

Was Opera in Italy the Nineteenth Century's Pop Music? Diverse Aspects of Opera in Milan before Italian Unification

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»William Shakespeare is now seen as the epitome of high culture,
yet to his contemporaries his work would have been understood as popular theatre.«
(Storey 1993:8)

1. What is it Popular Culture?

With its aristocratic origins, the conspicuous budget required for its performance, and its appeal to a classically educated audience, opera today is commonly associated with high culture. This article addresses the question whether opera in nineteenth-century Italy can be considered as popular music. My work attempts to engage the concept of the »popular« by applying diverse aspects of this concept to the discourse of performing opera in nineteenth-century Milan prior to Italian unification. The concept of popular music is a relatively new one. Is it possible to apply it to the musical culture of the nineteenth century? To ask this question might be useful for an understanding of the focus of my analysis, namely the concept of popular culture, and also for the object of my scrutiny, the genre of opera in Milan. This article suggests that from a cultural-studies perspective, opera can be considered as popular music. To define popular music, however, is not a straightforward task. As Storey¹ shows, popular culture is defined in different ways by cultural theorists. I will refer to certain works that describe opera as popular culture, and consider their specific concepts of popular culture. This study is also informed by a cultural studies analysis of contemporary popular music² in order to define opera as popular culture in its historical context. The study of opera at La Scala can be used as a case study to employ a Gramscian theory of hegemony when analyzing the contrasting forces of the time, namely the patriots of the *Risorgimento* and Austria's hegemonic power.

¹ John STOREY, *Cultural Studies and the Study of Popular Culture: Theories and Methods*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 1996.

² Simon FRITH, *Towards an Aesthetic of Popular Music*, in: Richard LEPPERT – Susan McCLARY, *Music and Society: The Politics of Composition, Performance and Reception*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, New York, Victoria 1992; John STREET, *Politics & Popular Culture*, Polity Press, Oxford, 2005.

Despite the fact that opera is commonly associated with high culture, there is a body of literature identifying nineteenth-century Italian opera as popular culture. It is a tradition that underlines the role of Verdi as the *vate*, the bard of the Nation. This literature celebrates the myth of 'the nation in arms' striving against the foreign oppressor. The father of ethnomusicology in Italy, Roberto Leydi, sees an ideological myth at the root of the problem of researching opera and popular culture. He describes it as a »ghost that has been roaming the historiography of Italian opera«³. Leydi problematises the fact that in this body of literature the definition of popular culture is often ambiguous. To define popular culture is not an easy task, as the term itself implies some ambiguities. One of these ambiguities is identified by Storey in its implicit otherness: »... popular culture is always defined, implicitly or explicitly, in contrast to other conceptual categories... A full definition must always take this into account...«⁴. In the study of opera as popular culture, high culture seems to be the most appropriate contrasting conceptual category that has to be considered. This is because today, opera, like all classical music, is commonly associated with high culture. Talking about high and low art implies a hierarchical understanding of the arts⁵, and in turn, a hierarchical view of the world, where 'high' is accorded greater significance than 'low'. In Adorno's view that division 'spells domination'.⁶ High art is generally seen as the product of the free will of an artist, whereas popular culture is conventionally seen as being dictated by the vicissitudes of audience requirements.

This dichotomy implies a divide between art and society. Aesthetic historiography⁷ and the Cultural Studies tradition⁸ see this binary opposition as having evolved during the Romantic era. Art became dissociated from society and became conceived of as the product of individual inspiration – of autonomous genius. Cook sees this separation as being the result of a socio-political process which he called 'the construction of bourgeois subjectivity'.⁹ Cook writes that the bourgeoisie were affirming their importance as a class at the economical, political, and cultural level;

³ Roberto LEYDI, Diffusione e volgarizzazione, in: Lorenzo BIANCONI – Giorgio PESTELLI, *Storia dell'opera italiana*, E.D.T. Edizioni di Torino, Turin 1998, 306.

⁴ J. STOREY, *op. cit.*, 1.

⁵ In the context of this article, opera is associated with popular culture not with the aim of diminishing its value. Indeed, opera has been compared with other forms of classical music and seen as 'less serious'. (See: Edward J. DENT, *Opera: A Stimulating Guide to its Nature and Development*, Penguin Books, Middlesex 1949, 14-15). Some commentators, however, argue that the consideration of high art as superior to popular culture is not longer valid, particularly for the new generation of cultural consumers (Bonita KOLB, *Marketing Cultural Organisations: New Strategies for Attracting Audiences to Classical Music, Dance, Museums, Theatre and Opera*, Oak Tree, Dublin 2000, 21). Today, moreover, the difference between 'high' and 'low' culture is hard to tell (Nicholas COOK, *Music: A very Short Introduction*, Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York 2000, 41).

⁶ J.M. BERNSTEIN in: Theodor ADORNO, *The Culture Industry*, with an introduction by J.M. Bernstein, Routledge, London-New York 2003, 7.

⁷ Elio FRANZINI – Elena MAZZOCUT MISS, *Estetica: I nomi, i concetti, le correnti*, Bruno Mondadori, Milan 1996.

⁸ Williams 1963.

