

REVIEW ARTICLE

## National Opera in a Transnational Age

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Francesca Vella, *Networking Operatic Italy*. University of Chicago Press, 2021. 256pp.

Mary Ann Smart, *Waiting for Verdi: Opera and Political Opinion in Nineteenth-Century Italy, 1815–1848*. University of California Press, 2018. 266pp.

Emanuele Senici, *Music in the Present Tense: Rossini's Italian Operas in their Time*. University of Chicago Press, 2019. 352pp.

Nineteenth-century Italian opera scholars used to be the cool kids in town. During the 1990s, we swanned through annual meetings of the American Musicological Society, delighted that our field of study, long situated at the periphery of the discipline, was heading straight toward the centre. My decision to write a dissertation about Italian opera performers was not prompted by the siren song of potential trendiness; nevertheless, it was thrilling to be among the contributors to a collective effort that was perceived as being on the cutting edge, or at least as cutting edge as musicology could get at the time. It didn't hurt either that this endeavour entailed touching down in Italy every now and again for some of the best parties (ahem, I mean, conferences) ever convened. I know I am idealising the past, but these thoughts came rushing back to me in a rosy hue a few months ago when a colleague approached me with this whopper: 'Remember when nineteenth-century studies were hip? We're the old-fashioned ones now.' True, studies of Rossini, Donizetti, Bellini, Verdi and their contemporaries are no longer in the vanguard, but books by Emanuele Senici, Mary Ann Smart and Francesca Vella demonstrate that there is still a lot of life left in the world of nineteenth-century Italian opera studies. We're still very cool.

Collectively, these three authors cut a wide temporal path through the nineteenth century. Senici's *Music in the Present Tense: Rossini's Italian Operas in Their Time* is devoted primarily to the years between 1810 and 1825 when Rossini was writing and producing his operas in Italy. This decade and a half dovetailed neatly with the end of the Napoleonic era, a circumstance that takes centre stage in Senici's narrative. Smart's *Waiting for Verdi: Opera and Political Opinion in Nineteenth-Century Italy, 1815–1848* also places the upheaval, social transformations and political reorganisations of the post-Napoleonic era at centre stage, examining how opera served as a means of communication among Italian audiences, musicians and political figures at a time when Italy was inching towards unification. Vella's *Networking Operatic Italy* takes up where Smart leaves off, focusing on the years immediately preceding and following Italy's unification in 1861; her final chapter brings readers up through events occurring in 1872. Despite their slightly differing timeframes, all three authors pursue a set

of critical connections between operatic production and the dynamic era – one marked by political upheaval and cultural transformation – in which these works were composed, performed and adored.

Where all three books converge is in geographic focus: with only a few exceptions, their attention falls on opera in Italy, eschewing a broad transnational perspective. As Jonathan Hicks has noted in this journal, the world of opera scholarship has taken a decidedly transnational turn over the past decade, the attention of many books, edited collections and conferences falling on how and where opera became unmoored (think, for instance, of the now wildly popular tosc@X conferences, moving bi-annually from city to city).<sup>1</sup> By primarily staying put inside Italy, therefore, Senici, Smart and Vella are not quite going with the flow, as Hicks might describe it. And yet all three authors embrace the reality of opera's various movements beyond its origins, an approach that is perhaps most evident in *Networking Operatic Italy*, as its title subtly suggests.

Vella opens her monograph with a rumination on the distinction between local and national perspectives, challenging monolithic understandings of opera's formative role in the young Italian nation state. Her intent throughout the book is to 'show how idiosyncratic notions of place were simultaneously the driving forces and the by-products of operatic trends that differed from city to city' (2). She doubles down, in other words, not just on the local, but on the hyperlocal. At the same time, however, she stresses that it is limiting to maintain a parochial framework and instead advocates for a 'holistic approach' (2) that examines how different urban actors and agendas encountered one another – these are the 'networks' alluded to in the book's title. In each of her five chapters, Vella challenges the idea that Italians were only concerned with longstanding traditions. She provides alternative perspectives on culture before and after 1861 that were brought to life through technological advances in transportation and communication. These developments revolutionised spatial and temporal experiences both within and outside Italy, and in turn, directly affected the reception of and discourse surrounding operatic production.

