Introduction

L'OBAMA

The day after the election of Barack Obama as the 44th President of the United States, a Texas conservative, unhappy with the president-elect, frustrated with the defeated Republican candidate, and bitter about the former president's role in the downfall of the Republican party, posted a mock operatic subject on the Web entitled *L'Obama, ossia l'avvento del Messia*.[1] This imaginary opera starts with the post-election celebrations of Baracco Obama, who degenerates during the course of the opera from messianic figure to communist dictator. The plot unfolds toward its tragic ending as Hillaria, wife of Gugliemo Priapo (named after the son of Aphrodite, Priapus, god of male fertility), plots against Baracco. Hillaria receives a dagger from a witch, Elena Tomasso, during a horrific magic scene involving the ghost of Giorgio II, who, after being condemned to eternal water-boarding, appears "with bloody hands holding his very small brain." In the last act Hillaria uses the dagger to stab Baracco in the back. The opera closes with a choral lamentation – "Orror! Orror! Orror!" – at the prospect that Sara Palino, "Governatrice del[l'] Alaska" and "Reginetta di Bellezza," will run for president in 2012.

By the end of November 2008, this satirical synopsis appeared on over 10,000 websites worldwide and circulated further by e-mail, but in the following months thousands of these links disappeared in the Internet's quicksand. At this rate, in 250 years, there will be only few if

[1] [James] Calvert, *L'Obama, ossia L'Avvento del Messia: Opera in Tre Atti*, posted on *Classical Music & Opera Forum* (November 5, 2008), http://cmandof.freeforums.org/post2060.html#p2060. Mr. Calvert disclosed his political views on 12 November 2008 at www.dailykos.com/story/2008/11/12/83028/900/329/659714 (both accessed May 17, 2010).

any references left to *L'Obama*, and the Uniform Resource Locator provided in the first note of this introduction will most likely no longer be accessible. Not for nothing does the disclaimer in the copyright-page of this book warn that "Cambridge University Press has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of URLs." If by any chance this satirical plot should be retrieved, readers in the distant future will no longer be able to appreciate it or fully understand it without the help of a critical commentary.

THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION THROUGH OPERA GLASSES

To a greater extent than the recent election of President Obama, the American Revolution, like few other epoch-changing events in the history of humankind, generated fear and awe, inspired hope and change, and induced hysterical laughter. The array and intensity of reactions that this event provoked explain why revolutionary America started to be represented in Italian opera, especially opera buffa. This genre allowed the music-dramatic representation of widely different emotions and it brought into play a broader variety of rhetorical levels of expression than heroic opera. In addition, Italian opera was the only genre of public entertainment without national boundaries, and radical politics were more tolerated in the comic genre than in the serious one.

The present book is the first comprehensive study of eighteenth-century Italian operas to represent revolutionary America.[2] Most of

[2] The only other studies on this subjects are earlier versions of parts of this book that I have published as articles in journals or papers in conference proceedings: "Oriental Tyranny in the Extreme West: Reflections on *Amiti e Ontario* and *Le gare generose*," *Eighteenth-Century Music* 4/1 (2007), 27–53; "Quakers and Cowboys: Italian Mythologies and Stereotypes of Americans from Piccinni to Puccini," *Opera Quarterly* 23/1 (2007), 22–38; "Quacqueri pistoleri: rappresentazione del personaggio americano nell'opera buffa tra esoticismo e rivoluzione," in Giovannipaolo Maione and Francesco Cotticelli (eds.), *Le arti della scena e l'esotismo in età moderna* (Naples: Turchini Edizioni, 2006), 365–379; "L'America nelle opere di Piccinni," in Alessandro DiProfio and Mariagrazia Melucci (eds.), *Niccolò Piccinni musicista europeo* (Bari: Adda, 2004), 173–192.

these operas became obsolete and were forgotten as soon as the French Revolution frightened many of the European elites in charge of opera productions. This study is directed towards retrieving this repertory from oblivion, providing the necessary commentary and contextualization for its comprehension in our time. It does so because this repertory had a tremendous impact not only on contemporary society but also on composers, such as Haydn and Mozart, who still play a central role in our culture and society.