⁹ N. COOK, *op. cit.*, 19.

their new role was expressed through the arts by an exploration of the human world of inner feelings and emotions. In this exploration, music became central because of its ability to express feelings and emotions. Music became dedicated to personal expression, divorced from the mundane features of everyday life. This process was central to the Romantic movement which flourished in the cultural capitals of western and central Europe: London, Paris, Berlin, and Vienna.¹⁰ As we will see later, the operatic milieu in nineteenth-century Milan was deeply involved with the political activities of the time. In his analysis of Italian opera during the Romantic era, Kimbell makes a notably germane connection between music and politics: »Most Italian Artists were, then, not solitary dreamers but men keenly aware of their social role... In Italy Romanticism was the cultural arm of the *Risorgimento*.«¹¹

Drawing on John Rosselli's work,¹² one could make the counter-argument that opera is not a popular genre because 'the people' were not admitted to opera-houses. In other words, opera is not seen as a popular genre because opera-house audiences were not representative of society as a whole, including the lower classes. John Rosselli demonstrates that only the upper middle classes, artisans and aristocrats' servants were present. The question: 'who are the people?' is central to the definition of popular culture. This is the main ambivalence inherent in the concept of 'popular' that is embedded in the root of the term itself. According to Fleury, 'popular' is a word that results from two sets of concepts: 'populus' and 'plebs'. Populus refers to the idea of citizenship, to the context of civic life, where plebs is the Latin term describing the under class.¹³ Opera was an important genre for the populus, central to civic life,¹⁴ particularly in nineteenth-century Milan.¹⁵ With regard to the composition of the main opera house audience, it is certain that the urban plebs and peasants were not among the public of theatres like La Scala.¹⁶ To assert, however, that opera in the nineteenth century was popular culture does not necessarily mean that it was the culture of all or of the lowest classes. The term 'people' here refers to the segment of population identified by Giovanni Morelli: »And with 'people' we mean a big, huge national middle class; perhaps the one intended by Berchet as the new class...«¹⁷ This new class can be seen as the protagonists of the *Risorgimento*.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹¹ David R. B. KIMBELL, *Romantic Opera: 1830-1850: Italy*, in: Gerald ABRAHAM, *The New Oxford History of Music*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, New York 1990, 141.

¹² John ROSSELLI, *The Opera Industry in Italy from Cimarosa to Verdi. The Role of the Impresario*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1984.

¹³ Fleury 2006: 32.

¹⁴ D. R. B. KIMBELL, *op. cit.*, 140-42.

¹⁵ Giuseppe BARIGAZZI, *La Scala Racconta*, Biblioteca Universale Rizzoli, Milan 1991, 11-409.

¹⁶ J. ROSSELLI, *op. cit.*, 1984.

¹⁷ Giovanni MORELLI, *L'opera nella cultura nazionale italiana*, in: Lorenzo BIANCONI – Giorgio PESTELLI, *Storia dell'opera italiana*, E.D.T. Edizioni di Torino, Turin 1998, 398.

2. Opera: A Popular Enjoyment

The popular American series ... *For Dummies*, well known for technical text on software, includes a book intended to popularize opera. The authors are practitioners addressing a prospective audience. They argue that opera was once popular. This was essentially because of the way it was enjoyed by audiences:

... Going to an opera was like going to a movie. People went to an opera as you might go to a rock concert: to have fun! They went to see their favorite stars and hear their favorite tunes. They wore casual clothes, they brought their own food and drinks, they even cheered (or booed, or threw flowers or tomatoes) during the show if the spirit moved them. Classical music was pop music.¹⁸

The account of an ordinary evening at La Scala during the nineteenth century shows the same kind of enjoyment. According to Barigazzi,¹⁹ the opera house was principally a meeting point. He describes La Scala as a flurry of activity in a musical background. Gambling, meeting people, making love, chatting, holding intellectual discussions, eating and frolicking around in the yearly Carnival season, were part of the activities enjoyed at La Scala during the performances. Games of chance were played in the foyers. As for food and drink, there were plenty of choices, which in turn, reflected the status of different customers. The artisan and servant class was sitting on the upper floor where there was a pub and a *bottiglieria*, a place where one could buy bottles of wine and spirits. A patisserie and a restaurant were also open for business. The eighteenth-century tradition of *aria da sorbetto*, literally meaning 'song of ice-cream', reflected the fact that eating ice-cream during the opera performance had been common practice for centuries. At that point of the performance the public had usually reached the point of ice-cream as part of their dinners. At La Scala, aristocrats were served food from the indoor restaurant in their own boxes, or they ate food that their servants provided from home.²⁰

Eating was clearly socially stratified, but noise escaped this hierarchical system of enjoyment. Music and chatting were the auditory landscape in which everybody was equally surrounded. The overture had the function of attracting the audience's attention, but this did not mean that after the beginning there was silent concentration. According to Stendhal, who was an opera enthusiast, intellectual life at La Scala was particularly agreeable because of the fine conversations. In Lodovico Di Breme's box, talking was at the centre of interest and music appeared to be a pleasant background:

In Paris I do not know anything like this box where every night one can meet subsequently fifteen or twenty men of value, and music is listened to when the conversation is no longer interesting.²¹

¹⁸ Pogue and Speck 1997: 8.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*.

