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Alessandra Campana  
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OPERA AND MODERN SPECTATORSHIP IN LATE  
NINETEENTH-CENTURY ITALY

At the turn of the twentieth century Italian opera participated in the making of a modern spectator. The Ricordi stage manuals testify to the need to harness the effects of operatic performance, activating opera’s capacity to cultivate a public. This book considers how four operas and one film deal with their public: one that in Boito’s *Mefistofele* is entertained by special effects, or that in Verdi’s *Simon Boccanegra* is called upon as a political body to confront the specters of history; also a public that in Verdi’s *Otello* is subjected to the manipulation of contemporary acting, or one that in Puccini’s *Manon Lescaut* is urged to question the mechanism of spectatorship. Lastly, the silent film *Rapsodia satanica*, thanks to the craft and prestige of Pietro Mascagni’s score, attempts to transform the new industrial medium into art, addressing its public’s search for a bourgeois pan-European cultural identity, right at the outset of the First World War.

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*For Cecilia, Francesca, and Jane*

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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book claims that opera participated in the making of a modern public in post-unification Italy. More broadly, the goal of these pages is to provide an alternative historical account of the aesthetics of opera, one that considers opera’s construction of a mode of spectating. Recent contributions to opera studies have been particularly alert to the connections between opera and public life, especially in terms of cultural and political history, compositional processes, censorship and reception, and lately also performance and ideology. This book contributes to these threads of inquiry but also claims that by the end of the nineteenth century opera, especially in Italy, is accorded the status of an autonomous, reproducible cultural commodity that aspires to constitute its audience by regulating the way it addresses it.

Crucially, Casa Ricordi’s publication of a series of staging manuals during the second half of the century – the *disposizioni sceniche* – is symptomatic of this newly felt need to devise and then control more precisely the moment of performance and its subsequent iterations. Chapter 1 introduces the staging manuals by considering their status as texts in relation to the performance they strive to control and to the public they aim to address. This leads to an examination of the staging manuals as a phenomenon pertaining both to a specific cultural policy and to a more general aesthetic turn. This book studies the detailed instructions of the manuals as textual traces of the theatrical conventions and solutions that were adopted to address and interpellate the public at the turn of the twentieth century. The central chapters examine more in detail how four of these operas and their staging manuals deal with their public: a public that in Arrigo Boito’s *Mefistofele* (1868–81) is openly confronted in its aesthetic assumptions but also entertained and mesmerized by spectacular special effects, or that, in the case of Verdi’s *Simon Boccanegra* (1857–81), is called upon as a political body, in its ability to confront the specters of history. But it is also a public that in Verdi’s *Otello* (1887) is subjected to the calculated emotional manipulation of contemporary acting theories and techniques, or one that in Puccini’s *Manon Lescaut* (1893) is urged to question the very mechanism that keeps spectators engaged with what happens on the stage, both visually and aurally. The last chapter is dedicated instead to a peculiar experiment involving a “diva film” and an opera composer: the silent film *Rapsodia satanica* (1914–17), interpreted by the famous actress Lyda Borelli, with an orchestral score by Pietro Mascagni. This extraordinary film represents an attempt at transforming the new industrial medium from mass entertainment into art, thanks to the consummate craft and the

cultural prestige of an opera composer. It also represents the effort to address a national mass audience in its search for a bourgeois pan-European cultural identity, right at the outset of the Great War.

This book therefore is also about how Italian opera in the last decades of the nineteenth century shaped and responded to the necessities and anxieties of modernity. The stage manuals testify to the emerging ambition to harness and channel the effects of live operatic performance, and to allow opera to address and cultivate a public. This ambition is surely an aesthetic one, but it also forcefully involves political and cultural formations, both those specific to post-unification Italy (such as the “making of the Italians”), as well as those more general to Europe at the turn of the century. It is at this juncture that this book creates a dialogue with cultural history as well as with other disciplines – film studies, theatre and performance studies – traditionally preoccupied with the issues at stake here, such as spectatorship, visibility, performance, theatricality and so forth. Each chapter therefore establishes its own critical scene, where theoretical concepts and historical themes interact with the textual traces left by these four operas and one film – libretto, score, staging manual, reviews. The curious case of Boito’s *Mefistofele* is explored in Chapter 2 through a series of intersecting narratives: the story of the opera’s disastrous reception and subsequent revision, Balzac’s novella *The Unrecognized Masterpiece*, and Giorgio Agamben’s account of the crucial shift in the aesthetics of modernity. I argue that the opera includes and envisions its notoriously tormented creation and reception. The innovative and spectacular apparatus devised by Boito engenders a spectator who is enchanted by the abundance of special effects but is ultimately encouraged to question the stakes of aesthetic judgment.