The topics of this study are both history and opera. As we look at history through opera glasses we gain access to aspects of past reality that other kinds of documentation do not always reveal. We begin seeing reality from the unique perspective of opera-goers during a time when opera had an impact comparable to that of the movie industry during the heyday of public cinemas.[3] However, when we observe political events through the lens of opera we need to take into account that eighteenth-century opera does not provide a direct and photographic representation of reality. Large-scale political and social life is often transposed to the microcosm of a cozy domestic sphere.[4] In the comic genre in particular, extended family and the world gravitating around this nucleus reproduce power structures existing at a larger level precisely, but only by analogy. In heroic opera, historical figures of a distant past are represented in opera with the intent of clouding them with myth, rather than shedding the light of historical truth on them. Yet, as Martha Feldman shows in her study on heroic opera, the use of myth and mythologized history did not neuter the power of opera to convey political ideas.[5] In fact, as Robert Ketterer argues, "Rome provided early modern Europe with impressive aural and

[3] For a comparison of eighteenth-century opera to the movie and television industry see Reinhard Strohm, *Die italienische Oper im 18. Jahrhundert* (Wilhelmshaven: Heinrichshofen, 1979), 22–23.

[4] Pierpaolo Polzonetti, "Opera as Process," in Anthony R. DelDonna and Pierpaolo Polzonetti (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Eighteenth-Century Opera* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 12–13.

[5] Martha Feldman, *Opera as Sovereignty: Transforming Myths in Eighteenth-Century Italy* (The University of Chicago Press, 2007).

visual presentations of two important myths, which I call the myth of the clement prince and the myth of liberty."[6] These fictions recur also in operas based on American subjects, most clearly in the numerous operas based on Montezuma (Chapter 3). In other operas, most notably in *Le gare generose* (Chapter 7), we will see that not only kings, but also capitalists or whoever can dispose of money acquire the privilege to show clemency and grant mercy. And it goes without saying that with the American Revolution the old myth of liberty was heavily charged with new and far more radical implications.

A plot containing explicit references like *L'Obama* would have been censored by religious and secular authorities as offensive to God, the State, and Good Taste. By the same token, opera topics as close to reality as John Adams's *Nixon in China* or *Doctor Atomic* would have been unthinkable. Every eighteenth-century opera comes with the implicit warning, "any resemblance of the characters to persons living or dead is merely coincidental." Yet, if political discourse could not be direct, it was nevertheless pervasive. There is no tenor role for Giorgio Wascintone, no bass character called Re Giorgio d'Inghilterra, no heroine called Abigaille Adami, but if no opera stages the Boston Tea Party, *Le gare generose* starts with a tea party in Boston. Although there are no battles of Lexington and Concord, military confrontation between American and European characters are represented in both Anfossi's Americanist operas, *L'americana in Olanda* and *L'orfanella americana* (Chapter 6). Opera makers never intended to inform. They intended to evoke information already familiar to the public in order to invite the audience to offer different perspectives on common knowledge and rethink that common knowledge with a critical and imaginative mind.

THE CORE REPERTORY

Indirect yet inescapable references to revolutionary America can be found most clearly in what I refer to here as the core repertory, which

[6] Robert C. Ketterer, *Ancient Rome in Early Opera* (Urbana and Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 2.

Table I.1 *The core repertory: eighteenth-century Italian operas based on American subjects*

Title and genre desgnation	Librettist	Composer	Premiere
I napoletani in America Commedia per musica	Francesco Cerlone	Niccolò Piccinni	Naples, 1768
Gli italiani in America Intermezzi a quattro voci (after *I napoletani*)	[Francesco Cerlone]	Niccolò Piccinni	Florence, 1769
Il viaggiatore americano in Joannesberg Farsa per musica	Pintus	Carl Ditters von Dittersdorf	Johannesburg, 1771
L'americano Intermezzi a quattro voci	Anonymous	Niccolò Piccinni	Rome, 1772
Il selvaggio di California Farsetta per musica (after *L'americano*)	Anonymous	Valentino Fioravanti	Rome, 1790
Amiti e Ontario Dramma giocoso	Ranieri de' Calzabigi	Giuseppe Scarlatti	Sleppe (Silesia), 1772
L'amante confuso Commedia per musica	Saverio Zini	Pasquale Anfossi	Naples, 1772
L'americana in Olanda Dramma giocoso	Nunziato Porta	Pasquale Anfossi	Venice, 1778
L'americana in Italia Dramma giocoso	Anonymous [Frediani]	Luigi Carusio	Venice, 1778
La quakera spiritosa Commedia per musica	Giuseppe Palomba	Pietro Alessandro Guglielmi	Naples, 1783
		Giovanni Valentini	Venice, 1786
Pasticcio version	[Revised by Lorenzo Da Ponte]	Various	Vienna, 1790
Le gare generose Dramma giocoso	Giuseppe Palomba	Giovanni Paisiello	Naples, 1786
L'orfanella americana Commedia per musica	Giovanni Bertati	Pasquale Anfossi	Venice, 1787
		Friedrich Gestewitz	Dresden, 1790
La creduta selvaggia Farsetta per musica	[after Cerlone, *Gli inglesi in America*]	Giacomo Tritto	Rome, 1792