²⁰ G. BARIGAZZI, *op. cit.*, 36.

²¹ Stendhal, in: *ibid.*, 98.

This apparent lack of regard for a performance that could be enjoyed daily is also evident from other sources. According to another foreign observer, the Irish writer Lady Morgan, women were talking most of the time. She writes that the more serious women went alone at the opera house, where they used to meet in their boxes. They often turned their backs to the stage and started chatting to each other, interrupted every now and then by visitors. Only 'fashionable' arias managed to attract a temporary attention.²² If this was the behaviour of serious women, one wonders what the frivolous ones were doing. Stendhal suggests that La Scala was a meeting point for lovers. Furthermore, he maintains that the public opinion concerning ladies was formed in the main foyer at the entrance. According to Stendhal, it was humiliating for a woman to be short of a lover to escort her to her box. This was a particularly serious matter at the premiere of the season. In case a lady was short of lovers, Stendhal suggests ironically that her husband might have done her the favour of accompanying her. If she had to be accompanied by a servant, her reputation would have suffered.²³ The respectful silence of the audience is a *musical value*²⁴ of our epoch.²⁵ In nineteenth-century Milan, opera was a popular event that was enjoyed through all the senses. Perhaps it was no coincidence that Domenico Barbaja, impresario of La Scala in Milan, San Carlo in Naples, the Imperial Court Theatre and the Kärntnerthor Theatre in Vienna had once managed a circus and then the gambling room of La Scala:²⁶ there he learned the skills of a popular entertainer.

3. *The Popular Aesthetic of Melodrama and the Problem of Class*

Although sensual enjoyment might not be a sufficiently comprehensive definition to describe popular culture, the atmosphere indicated above has little to do with the aura of aristocratic respectability and culturally refined enjoyment that surrounds opera today. According to Cook, musical values are culturally defined and shift according to time and space.²⁷ Since the nineteenth century, there has been a significant shift in the behaviour of audiences. Opera was a more popular enjoyment in nineteenth-century Milan than it is in our time. The behaviour of the audience, however, does not solely attest the popularity of the genre. In his study illustrating different concepts of popular culture, Storey begins with the current meaning. Popular culture is commonly understood as a 'culture which is widely favoured or well liked by many people.'²⁸ The widespread existence of opera houses all over Italy in

²² Lady MORGAN, *Italy*, Henry Colburn & Co., London 1821, 35.

²³ Stendhal, in: G. BARIGAZZI, *op. cit.*, 99.

²⁴ N. COOK, *op. cit.*, 1-18.

²⁵ Edward J. DENT, *Opera: A Stimulating Guide to its Nature and Development*, Penguin Books, Middlesex 1949, 24.

²⁶ Henry RAYNOR, *The Commercialisation of Opera in Music and Society since 1815*, Barrie & Jenkins Ltd, London 1976, 67.

²⁷ N. COOK, *op. cit.*, 1-18.

²⁸ J. STOREY, *op. cit.*, 7.

the nineteenth century is well documented,²⁹ and it represents the best evidence for the popularity of opera. Bianconi highlights the 'polycentrism' of the diffusion of Italian opera houses: they existed all over the country, with the majority being situated in the North. To provide an idea of the proportion of this phenomenon, Bianconi refers to a census of the 1890s that recorded 1055 theatre and opera houses. Opera houses were present even in tiny towns, and opera festivals were held even in modest municipalities on the occasion of trade fairs.³⁰

The appreciation of opera, furthermore, was not limited to those who had the privilege of regularly attending opera houses. During the *Risorgimento*, according to Kimbell

...opera remained a popular art form loved by Italians of all classes and conditions... outside theatres, operatic music was a mainstay in the repertoire of town and military bands, of church organist and of town and of barrel-organ grinders. That coachman who drove Dickens into Italy in 1846, and who had »a word and a smile, and a flick of his whip, for all peasant girls, and odds and ends of the Sonnambula for all the echoes« was a quintessential figure of the period.³¹

There is no comprehensive study to prove the widespread popularity of the genre outside the opera house, but Leydi's work shows how street musicians in the civic context contributed to popularising opera in the mid-nineteenth century.³² From a musicological perspective, Leydi demonstrates the penetration of opera codes in Italian popular songs through the diffusion of tonality, the tempered scale, harmonic sensibility and through certain practices, such as the *incatenatura*.³³ According to Davis, the popularity of opera was fostered by its aesthetic language. In fact, it provided a unique opportunity to express Romanticism through different artistic forms (painting, literature, and music) unified in a single performance.³⁴

From a broader aesthetic perspective, it can be maintained that melodrama has affected Italian taste. 'Opera' is a word invented in England, whereas *Dramma per musica* or *Melodramma* were the classical names used traditionally in the title-pages of scores and librettos in Italy.³⁵ According to Paolo Puppa, Gramsci thought that only two types of public performances were actually popular culture in Italy, namely legal oratory and opera.³⁶ In his *Prison Notebook*, Gramsci regrets the common man's

²⁹ Lorenzo BIANCONI, *Il teatro d'opera in Italia*, Il Mulino, Bologna 1993; Carlotta SORBA, *L'Italia del melodramma nell'età del Risorgimento*, Il Mulino, Bologna 2001.