In Chapter 1, 'Stagecrafting the City', for instance, Vella's focus falls on the rise of Florence to a position of artistic leadership, despite having spent most of the century playing second fiddle to Rome, Venice, Naples and Parma, all of which housed opera houses of greater stature and impact. The author illustrates that Florence's increasing status was achieved through its staging of Meyerbeer's grand operas at the Teatro della Pergola – specifically *Robert le diable* (1831), *Les Huguenots* (1836) and *Le prophète* (1849) – the first such productions in Italy. By importing these works, Florence broke through its previously unshakeable veneer of provincialism, opening itself up to an expanding network of European journalistic attention, and, in the 1852 production of *Il profeta*, demonstrating technological advances in lighting to all of Italy and beyond. Chapter 2, 'Funeral Entrainments', shifts attention to one musical work, the funeral march from Errico Petrella's *Jone* (1858), and the variety of contexts in which it was performed. As an extract from a larger work, Vella argues, this march was free to roam about on its own, serving as a vehicle for social and cultural expression by appealing to and resonating with diverse audiences throughout nineteenth-century Italy.

In Chapter 3, 'Global Voices', Vella shifts gears from operatic works to its singers, specifically Adelina Patti (1843–1919). This chapter is one of the few in all three books that takes a performative turn. As is well known, Patti's life and career spanned multiple nations and regions in which she, as well as many of her contemporaries, negotiated linguistic, national and cultural differences. Among other insights, Vella points to the uniqueness of Patti's voice: 'Absorbing and reproducing the sounds of different linguistic environments was the natural inclination of her voice [...] A vocal machine perpetually on the move, Patti

<sup>1</sup> 'Opera History, the Travel Edition', *Cambridge Opera Journal* 33/3 (2021), 173–83.

revealed the reproductive potential inherent in our vocal organs, something that can help us grasp how bel canto was (re)conceived in a globalizing age' (82). Chapter 4, '*Ito per Ferrovia*', explores mobility of a different sort, illustrating how the increasing buildup of railway arteries throughout Italy became a vital factor in creating a shared operatic culture both within and outside the country; and the book's concluding chapter, '*Aida, Media, and Temporal Politics, 1871–72*', investigates how Verdi's opera can be understood as a product of its historical and cultural moment in Italy, particularly in terms of how opera engages with issues of time, media and politics.

One of the elements of Vella's book that I found most persuasive is its eclectic approach and her ability to draw fascinating connections across seemingly distinct subjects. In *Waiting for Verdi*, Smart embraces a similarly wide-ranging style throughout its six chapters, each dedicated to exploring how various operatic works and the discourse that surrounded them played a role in the crystallisation of an Italian national sensibility. Whereas Vella's case studies touched here and there on questions of a political nature, Smart's monograph is dedicated entirely to exhuming clues about the role that musical production played in the many political conversations that wove their way through mid-nineteenth-century Italian culture. In doing so, she makes a compelling claim: that for music to be considered political 'it should be possible to demonstrate that it has affected some aspect of concrete reality'. In other words, 'the experience of hearing the music must have changed events in some fundamental way for listeners' (9). Each of her chapters approaches this premise from a different angle.

Smart's first case study explores the theatrical experiences among Italian intellectuals, impresarios, librettists and playwrights who participated in debates initiated by Madame de Staël about Italian theatre in 1816 and 1817 (Chapter 2, 'Accidental Affinities: Gioachino Rossini and Salvatore Viganò'). The conversations de Staël sparked produced a renewed interest in the country's past, generating a mentality that valued artworks 'for breaking the rules, for departing from the ideals of beauty and decorum, and for daring to depict characters and subjects less edifying than they were gripping or disturbing' (24). As the chapter's title suggests, Rossini and Viganò figure prominently in this discussion, both for their influence on one another and for how they each challenged dominant conventions of the time. Chapter 3, 'Elizabeth I, Mary Stuart, and the Limits of Allegory', cites more than a dozen operas set at the Tudor court that were written and performed during the first half of the nineteenth century, the most successful of which 'starred' Queen Elizabeth I. Overall, Smart argues that this Tudor operatic trend offers a new angle on the 'evolution of historicist consciousness in Italy and on the gradual eclipse of occasional works and political allegory in favor of a darker depiction of monarchy and life at court' (61). This shift, she concludes, corresponds with broader changes in Italian society, including a transition away from the 'bureaucratic monarchy' (94) and an increasing embrace of free-market forces within the art world.

