

POSTLUDE

Operetta and the Meanings of Nowhere

Arman Schwartz 

University of Notre Dame, USA
Email: aschwar3@nd.edu

Slightly over a decade ago, as part of a special issue of this journal devoted to twentieth-century Italian opera, I published an article that began by asking ‘What happened to *verismo*?’¹ The answer, somewhat in the manner of its time, involved apparitions, ghostly echoes and the uncanny magic of wireless technology. This current issue of the *Cambridge Opera Journal* – which, needless to say, focuses on repertoire undiscussed and largely unknown back in 2012 – provides a rather different response to the question, suggesting that, in the years around the First World War, the aggressive materiality of operatic realism instead gave way to the even more visceral and immediate pleasures of Italian operetta. As Marco Ladd and Ditlev Rindom observe in their introduction, the leading lights of the *verismo* movement all went on to embrace the new genre: Pietro Mascagni with *Sì* (1919), a work that in fact begins with a distinctly *un*-uncanny chorus of telegraph operators; Umberto Giordano with *Giove a Pompei* (1921); and above all Ruggero Leoncavallo, author of *Prestami tua moglie* (1916) and *A chi la giarrettiera?* (1919), as well as many other less-memorably titled entertainments for audiences in Italy, New York and London. The Sonzogno publishing house followed its operatic *concorso* of 1888, which famously introduced *Cavalleria rusticana* to the world, with a similarly conceived operetta contest in 1913. In this context, Giacomo Puccini’s embrace of ‘Silver Age’ conventions in *La rondine* (1917), a work whose generic fuzziness has long puzzled listeners, may seem less an outlier than an acknowledgement of larger shifts in taste and value.²

A sense of continuity or, perhaps more accurately, of movement between the seemingly distinct cultural worlds of ‘opera’ and ‘operetta’ may thus be one of the more valuable lessons to be learnt by reading the articles in this issue. The specific forms of circulation described in the preceding pages – which, to be clear, involved not just composers, but performers, directors and librettists, as well as the shared ‘infrastructure’ of publishing houses and theatrical venues – also suggest that the study of Italian operetta poses different challenges, and does different historiographical work, than that of its more familiar Viennese counterpart. For example, in her important monograph *The Operetta Empire*, Micaela Baranello invites musicologists ‘to move beyond the conventional view of Vienna as a modernist “temple of

¹ See Arman Schwartz, ‘Puccini, in the Distance’, *Cambridge Opera Journal* 23/3 (2011), 167–89, at 167. The double issue, guest-edited by Roger Parker, was published as 23/3 and 24/2.

² See Micaela Baranello, ‘The Swallow and the Lark: *La rondine* and Viennese Operetta’, in *Giacomo Puccini and His World*, ed. Arman Schwartz and Emanuele Senici (Princeton, 2016), 111–32.

art” to consider wider audiences and works usually deemed aesthetically disposable’.³ She aims to take seriously a repertoire effaced by the mythology of ‘*fin-de-siècle* Vienna’, that is to say, not to call attention to the forgotten sex comedies of Alban Berg or Gustav Mahler.⁴

In contrast, the contributors to this issue delight, as do the plots of many Italian operettas themselves, in often surprising juxtapositions. Ladd reads Carlo Lombardo and Virgilio Ranzato’s Orientalist fantasy *Cin-ci-là* (Parisian showgirl upends a tradition-bound community’s rigid sexual mores, 1925) alongside Puccini’s *Turandot*; Rindom presents Lombardo and Mario Costa’s *Scugnizza* (wealthy American melancholic encounters spirited Neapolitan street urchin, 1922) as a counterweight to spectacularised images of the Italian south propagated by *verismo* works. Similarly, it is tempting to ask how Elena Oliva’s richly detailed discussion of *Li Maganzesi a Roma* (1888), a Roman dialect comedy in which ‘a clash between republicans and papists ... forms the backdrop against which legendary figures with farcical features appear in the most popular places in the city’, might prompt us to reconsider the hyper-realistic pathos of Puccini’s *Tosca*. There is, admittedly, an element of risk in this approach – an implication that Italian operetta is interesting precisely because the fascination of Italian opera is so well established. At the same time, all the articles in this issue demonstrate that taking Italian operetta seriously requires thinking seriously about its engagement with a host of *other* genres and traditions, from vernacular poetic improvisation and Neapolitan song to jazz and silent cinema. Operetta, in its very in-betweenness, might thus spur us to imagine a portrait of the musical culture of post-Unification Italy focused less on opera than on what the editors call, in reference to the capacious interests of no less a figure than Antonio Gramsci, ‘theatre in the broadest sense’.