³⁰ L. BIANCONI, *op. cit.*, 11-16.

³¹ D.R.B. KIMBELL, *op. cit.*, 141.

³² Roberto LEYDI, *Diffusione e Volgarizzazione*, in: Lorenzo BIANCONI – Giorgio PESTELLI, *Storia dell'opera italiana*, E.D.T. Edizioni di Torino, Turin 1998.

³³ *Ibid.*, 333.

³⁴ John A. DAVIS, *Opera and Absolutism in Restoration Italy, 1815-1860*, *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, XXXVI, 4 (Spring 2006), 572.

³⁵ E.J. DENT, *op. cit.*, 38.

³⁶ Paolo PUPPA, *Discussion at the Conference: The Role of the Performer in Italian Theatre*, University of Strathclyde, Glasgow, 26-28 October 2006.

appreciation of literature and poetry in Italy. According to Gramsci this appreciation is informed by melodramatic sentimentality, defined as 'theatrical expression with a baroque vocabulary'.³⁷ This aesthetics has been internalized not through individual readings of literature, but through collective attendance at performances. Gramsci's statement might reinforce Scaramuzza's assumption that the category of the melodramatic is not exclusive to opera, and that, by contrast, it cuts across the universe of arts.³⁸ This diffusion of melodramatic taste in Italy appears to be grounded in the operatic tradition. In addition, Gramsci's definition of the adjective 'melodramatic' as 'theatrical expression with a baroque vocabulary,' seems to point directly towards opera. It is of course not the aim of this article to provide an absolute definition of opera; it is, however, scarcely questionable that opera is a musical and theatrical expression born in the baroque period. According to Gramsci, melodramatic taste 'contaminated' other genres. Cinema (particularly with regard to the nature of subtitles employed for silent films) was affected by this melodramatic attitude. Thus, the quantitative evidence for the popularity of opera in nineteenth-century Italy is reinforced by the penetration of the aesthetics of opera in other domains of Italian culture.

It is also remarkable that Gramsci is referring to the impact of melodramatic taste on the perception of literature; in this regard, he refers to those libretti where words and passions appear to be extreme. This is typical also of contemporary popular genres. The scriptwriter Terry Hodgkinson makes a striking analogy between opera and soap opera: »Opera, like soaps that have appropriated their name, are populated with people who strangle, stab, cherish, hate and poison«. ³⁹ In his view, opera stories can be associated with soap opera plots. Soap opera is one of the most popular genres of our time. Hodgkinson's ideas deserve attention, even if they are more indebted to critical acumen than empirical research. Further studies might develop this parallel. This comparison is also interesting from a gender perspective because soap opera is commonly considered a 'female genre', whereas opera does not have this gender characterisation. The display of emotions and passions were (and remain) at the basis of the operatic genre, a display which does not depend upon a gender characterisation. Bellini wrote to the librettist of *I Puritani*: »The music drama must draw tears, inspire terror, make people die, through singing«. ⁴⁰ According to Kimbell, Rossini, Bellini, Donizetti, and Mercadante developed a more Romantic ideal of music drama. ⁴¹ Opera was an 'emotional' genre, which became even more so because of the influence of the political situation:

³⁷ Antonio GRAMSCI, *Pirandello, Ibsen e il Teatro*, Editori Riuniti, Roma, 1992, 32.

³⁸ Gabriele SCARAMUZZA, *Estetica del melodramma*, in: Pietro D'ORIANO, *Per una fenomenologia del melodramma*, Centro Universitario di Ricerca »Fenomenologia e Arte« (CIRFA) e MIUR Università di Roma Tre, Quodlibet Studio, Macerata 2006, 121.

³⁹ Terry HODGKINSON, *Where Soap Meets Opera*, in: *The Guardian: Royal Opera House – A World Stage*, ed. Guardian News and Media Ltd, Manchester 2006, 6.

⁴⁰ Bellini 1943: 400.

⁴¹ D.R.B. KIMBELL, *op. cit.*, 162.

...certain extra-musical factors played a part in increasing the dramatic and emotional range of opera; it was made to function as the vehicle for new ideas, and it was subject to unprecedented ideological and imaginative influences. In the central decades of the Risorgimento it is not to be wondered at that one extra-musical factor was politics.⁴²

Opera expressed feelings of national identity, which were popular among people.