The next two chapters represent the few moments across all three books where attention shifts away from Italy, albeit not fully. Smart's concern falls on the migration of Italian composers to Paris and how their experiences there impacted developments of opera within Italy. In Chapter 4, 'Reading Mazzini's "*Filosofia della musica*" with Byron and Donizetti', for instance, she emphasises the significance of exile, highlighting the role that popular rebellion and martyrdom played in operas such as Donizetti's *Anna Bolena* (1830) and *Marino Faliero* (1835). Chapter 5, 'Parlor Games', focuses on specific songs and scenes in operas by Bellini, Mercadante and Rossini, particularly the patriotic and political ones adapted into fodder for parlour games played in Parisian salons, describing how this music opened paths for political discussion and the expression of nationalistic views.

The book's final chapter, 'Progress, Piety, and Plagiarism: Verdi's *I Lombardi* at La Scala', returns to the operatic centre of Italy: Milan and the Teatro alla Scala. Here, Smart examines

how Verdi's portrayal of the Crusades resonated throughout contemporary debates about Italian identity in light of the philosophical vision promoted by Vincenzo Gioberti (1801–1852) for an Italian nation unified in the embrace of the church and under the leadership of the Pope. Through this analysis, she illustrates how Verdi's innovative musical language contributed to the emerging discourse of musical and artistic progress in mid-nineteenth-century Italy.

In a brief conclusion to the book, Smart speaks to her decision to end her discussion of opera and politics with *I Lombardi* (1843), a choice rooted in the fact that this opera is relatively free of the weight of myth and emotion attached to so many of Verdi's later works. As such, she maintains, it provides uncharted ground on which to explore political expression within operatic works. Interestingly, in offering a series of avenues for further research, she emphasises the importance that 'proper relations between word and melody' played in many of these discussions, noting that critics and philosophers were quick to censure Rossini for his many 'breaches of those relations' (182). These types of breaches, as well as many other issues surrounding Rossini's, are precisely the sort of phenomena that interest Senici in his book.

'The premise of *Music in the Present Tense*', Senici writes, is the existence of a 'wide gap between the popularity of Rossini's Italian operas when they first appeared on the stage and the scholarly and critical attention they have received over the past century' (1). The central question of this study, in other words, is this: why has the one of the most popular composers of all time been virtually ignored in the critical literature? To answer this question, Senici positions Rossini front and centre rather than merely as a precursor to subsequent composers, and he does so by eschewing the concept of 'reception' in favour of 'discourse'. The author suggests that the term 'discourse' implies a flexible interpretive framework encompassing all elements of works – textual, musical and visual – as well as their various manifestations, from live performances to diverse sources that facilitate them. Additionally, it encompasses the discussions about and surrounding these works, regardless of their origin or timing. Discourse, in other words, is a dynamic field of human interaction that helps get at what critics, performers and audiences felt and thought about Rossini's works. One way that this book embodies the 'present tense', therefore, is by delving into how Rossini's operas were perceived during their time, aiming to grasp their extraordinary appeal to audiences of that era.

The book contains fifteen chapters and is divided into two parts: Chapters 1–7 explore the 'how' of Rossini's music – his compositional practices and their dramaturgical outcomes. The second half, Chapters 8–15, investigate the 'why', drawing connections between the practices explored in the first half and placing them into the context of what was going on culturally and politically in Italy at the time the works were premiered and widely disseminated.

The first five chapters each explore a distinct aspect of Rossini's compositional practice and the discourse that blossomed around these musical characteristics during the first two decades of the composer's career: imitation (the extent to which musical settings reflected the meaning of the words), repetition (reuse of similar material within Rossini's operas and within individual musical numbers), borrowing (reuse of material from his other operas), style (the musical elements that characterised the sound of an individual composer's oeuvre, a situation predicated on repetition) and genre (the suitability of music to the overall mood of the story).