This is not to say that navigating the relationship between different genres (and, by extension, the relationship between the competing gendered, class-based, regional, national and racial identities that informed those genres) was ever easy. Indeed, although it has become common to speak of a ‘Puccini problem’ in *fin-de-siècle* Italy – an anxiety about mediating between ‘high’ and ‘low’, cosmopolitan modernity and national tradition – this issue suggests that it might be more accurate to diagnose a ‘Mascagni problem’.⁵ No composer, and certainly no non-Italian composer, of his generation careened between a wider range of styles and genres: *verismo* and symbolism, *commedia dell’arte* and D’Annunzianism, operetta and silent film. Puccini, in contrast, seems unique in his ability to occupy a consistent, if hardly exalted, cultural terrain.

Perhaps the most surprising protagonist to emerge from these pages, though, is Mascagni’s patron, the publisher Edoardo Sonzogno. Alessandra Palidda emphasises the Milanese businessman’s extraordinary monopolistic rapacity, which gave rise to a music publishing empire so totalising that it produced its own paper, published its own newspapers (via a technology impressive enough to make the factory into a sort of tourist attraction), managed its own theatres, and of course commissioned many of the major operas and operettas of the era. The Casa musicale Sonzogno has no real precedent in the annals of theatrical history, and its closest analogue may be Hollywood cinema, or at least the nightmares of the Frankfurt school. Palidda’s article brings to mind a recent study by Gavin Williams that places Luigi Manzotti’s ballet *Excelsior* (1881) alongside Siegfried Kracauer’s subsequent theorisation of the ‘mass ornament’.⁶ Both Palidda and Williams situate late nineteenth-century Milan at the forefront of the modern culture industry – and they do so, significantly, by sidelining opera as a privileged mode of cultural production.

³ Micaela Baranello, *The Operetta Empire: Music Theater in Early Twentieth-Century Vienna* (Berkeley, 2021), 2.

⁴ See Baranello, *The Operetta Empire*, 4.

⁵ See Alexandra Wilson, *The Puccini Problem: Opera, Nationalism, and Modernity* (Cambridge, 2007).

⁶ See Gavin Williams, ‘Excelsior as Mass Ornament: The Reproduction of Gesture’, in *Nineteenth-Century Opera and the Scientific Imagination*, ed. David Trippett and Benjamin Walton (Cambridge, 2019), 251–68.

What sort of future is there for ‘Italian operetta studies’? Without a composer as familiar as Jacques Offenbach, or an advocate as enthusiastic as the director Barrie Kosky, the prospects may seem grim. Even Milan lacks the theoretical glamour that attaches itself so easily to operetta’s more familiar sites: Paris, Vienna and Berlin. At the same time, it may be worth recalling that, in one of the first articles to ask how we might take operetta (all operetta) seriously, Carolyn Abbate framed her challenge as an ethical project, calling for a mode of engagement she termed ‘insouciant attentiveness’.⁷ I detect a similarly comic rigour at work in Emanuele Senici’s article – all the more impressively given that his subject is, at root, the memory of fascism. Senici revels in the paradoxes and contradictions involved in broadcasting a season of operettas on Italian television in 1954–5, paying particular attention to a performance of *Die lustige Witwe* (translated as *La vedova allegra*) that brought together Jews, partisans and Nazis; old and new technologies; stars of bel canto, spoken comedy and the Darmstadt avant garde. In this account, operetta’s critical potential seems inseparable from its awkward untimeliness. It is significant, then, that Senici, uniquely among the contributors to this issue, also lingers on the meanings of Trieste, that ‘natural capital of nowhere’ poised perennially between empires, as if operetta’s true home is *unheimlich* after all.⁸

Arman Schwartz is an assistant professor in the Program of Liberal Studies at the University of Notre Dame. The former Executive Editor of *The Opera Quarterly*, he is the author of *Puccini’s Soundscapes: Realism and Modernity in Italian Opera* (Olschki, 2016) and co-editor, with Emanuele Senici, of *Giacomo Puccini and His World* (Princeton, 2016). *Sonic Circulations: Music, Modernism, and the Politics of Knowledge*, which he co-edited with Emily MacGregor and Emily I. Dolan, is forthcoming from the University of Pennsylvania Press.

⁷ See Carolyn Abbate, ‘Operetta, Kracauer, and Ethical Frivolity’, *The Opera Quarterly* 33/1 (2017), 62–86, at 83.

⁸ See Jan Morris, *Trieste and Meaning of Nowhere* (London, 2001), 179. ‘It is the nation of nowhere, and I have come to think that its natural capital is Trieste.’

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