4. From Popular to Political: Opera, the Austrians and Risorgimento

»I am concerned with what it means to talk of popular culture as politics, to see where pleasure shades into political practice.«⁴³

According to John Street, popular culture becomes engaged with politics because it provides a form of identity. His point of departure is Simon Frith's attempts to describe the mechanism concerning the audience and the development of its passions. Frith writes of pop music: »Pop love songs do not »reflect« emotions...but give people romantic terms in which to articulate their emotions.«⁴⁴ From a neo-Gramscian perspective, this concept of articulation means at the same time 'to express' and 'to join together'.⁴⁵ This articulation can become the basis of an identity which acts as the source of political thought and action.⁴⁶ This can be applied to La Scala audiences, which were particularly engaged with intellectual and political thought, and with political action. Lodovico Di Breme's box at La Scala was a meeting point where *Il Conciliatore*, arguably the most important Romantic magazine, was conceived and discussed by some of the main protagonists of the *Risorgimento*: Federico Confalonieri, Silvio Pellico, Giovanni Berchet among others.⁴⁷ According to Stendhal, this was not the only intellectual group: »Before entering the box of Mr. Di Breme, I visit four or five boxes where the conversation is far from not being always philosophical.«⁴⁸ Many of these intellectuals were later personally involved in the fights and intrigues of the *Risorgimento*. Passions remained at the core of politics, particularly in the Gramscian view. After all, Gramscian hegemony is »... a ceaseless endeavour to maintain control over the hearts and the minds of subordinate classes.«⁴⁹ Therefore, it is not surprising that popular cultural activities such as opera, which were able to inflame the hearts of people, were also used in the struggle for (political) hegemony.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ John STREET, *Politics & Popular Culture*, Polity Press, Oxford, 2005, 26.

⁴⁴ Simon FRITH, *Music for Pleasure*, Polity Press, Cambridge 1988, 123.

⁴⁵ J. STOREY, *op. cit.*, 14.

⁴⁶ FRITH and HORNE, in: Street 2005: 10.

⁴⁷ G. BARIGAZZI, *op. cit.*, 89-90.

⁴⁸ Stendhal, in: G. BARIGAZZI, *op. cit.*, 98.

⁴⁹ Miliband 1982, in: Paul RANSOME, *Antonio Gramsci: A New Introduction*, Harvester Wheatsheaf, New York-London-Toronto-Sydney-Tokyo-Singapore 1992, 132.

It is not straightforward to express how a musical work can stimulate political thought and action. Frith and Street observe that »when people feel most passionately about music together it is because of its power to mark boundaries«. ⁵⁰ Thus, one can say that for the *Risorgimento* movement, the marking of both the national identity boundaries and the physical boundaries of Italy were crucial. At a time when the action of censorship »rarely allowed composers to write operas that were explicitly political«, ⁵¹ implicit politics became explicit through the manner in which the audience 'read' the performances. To be considered political, an opera »...suffices to have some sentences that could be linked somehow to the present events«. ⁵² Hence, it is not surprising that some opera performances became political manifestations, as *Norma* did ⁵³ on the eve of the War of Independence, 10 January 1859, when the chorus 'Guerra, Guerra!' provoked a violent demonstration against the Austrian Government. ⁵⁴ Indeed, the effects of opera on its audience were carefully supervised by the police. ⁵⁵ The use of the acronym V.E.R.D.I. has become legendary. Ostensibly celebrating Busseto's maestro, the audience was covertly cheering the king of Piemonte, Vittorio Emanuele, (V.E.) as the king (Re, R.) of Italy (D'Italia, D.I.). The patriotic role of Verdi has often been reconsidered and downplayed, particularly in recent studies. ⁵⁶ But the role of opera choruses to induce rebellion and patriotic sentiment is well known, whether the composer is called Verdi, Rossini or Beethoven. ⁵⁷ Martin reminds us that Verdi's music in the first ten years of his operatic career was identified with his choruses. ⁵⁸ In Italy, the audience's request for an encore was often for a choral number, and it generally had political significance. ⁵⁹ According to Kimbell,

Verdi perceived that if the chorus was to embody the idea of the nation – not only the Jewish or French nation ostensibly represented on the stage, but the potential Italian nation among his audience – the manner of its utterance must be as popularist as possible. This ideal is realized by writing for it predominantly in unison (1990: 163).

Attending a performance became a collective enjoyment. The chorus stressed the sense of being part of a community. Writing in unison was the musical manifes-

⁵⁰ FRITH and STREET 1992: 80.

⁵¹ D.R.B. KIMBELL, *op. cit.*, 162.

⁵² Claudio TOSCANI, *Melodramma e Risorgimento*, in: Pietro D'ORIANO, *Per una fenomenologia del melodramma*, Centro Universitario di Ricerca »Fenomenologia e Arte« (CIRFA) e MIUR Università di Roma Tre, Quodlibet Studio, Macerata 2006, 199.

⁵³ Raffaello MONTEROSSO, *La musica nel Risorgimento*, Vallardi, Milan 1948, 278.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁵⁵ D.R.B. KIMBELL, *op. cit.*, 162.

⁵⁶ See the contributions by PROCACCI, BIANCONI, CASTELVECCHI and ROSSELLI, in: Fabrizio DELLA SETA – Roberta MONTEMORRA MARVIN – Marco MARICA, *Verdi nella storia d'Italia*, in: *Verdi 2001 Atti del Convegno Internazionale Parma – New York – New Heaven*, 24 Gennaio – 1 Febbraio 2001, Olschki, Firenze 2003.

⁵⁷ D.R.B. KIMBELL, *op. cit.*, 162-65; C. TOSCANI, *op. cit.*

⁵⁸ George MARTIN, *Verdi and the Risorgimento*, in: William WEAVER – Martin CHUSID, *The Verdi Companion*, Norton, London-New York 1979.