consists of the operas listed in Table I.1. All these operas are set in America and/or feature American characters from the territory corresponding to today's United States. These works display unprecedented configurations of social and gender roles, which led important composers such as Anfossi, Cimarosa, Guglielmi, Haydn, Mozart, Paisiello, and Piccinni to introduce far-reaching musical and dramatic innovations into the fabric of Italian opera. Most notably, opera buffa's strict character hierarchy, in which rhetorical levels reflected social status, was immediately transformed into a more dynamic system when American characters walked onto the stage or when European characters were transplanted into the New World. Hence this book not only presents political and intellectual history as seen through opera glasses, but also identifies ways in which a world-changing event such as the American Revolution shaped the history of opera.

As is appropriate for the production and reception of a multi-media genre such as opera, as well as of a dual object-subject of study – opera and reality – the methods of research and critical interpretation must be eclectic. In this book I use philology, musical and textual analysis, cultural and literary studies, gender studies, sociology and history of ideas as tools rather than as guiding doctrines.

Let us see why and how through a brief examination of an opera buffa that will be discussed at greater length in Chapter 8, *La quakera spiritosa*, or *The Witty Quaker Girl*. This opera, first set to music by Pietro Alessandro Guglielmi for Naples in 1783, features an American Quaker woman named Vertunna, who goes to Italy to fulfill the contract stipulated by her father to marry an old Neapolitan count. Once in Italy, however, she finds that she prefers the count's vineyard worker, Tognino. Even though Tognino is more attracted to men than to women, she proposes marriage to him, brandishing a handgun for added incentive. For the Viennese version of this opera (1790), Lorenzo Da Ponte revised the libretto and new music was composed by several musicians, including Cimarosa, Haydn, and Mozart. Although the opera is set in the present time and centers around an eccentric and highly unusual American character, her name

alludes to a familiar classical myth involving the god of seasonal change, Vertumnus, who changed his sex from male to female in order to seduce a nymph who shies away from men. This shows that even in the late eighteenth century, opera remained a symbolic art rooted in classical literature. Yet, these traditional symbols were reinterpreted, taking into account contemporary events. In *La quakera spiritosa*, Vertumnus's sex-change is represented by the reversal of gender roles, and the freedom of the characters to determine how their natures are expressed. Vertunna (unlike Vertumnus) does not change into a man, but she also does not allow her gender to define her role. In this case mythology needs to be interpreted in light of contemporary reality: the reference to the Etruscan-Roman divinity of seasonal transformation is in itself a reference to revolution as cyclic change, in line with Vico's philosophy of history. Our interpretation of gender roles in general needs to be consistent with the context of this opera's early production. The rebellion of the daughter against her father's will is of political import considering that in opera the domestic sphere – i.e., the power relationships within the family – often mirrors the public sphere – i.e., the power relationships within the state and society at large. If the father stood for the king and the daughter for his subjects, the opera is consistent with representations of revolutionary America as a country of sons and daughters rebelling against their fatherland.[7]

Ironically, the opera's most direct allusion to the American Revolution is in its representation of the armed Quaker woman – ironically, because twentieth-century mainstream historiography grant Quakers a marginal role in the Revolutionary War by presenting them as strict pacifists, even though many did indeed fight in the War of Independence. The active participation of Quakers in the war was well documented, and in fact conflated, in contemporary European journalism, which portrays Quakers as protagonists of the American

[7] Jay Fliegelman, *Prodigals and Pilgrims: the American Revolution Against Patriarchal Authority, 1750–1800* (New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

Revolution.[8] Without reading contemporary literature we miss this point and we might see their representation with guns as a paradox or parody. In fact, what seems an operatic distortion of reality happens to reveal an aspect of reality that has been forgotten or underestimated by many historians.

Another set of problems that this opera poses, like many others studied in this book, has to do with the many and often radical changes made to the original text. The Viennese production by Da Ponte and the composers working on the *pasticcio* version requires us to compare literary and musical sources and contextualize them historically to find out that a different location (Vienna vs. Naples) and eight years of time made a difference in the perception of America. Contrary to what we may think, putting together the *pasticcio* based on newly composed music and carefully re-editing the entire libretto required more energy and time than recycling an old score. How can we dismiss a *pasticcio* as mindless only because it lacks a centralized authorial intention? To a lesser extent this problem informs many operas in the core repertory, in which variants and alternative productions of different operas always produced new sense and never less sense.

