to the many libretti prepared for minor composers still largely unnoticed in modern research, i.e., Nasolini, Generali, Mabellini, Coccia, Petrella, Pacini, and Poniatowski, to cite but a few. Distinguished Italian dramatists and poets are also well represented, and there is a good cross section of libretti prepared by such important writers as Felice Romani, F. M. Piave, Arrigo Boito, and Antonio Ghislanzoni. The major part of the collection belongs to the minor writers of nineteenth-century Italy, largely ignored in modern times.

Although the S.U. collection is modest in size when compared with other major libretto collections in the United States, it is representative enough to be of significance. Undoubtedly, there are items in our collection which will not be found elsewhere. For example, the music library of the University of California, Berkeley, houses a collection of approximately forty-four hundred Italian libretti, plus another nine hundred libretti of Sicilian provenance. (Our Tuscan collector barely glances towards Sicily.) On checking our holdings against the California collection as catalogued by Denis Dufalla, *A Collection of Italian Libretti, Title-Index* (computer print-out prepared by the University of California), it was found that approximately 204 items in the Syracuse University collection are not at Berkeley. In addition, there are approximately 350 variants between the two collections. (*Variant* refers to differences in dating, place of publication, place of performance, title, librettist, and composer.)

The University of Texas, Austin, houses the Krauss Italian Libretto Collection in the Ransome Humanities Research Center. This collection is made up of 3800 items, of which 2737 pertain to nineteenth-century practice. Personnel at the University of Texas graciously supplied a microfilm of the typescript catalogue for the years 1790-1900 which arrived, alas, too late for integration into the catalogue of the Syracuse University collection. A preliminary check, however, of the first 100 entries in the Syracuse catalogue with the holdings in Austin revealed 41 items in Syracuse which are not found in Austin, 24 held in common, two variants, plus 33 items not verifiable due to differences in cataloguing procedures and arrangement of

EZECHIA

DRAMMA SACRO

POSTO IN MUSICA

DAL MAESTRO ERMANNO PICCHI

ed eseguito la seconda volta

NELLA CHIESA DI S. GIOVANNI EVANGELISTA

ALLE SCUOLE PIE

il dì '19, 20 21 Febbraio 1871

DALLA CONGREGAZIONE

DI MARIA SS. ADDOLORATA E S. GIUSEPPE CALASANZIO

preseduta dall' Illustrissimo e Reverendissimo Sig. Canonico

CONTE FERDINANDO CAPPONI.



FIRENZE

TIPOGRAFIA CALASANZIANA

dir. da A. Ferroni

1871.

San Giuseppe Calasanzio was the father-founder of the Scolopian order which took over the Church of San Giovanni Evangelista in Florence, generally known now as San Giovannino, from the Jesuits following the expulsion of that order in the late eighteenth century. The Society of Santissima Maria Addolorata is a Florentine foundation dating from the thirteenth century and commonly known as Servites. A joint celebration of these two religious orders was often held just before Lent and was presided over by a distinguished Florentine, layman or priest, from an ancient family. The Syracuse University libretto collection contains sixteen libretti for sacred dramas performed under these circumstances in this particular church.

CRISTOFORO COLOMBO

156.



DRAMMA LIRICO

di

LUIGI ILLICA

Musica

di

ALBERTO

FRANCHETTI



G. RICORDI & C.
EDITORI

(PRINTED IN ITALY)

Cristoforo Colombo was first produced in Genoa in 1892 in honor of the four hundredth anniversary of Columbus's discovery of the new world; this is the cover of the revised edition of the libretto. Luigi Illica was a well-known librettist who worked with Puccini on *Manon Lescaut*, *Madama Butterfly*, *Tosca*, and *La Bohème*. His dramas were also used by such composers as Mascagna, Cilea, and Smareglia.

materials. While the percentage of items *not* held in common would undoubtedly diminish in a final accounting, there would seem to be a significant number of libretti indigenous to each collection; thus, each collection, regardless of size, is important for research purposes.

This is an important consideration to keep in mind because the history of opera is inextricably connected to problems and issues related to different kinds of performances. Often the production of the same opera in the same season will differ radically from city to city. Arias and ensembles will be altered; some will be deleted, others added. Changes in plot will be effected, etc. Before certain key issues relating to the history of opera can be explored, modern scholars need to be aware of every libretto used in a specific place for each particular performance. Comparative studies of libretti will prove invaluable in the future.

Around the middle of the nineteenth century the practice of printing a specific libretto for a specific occasion was replaced by the use of the general, commercial libretto, useful for all times and all performances. Thus, a degree of standardization for the text, unknown in previous eras, became the order of the day, and it is interesting to note the differences which occur between the standardized text and those libretti still printed for special occasions. The Syracuse University collection contains many examples of all such practices which will prove useful in future studies.

The libretti in our collection are quite varied. Some are very elaborate with respect to the amounts of information conveyed. It is not unusual to find extensive introductory essays discussing historical and esthetic matters. Occasionally, one is surprised to find copious footnotes justifying the dramatist's choice of plot situations and text. The already noted lists of performers and production staff members give valuable clues as to the nature of a given performance in a specific theatre. Scenic descriptions may also be extensive and are fascinating in that we are able to recapture how another age conceived of place as an exotic locale or understood a given historical circumstance. On occasion, there may be a few musical examples or illustrations, but these are rare.

Some of the libretti are elegantly printed, handsome in appearance; many of the later nineteenth-century libretti have somewhat lurid covers more appropriate for substandard literary fare. Title pages convey a wealth of information pertaining to ruling authorities, theatres, dedications, etc. Most of the libretti, however, are of humble provenance, printed on poor quality paper which requires careful handling. In many cases, libretti for certain known performances have not survived simply because they must have disintegrated from handling. Almost all the libretti in the Syracuse University collection were intended for use, and used they were in the theatre and out, before, during, and after a particular performance. We often forget that an audience understanding a sung language and capable of refreshing its memory with respect to the words used will have a greater understanding of the

complete opera than those of us who must depend upon synopses or translations to learn all there is to know about the opera.

More often than not, the libretto is small enough to be pocketed without inconvenience. Only the elegant productions for important occasions are too bulky to be overlooked. And the libretto was also cheap enough to be discarded without second thought once its function had been served. Oftentimes pencilled annotations will be found making corrections in the cast lists, correcting spelling, and noting changes in the text. Such activity serves to remind us of how seriously some people took their opera-going and how useful the libretto was to them.

In fact, there is a wealth of information in the libretti pertinent for social and cultural historians to say nothing of the musicologist whose speciality is the history of opera. The history of the ballet in the nineteenth century, especially in Italy, is a rich vein of materials yet to be exhaustively mined. The Syracuse University collection will prove to be a valuable resource for different kinds of research, and we are fortunate to have such material in the university's collection.