⁵⁹ C. TOSCANI, *op. cit.*, 197.

tation of this collective feeling. Performing opera was a popular and public event central to urban life,⁶⁰ and its political significance was seen as an expression of revolt against the Austrian Empire as the occupying power. Thus, the cultural environment in which opera was situated at La Scala encouraged audiences to celebrate the genre as a public articulation of their emotions. At the same time, they saw La Scala as a place for intense political and intellectual discourse, which became the seedbed of political action. The theatre itself was used for fighting; this 'belligerent' use of the stage can be seen as a symbol of the importance of opera in the *Risorgimento*. During the celebrated 'five days of Milan,' from 18-22 March 1848, parts of the scenery were used to construct barricades together with some coaches in *contrada San Giuseppe*,⁶¹ (now Giuseppe Verdi Street on a side of the opera house). The revolt started when the news about the insurrection in Vienna reached Milan. Barigazzi recounts that members of the artistic milieu of La Scala were involved in this battle, which is considered one of the epic events of the *Risorgimento*. Thus Emanuele Manunzio, one of Verdi's students, used a rifle and was wounded in a confrontation with Austrian troops. The Temporary Government, which lasted until the beginning of August, was located in Giuditta Pasta's house. Pasta, a retired soprano, offered her home to the insurgents. She also gave financial support to the rebels in exile. At the end of the revolutionary period, she went in exile to Switzerland where Mazzini persuaded her to give a performance for the exiled community.⁶²

Singers were real stars, with higher incomes than composers and musicians. Traditionally, they had the right to decide that the aria with which they were assigned and which they carried with them in their luggage (the so-called *aria da baule*), could replace any given aria in no matter which opera. Audiences loved their singers; what Simon Frith writes about pop singers seems to be easily applicable also to opera singers: »...It is through the singing voice that people are most able... to feel that performances are theirs in certain ways... The tone of voice is more important than the actual articulation of particular lyrics«. ⁶³ It is well known that opera lovers sometimes cheer their favourite singers independently of the value of the performance itself. The 'supremacy' of one of these singers could become a matter of dispute between 'parties' who supported their own favourite; just as football fans support their own club. The dispute between Maria Callas and Renata Tebaldi has been famous. At the time of Bellini and Donizetti, there was a comparable dispute between the Lombard Giuditta Pasta and Maria Malibran, both performers of *Norma*. This dispute also had political connotations. Giuditta Pasta was patriotic, whereas Maria Malibran was supported by a *sui generis* La Scala impresario, the duke Carlo Visconti di Modrone, representative of the Austrian government in Milan.

⁶⁰ John A. DAVIS, Opera and Absolutism in Restoration Italy, 1815-1860, *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, XXXVI, 4 (Spring 2006).

⁶¹ G. BARIGAZZI, *op. cit.*, 191.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 180-83.

⁶³ S. FRITH, *Towards an Aesthetic of Popular Music* (1992), 144.

The political aspects of those disputes were clear to La Scala public of that time, thus the patriot Massimo D'Azeglio admits with feelings of guilt that he had been affected by the powerful performance of Maria Malibran, a singer who had Austrian political associations. He reported in his *Ricordi*⁶⁴ that he was aware of the controversial political representation of Maria Malibran, but after fifty years he still had a clear impression of the fascination that Malibran had on all the people, including himself. While referring to this, he made two important points. The first one was that the popularity of opera singers in Milan was not comparable with that of any other artists: La Scala protagonists were the most beloved of all the artists, writers and painters performing in the city. The second and more interesting point was that because of the popularity of opera, »Austrians ruled Lombardy through La Scala opera house. And it must be said that up to a certain period this was done successfully«.⁶⁵ This observation is striking for two reasons. Firstly, being one of the fathers of the *Risorgimento*, D'Azeglio's is an authoritative voice. His portrait can be seen in all museums dedicated to the *Risorgimento*, and he is famous for another historical sentence that appears in all history books, whether primary-school textbooks or academic treatises: »Italy has been made, now Italians must be made«. Secondly, D'Azeglio's awareness of the importance of cultural considerations for ruling a country seems to anticipate the Gramscian theory of hegemony before Gramsci himself.

D'Azeglio interpreted the political situation of his time in Lombardy under the Austrian domination in a way which would be theoretically systematised a half-century later by Gramsci. Cultural activities are at the core of the Gramscian view of power. The state⁶⁶ is not seen by Gramsci just as a coercive machine that submits the masses to the will of a dominating class. A ruling elite or a foreign hegemonic state needs consensus in order to rule its subjects. The consent is achieved by the ruling class through ideological and cultural hegemony. In other words, the political and cultural values of the ruling class(-es) are disseminated to the rest of society, particularly to subordinate groups and classes that accept them as their own. These values become sedimented in society to the degree that they take on the status of unchallenged *common sense*.⁶⁷ The importance of civil society lies in its function as a context wherein private and group interests are transformed into political aspirations. In such a context lies the creation and formation of identity and ideological struggle. Here also intellectuals work for the construction of hegemony. In sum, civic society is the place where interests are grouped, ideologies developed, political action

⁶⁴ D'Azeglio 1957.

⁶⁵ D'Azeglio 1957: 322.