AMERICAN CHARACTERS IN ITALIAN OPERA

To eighteenth-century European opera audiences, America appeared as an unusual place: here Quakers have guns, slave-holders are remorseful and merciful, businessmen are generous, savages can be more civilized than savage European soldiers, women are strong, and men are good-looking.

Eighteenth-century operas that refer most directly to revolutionary America belong to comic opera or opera buffa. This is not because Americans were perceived as particularly funny. The traditional division between serious and comic concerned subject matter first and

[8] For a recent critique of the modern marginalization of the role of Quakers in the American Revolution see Jane E. Calvert, *Quaker Constitutionalism and the Political Thought of John Dickinson* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 1–22.

foremost. On the one hand, serious opera (opera seria) was exclusively concerned with the gods and heroes of mythology and ancient history; it tended to represent sovereigns, their court dignitaries, generals, and the like. On the other hand, opera buffa featured a wide social spectrum below sovereigns, ranging from middle or low aristocracy, through a large range of professional classes (barbers, lawyers, doctors, merchants, etc.), down to servants and occasionally farmers, with the exclusion of the clergy.

By the 1770s, casting American characters in opera buffa did not imply any necessity to represent them as stereotypes, or to cast them as either comic or serious characters. This was due to the emergence of the "mezzo carattere" and middle style since at least Piccinni's setting of Richardson's *Pamela* as *Cecchina* (1760), after which opera buffa became increasingly injected with the language of sentimentality and sensibility. It is significant that it was Piccinni himself to launch the craze of American themes. The emergence of sentimental opera happened in connection with a trend in literature and drama that, as recent scholarship shows, played an important role even in the dissemination of radical ideas in revolutionary America.[9] In line with the aesthetics and ideology of sensibility, opera buffa became more and more socially inclusive and dynamic. American characters, indeed, could have fit only imperfectly into the system of roles derived from the comedy of masks.

[9] On the English origins of the Age of Sensibility see Northrop Frye, "Towards Defining an Age of Sensibility," in Harold Bloom (ed.), *Poets of Sensibility and Sublime* (New York, New Haven, CT, Philadelphia, PA: Chelsea, 1986), 19–30. The migration of English sensibility into opera buffa is documented by Mary Hunter, "'Pamela': The Offspring of Richardson's Heroine in Eighteenth-Century Opera," *Mosaic* 18 (1985), 61–76. On sensibility and sentimentality in opera the best contribution remains Stefano Castelvecchi's studies on the subject, starting with his "Sentimental Opera: The Emergence of a Genre, 1760–1790," PhD dissertation (University of Chicago, 1996). The relevance of the culture of sensibility in the American Revolution is discussed in Sarah Knott, *Sensibility and the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2009).

THE OPEN BOUNDARIES OF THE CORE REPERTORY

This book begins and ends with two operas that are not in the core repertory since they do not represent America directly: *Il mondo della luna* and *Le nozze di Figaro*. They frame the core repertory to show that we are by no means dealing with an isolated group of works, because, as I hope to demonstrate, even these two operas by Haydn and Mozart are inspired by the American Revolution.

The chapters of this book are organized following the rough chronological order of the operas they focus on, starting with the earliest setting of Goldoni's libretto of *Il mondo della luna* (Venice, 1750) and other early settings preceding Haydn's 1777 version, and ending with opera in Mozart's Vienna during the last decade of the century. The titles of the chapters do not directly refer to the operas that are their main (but not exclusive) focus. Rather they emphasize the main theme of these operas, which in the context of this study is more important than the work or its composer(s).

The first two chapters present an in-depth analysis of *Il mondo della luna*, ranging from the unexplored seventeenth-century commedia-dell'arte and spoken-comedy sources of the libretto, including Aphra Behn's adaptation, deeply charged with English revolutionary rhetoric. Though neither Goldoni's libretto nor its many models and operatic adaptations make overt reference to contemporary events in America, these sources impinge upon our narrative in several ways. First, *Il mondo della luna* is an exemplary case: no other opera offers a better case study for the understanding of buffa conventions and the meaningful ways they could be subverted. Therefore, the context provided by these initial chapters will inform all of the subsequent analyses. Second, the opera shows how the commedia-dell'arte traditions were retained and transformed in eighteenth-century opera as a result of Goldoni's reforms. The centrifugal forces in Goldoni's domestic comedies – i.e., the destabilization of patriarchal authority – can be related to the republican system in which he lived, in Venice. This also explains why Haydn chose the libretto in 1777, and why the anonymous figure who revised