Chapter 3 argues that the story of Simon Boccanegra, the pirate turned doge, marred by the relentless demands of the past, stages what can be termed a spectral historicity. This is discussed in the context of a burgeoning culture industry and its contemporary celebrations of an enlightened, technological modernity: from the light shows of the National Exhibition of Industry and Art in Milan, to the performance of the *gran ballo Excelsior*, to popular mid-century optical spectacles such as diorama and phantasmagoria. This chapter’s critical scene at times shadows but does not engage directly with the Benjaminian arguments that are probably more familiar to the discourse of opera studies. This kind of theoretical “ghosting” is hardly casual and reflects instead this book’s attempt to attend to the specificity of Italian culture at this time.

Turning from stagecraft to acting theories, Chapter 4 focuses on the poietic and empathic force of acting. The minute descriptions of gestures in the staging manual for *Otello* respond to contemporary controversies about acting, such as the one that developed around Denis Diderot’s *Paradox of the Actor*. In Verdi’s opera the conflict between Otello and Jago thematizes acting along the lines of those controversies, as the juxtaposition of what Lacoue-Labarthe termed passive and active mimesis. Otello, the victim of Jago’s calculations, is confined, on the one hand, to the transparent emotionality elaborated by great Romantic actors (such as Tommaso Salvini). On the

other hand, he is the only character endowed with the capacity of empathetic reappropriation of his past. Thus the opera raises issues that challenge the ethics and aesthetics of theatrical mimesis.

Nowhere is the mimetic potential of a character exploited as much as in *Manon Lescaut*, and in the way of a tour de force in subject-construction. Chapter 5 introduces the gaze as a theatrical device, and discusses the relation of the heroine to the set in conjunction with a number of twentieth-century critical texts which are concerned with identity and spectatorship: from Jean-Paul Sartre's notorious vignette of the voyeur to Jacques Lacan's theory of subjectification in the realm of vision, and film theory's elaboration of the concept of suture. From this perspective, what have traditionally been considered the opera's most problematic aspects – the lack of continuity among the acts and the odd bareness and stillness of the last act – emerge as its most modern features. In this sense *Manon Lescaut* explores the limits of nineteenth-century operatic spectatorship and, in the nowhere of the last act, it reveals voyeurism as the necessary trick behind the operatic machinery.

By closing with another variation on the Faustian theme, the silent film *Rapsodia satanica*, forty years after Boito's *Mefistofele*, this book suggests that Faust's dilemma assumed a special significance also in Italian experiments with an art of modernity. Chapter 6 turns to the theory and historiography of music in early film, examining the role of an opera composer at work with the new production system of cinema. The experiment was firstly an economic enterprise but it also constituted a new test of the very capabilities of music as a medium: the opera composer Mascagni invents a new working method, but also a new function for music in order to accompany the powerful mute images of the actress and diva Lyda Borelli.

This book has been long in the making, typically for a first research project but also unusually so – perhaps because it took a while to realize that research on the performance potentialities of texts was destined to translate into a performance of endlessly potential texts. Hence previous versions of these chapters have assumed the form of conference papers, proceedings and journal articles, at different degrees of distance from their current status. Chapter 3 includes segments previously published in “*Il menzognero incanto: Sight and Insight in Simon Boccanegra*,” *Studi verdiani* 13 (January 2000), 59–87, and in “*Amelia/Maria and the larve del passato*,” *Cambridge Opera Journal* 14/1–2 (March 2002), 211–27, which reached rather different conclusions. Similarly, part of Chapter 4 appeared as “*Intelligenti giuochi di fisionomia: Acting in Otello*,” in *Verdi 2001. Atti del convegno internazionale di studi, Parma, New York, New Haven, 24 gennaio–1° febbraio 2001*, Fabrizio Della Seta, Roberta Montemorra Marvin, and Marco Marica, eds. (Florence: Olschki, 2002), 879–901, developing another kind of argument, while Chapter 5 is based on my article “*Look and Spectatorship in Manon Lescaut*,” *The Opera Quarterly* 24/1–2 (Spring 2008), 4–26. Translations in the text are my own, unless otherwise indicated.

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## xvi | Preface and acknowledgments

The work for this book has accrued from the expertise, intellectual generosity and friendship of a large number of people. Prompts, ideas, reactions, discussions have traveled across the pond several times, encompassing a broad geographical as well as disciplinary network of colleagues and friends. Among those who directly dealt with these pages at some early stage are my *maestri*: first of all Pierluigi Petrobelli, with his ever inspiring passion and imagination, and more recently David Rosen, who with an incomparable mix of subversive humor and intelligent craftsmanship has shared his interests and discoveries and taught me the tools of the trade.

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