⁶⁶ Gramsci use the term 'state' with a peculiar meaning. According to him, the state has two components: civil society and political society (A. GRAMSCI, *Selection from Prison Notebooks*, 263). The state is »conceived as a form of social relations through which capitalism and hegemony are expressed«; Andreas BIELER – Adam David MORTON, *Theoretical and Methodological Challenges*, 2).

⁶⁷ S. HOBDEN – J. R.W. ONES, *Marxist Theories of International Relations*, in: J. BAYLIS – S. SMITH, *The Globalisation of World Politics: An Introduction to International Relations*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2005: 236; Cox 1983: 164; Gill and Law 1993, 93.

conceived and alliances formed.⁶⁸ As discussed above, participation in the opera (as performer or audience member) was the cultural activity of the civic society in Milan. La Scala was a forum where various cultural activities took place, intellectuals gathered, and the symbolic power of foreign rule was exerted. It was the perfect locus to spread hegemonic power. Practices, behaviours, and values learned at La Scala were instrumental in the exercise of hegemonic power for the Austrians.⁶⁹ In Gramscian terms, La Scala can be defined as a civic institution of society. In sociological terms, one can refer to La Scala as an agency of socialisation. D'Azeglio suggested that La Scala was used by the Austrians as an instrument by which their subjects were both controlled and fascinated. Up to a certain point, this process was effective. Then, arguably, the 'historical bloc' was challenged.

'Historical bloc' is a Gramscian term that refers to inter-class power relations. The interaction between the dominant elite and its subjects is not simple. It implies the integration of a variety of different class interests spread throughout society. This integration represents an agreement of economic and political aims as well intellectual and moral unity between the different classes, which are described by Gramsci with the term historical bloc.⁷⁰ The historical bloc is composed of a group of classes that is centred upon a core hegemonic idea. There is a hegemonic class in every bloc. The construction of each bloc begins with the formulation of the dominant front that will exercise hegemony. In the first part of the nineteenth century in Italy, a new class was emerging: the bourgeoisie. This new class had its own interests and it posed a challenge to the stability of the historical bloc. This is not to say that the Risorgimento was a bourgeois movement, but because of the changed socio-cultural conditions, there was a need to re-shape power-forces among the historical bloc. This was arguably one of the reasons that provoked the rebellion against the external hegemonic power. The importance of opera for patriotism⁷¹ and for rebellion against the hegemonic power cannot be denied. Opera was a civic cultural activity in which a struggle for cultural hegemony took place. La Scala was an institution of civic society. It was instrumental in the cultural struggle for hegemony.

⁶⁸ Augelli and Murphy 1993: 129; A. GRAMSCI, *Selection from Prison Notebooks*, 12, 245.

⁶⁹ To be precise, the Gramsci theory of hegemony refers to domestic politics at a national level. The hegemonic power is not seen in an international context of domination of one state upon the other. However, the neo-Gramscian school transfers the Gramscian theory of hegemony to the field of international relations. In particular, the *Coxian* interpretation of Gramscian hegemony claims that contemporary world hegemony exists not in the coercion of a superpower, but in the general consent that the dominant powers manage to produce in order to make it acceptable to everyone, including those who least benefit from it. [S. HOBDEN – J. R.W. ONES, *op. cit.*, 237; Gill and Law 1993: 93; Robert W. COX, Gramsci, Hegemony and International Relations: An Essay in Method, *Journal of International Studies*, 12, no. 2 (1983), 7]. Therefore, the Gramscian theory of hegemony can be applied to the hegemonic superpower represented by the Austrian Empire in reference to the citizens of its subjected territories, like the Lombardo-Veneto.

⁷⁰ A. GRAMSCI, *Selection from Prison Notebooks*, 181-366; A. BIELER – A. D. MORTON, *op. cit.*, 2; Rupert 1993: 81.

⁷¹ Alberto M. BANTI, *La nazione del Risorgimento. Parentela, santità e onore: le origini dell'Italia unita*, Einaudi, Torino, 2000.

For a long period, La Scala became the locus of political conspiracies, which are well documented in Barigazzi's account (1989). Austrian secret police and their spies were active at La Scala, and they succeeded in detecting anti-Austrian activities. On 6 October 1820, Ricordi's employee, the musician Pietro Maroncelli who worked on adaptations of libretti, was arrested for conspiracy; some days later the same fate overtook Silvio Pellico. They both ended up in the Spielberg prison, sentenced to life imprisonment. In February 1821, two members of the Carboneria conspiracy movement met at La Scala: Carlo Castiglia and Giuseppe Pecchio. Soon after, Castiglia gave the police information about a new conspiracy of insurrection which he had learned from Pecchio. Castiglia's betrayal sparked off a new wave of arrests: Federico Confalonieri and Philippe Adryane were sentenced to life imprisonment. Other conspirators who also used to meet at Lodovico Di Breme's box, such as Porro Lambertenghi, Pallavicino, and Borsieri, were given minor sentences, and some of them managed to escape. The original group of the magazine *Il Conciliatore* was, however, destroyed. After this second trial, La Scala boxes remained empty with their curtains closed for three nights. This was clearly a demonstration of public support for the individuals who had found their identity as conspirators against foreign rule in the cultural atmosphere of La Scala.⁷² La Scala was a place for conspiracy and for demonstrations of independence. As a consequence of its central role in the civic life of Milan, La Scala became an important political arena.