While the majority of Senici's interlocutors are Rossini's contemporaries, he occasionally breaks the temporal boundaries he sets for this book and draws on analyses written beyond the early decades of the nineteenth century. Such is the case in Chapter 6, 'Dramaturgy', where he folds the work of Benjamin Walton, Saverio Lamacchia, Damien Colas and other present-day historians into a conversation about metatheatricity in Rossini's works. The

need to step outside the nineteenth century for this subject, Senici explains, is because metatheatricality was not a topic of conversation until recently, ‘commentators highlighting instead the characters’ “vitality”, or the infectious excitement of Rossini’s rhythms’ (109). Chapter 7, ‘Noise’, serves as a bridge between the first and second halves of *Music in the Present Tense*, linking contemporary observations regarding the supposed loudness of Rossini’s operas to the sounds of guns and bombs that were built in to what Senici identifies as the overwhelming trauma of the Napoleonic era.

The book’s second half opens with two chapters that rarely mention Rossini or his music. Instead, ‘Modernity’ and ‘Theatricality’ lay out critical cultural groundwork, seeking to understand the effect that the onslaught of modernity (in the form of the political and social turmoil left in the wake of the Napoleonic wars) had on the Italian people. As Senici explains, ‘the arrival of Napoleon’s armies in 1796 and the two decades of continuous political upheavals and social tensions that followed had an unprecedented impact on most spheres of human activity in many regions of the Italian peninsula, especially the northern and central ones’ (129). The result, Senici explains, ‘was a psychological and emotional position on the part of many middle- and upper-class Italians who experienced the upheavals of the French years’. This position is best characterised as ‘confusion, bewilderment, shock, trauma, impotence, melancholia, self-othering, and indolence’ (138). It is against this unstable cultural backdrop that the remaining chapters of the book unfold.

Chapter 10, ‘Repertory’, explores the role Rossini’s operas played in the formation of an operatic canon, providing a sample of how these works were repeated early on in a pair of cities (Milan and Cremona), as well as surveying the means through which this music was disseminated outside of the opera house including as piano vocal scores, *pezzi staccati*, transcriptions for solo piano, and as arrangement for a variety of instrumental combinations. Senici demonstrates this process in action in the next chapter, ‘Di tanti palpiti’. As its title implies, this chapter homes in on one aria, Rossini’s most popular, to understand the ‘paths taken by Rossini’s music as it spread to sites apparently not reached by opera’ (181).

In Chapter 12, Senici explores the role of memory in the reception of Rossini’s operas, investigating how familiarity with the music was cultivated through repeated exposure both in- and outside the opera house. The extra-theatrical dissemination examined in the previous two chapters thus obtains retrospective critical significance, as it provides the fuel for listeners’ operatic memory. The next chapter, ‘Pleasure’, focuses on the concept of repetition in Rossini’s compositions and its impact on listener enjoyment, arguing that the composer’s innovative use of repetition created a unique sense of familiarity and pleasure among audiences. Chapter 14, ‘Movement’, examines philosophical interpretations of Rossini’s music by Hegel, Schopenhauer and others, emphasising its departure from mimetic representation and its role in promoting freedom and movement in art. Finally, Chapter 15, ‘Belief’, reflects on the legacy of Rossini’s Italian operas following his departure from the genre in 1823, exploring how this music was perceived in the context of evolving trends in Italian opera, particularly regarding the balance between imitation and dramatic truth.

Toward the end of his book, Senici arrives at an enlightening answer to the question of why Rossini has long experienced a historiographical neglect that is out of proportion to the popularity of his operas. The cause is rooted in the composer’s tendency to embrace a disconnect between words and music, a penchant that both his predecessors and successors eschewed, preferring a greater degree of ‘dramatic truth’ which required merging the meaning of words and music closely. This situation, as Senici explains, sparked a tendency to ‘construct a history of Italian opera in which the Rossinian Rossini, so to speak, was but a parenthesis, almost an aberration, in a narrative of progress toward ever greater imitation, ever greater dramatic truth’ (268). Rossini gets left out of the discussion, in other words, because he did not go with the historical flow, the reason for both his popularity and subsequent neglect.

The landscape of nineteenth-century Italian opera studies has undoubtedly evolved, but Senici's, Smart's and Vella's books illustrate that it remains vibrant with much still to uncover. Importantly, despite a widespread shift towards transnational perspectives, the focused approach of these authors underscores the enduring significance of local and national narratives. Senici's examination of Rossini's Italian operas, Smart's exploration of opera and political discourse and Vella's investigation of operatic networks collectively paint a rich, multifaceted picture of nineteenth-century Italian opera, revealing the many ways that operatic works and their performances were intertwined with the societal transformations of their era.