For Gramsci, hegemony is promoted by various means. Among these, two are dominant, namely, institutions of civic society and intellectuals. Institutions facilitate hegemonic control⁷³ by undertaking the transmission of ruling ideas, and by preventing the masses from distinguishing their own interests from those of the dominants. Along with education, all other institutions that shape perceptions, such as churches, mass media and political associations, function within the guidelines of the ruling class.⁷⁴ La Scala appears to be one of those cultural institutions that decisively shaped public opinion in the nineteenth century. La Scala was central to the struggle for hegemonic power.

5. Opera: Popular Power

The concept of popular culture implies some ambiguities on different levels. On one level, according to Storey it needs to be defined against or in comparison with another concept, namely, elite culture. Drawing on Storey's historical account of the concept of popular culture, there are different levels to be taken into account in defining opera as popular culture, levels which transcend the social composition of the audience. Opera was of course a more popular entertainment in the nineteenth cen-

⁷² G. BARIGAZZI, *op. cit.*, 100.

⁷³ S. HOBDEN – J. R.W. ONES, *op. cit.*, 236.

⁷⁴ Joseph FEMIA, *Gramsci's Political Thought: Hegemony, Consciousness, and the Revolutionary Process*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1981, 44.

ture than it is today. On another level, popular culture simply means a culture which enjoys the support of the majority. Although the audience of La Scala was not inclusive of peasant and working classes, it is still legitimate to say that opera was a genre loved by the public. Sorba, Bianconi, Kimbell and Davis show how widespread the cultivation of this genre was (in addition to the sheer number of venues in which it was presented) and they thereby affirm its centrality to urban life in nineteenth-century Italy. In addition, a model of criticism inflected by Gramscian theory (as in Leydi's work) can illuminate how the aesthetics of melodrama influenced Italian taste in different art forms, such as literature, cinema, and music. Finally, it is crucial to clarify what one means by 'The People'. Opera to a certain extent can be seen as popular culture, if 'The People' are identified with the idea of 'populus'. But in the present context, this term connotes the bourgeoisie rather than the labour classes. Indeed, the bourgeoisie defined itself precisely as a 'populus', a majority, in relation to the aristocratic minority. The bourgeoisie is thereby central to our understanding of the *Risorgimento*. Nineteenth-century Milan is an excellent case study because of its industrial milieu, and because of its central role in the *Risorgimento* process. In sociological terms, La Scala was an agent of socialisation used by both contrasting fronts in the *Risorgimento*: by the intellectuals as a vehicle for political resistance, and by the Austrians for the purposes of upholding their hegemonic rule. Both sides could be investigated using the Gramscian theory. Further studies could apply this theoretical framework to the entire Lombardo-Veneto and to the milieu of the Austrian Empire, widening the scale of investigation. It might be interesting also to study the same opera houses during other historical periods and to consider whether, and for how long, such venues exerted similar degrees of socio-political influence. The Gramscian theory of hegemony is not new in cultural studies, and it has already been applied to many different domains of art and to diverse political situations, particularly by the Birmingham school. Thus far it has not been applied to the social formation of opera in Gramsci's own country during the *Risorgimento*, an historical period that Gramsci studied thoroughly. Given the political significance of the culture of opera, this theory can offer a new perspective on the genre, and it can provide decisive insights into our understanding of power relations in Italian history. What begins to appear clearly at this stage of the investigation is that the culture of opera and the formation of political hegemony are interlinked at a crucial point in that history.

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Sažetak

Je li opera u Italiji 19. stoljeća bila pop glazba? Razni aspekti opere u Milanu prije ujedinjenja Italije

Svojim aristokratskim podrijetlom, enormnim proračunima za uprizorenja i potrebom za klasično obrazovanom publikom današnja opera se općenito dovodi u vezu s visokom kulturom. U ovom se članku raspravlja o pitanju može li se operu u Italiji u 19. stoljeću smatrati popularnom glazbom.

Pojam popularne glazbe relativno je nov. Je li moguće primijeniti ga na glazbenu kulturu 19. stoljeća? Ova se ideja uvodi u raspravu s obzirom na situaciju s izvođenjem opera u Milanu u 19. stoljeću prije ujedinjenja Italije 1861. godine. Međutim, definiranje popularne kulture nije lak zadatak. Razni znanstvenici koji su se koncentrirali na različite aspekte 'kulturne industrije', sastav publike ili percepciju ponudili su brojne definicije. Primjenjujući razne definicije popularne kulture na operu u Milanu u prvoj polovici 19. stoljeća odgovor na spomenuto pitanje promjenjiva je karaktera. Međutim, razlike između 'visoke' i 'niske' kulture sve se više shvaćaju kao političke, a manje kao estetičke ili intelektualne razlike (Mukerji & Schudson, 1991). Čini se da se nameće ocjena da je izvođenje opere imalo političko značenje, a definiranje opere kao popularnog žanra da je imalo političke implikacije.