

Texts from Elsewhere

- Verdi, 'Pace, pace, mio Dio!'

(Leonora), *La forza del destino*, Act IV

- Verdi, 'D'amor sull'ali rosee/Miserere/Ah! che la morte ognora'

(Leonora, chorus, Manrico), *Il trovatore*, Part IV

© Cormac Newark 2016

[accepted for publication in the *Cambridge Opera Journal*, Cambridge University Press, as part of a tribute to Roger Parker]

In *Leonora's Last Act*, Roger Parker reminds us of opera's essential textual plurality:

its music is accompanied by a literary text, one that commonly derives from an earlier, independent text; it involves characters and character types, many of whom carry texts from elsewhere; and its performance is usually a public event that in turn produces a mass of texts concerned with reception, criticism, and commentary. Opera, in short, challenges us by means of its brash impurity, its loose ends and excess of meaning, its superfluity of narrative secrets.¹

Those secrets are nowhere more compelling, I think, than when they are themselves carried elsewhere, above all into the meta-critical world of fiction. There, arias become very different cultural objects, sometimes composite, sometimes fractured, always more meaningful. Examining this special kind of reception, criticism, and commentary can, among other things, serve to highlight the wisdom of a recurring argument in Parker's book, about the need for self-awareness in the use of even the most familiar disciplinary tools. To adapt the above summing-up, the narrative secrets of both fiction (in Italian, simply *narrativa*) and opera, especially in combination, challenge us to consider what might be the narrative secrets of

¹ *Leonora's Last Act: Essays in Verdian Discourse* (Princeton, 1997), 61.

musicology.

For more reasons than the obvious onomastic one, an especially apposite case-study is to be found in a short story by Luigi Pirandello, ‘Leonora, addio!’.² Though best known outside Italy for his plays, in particular *Sei personaggi in cerca d’autore* (*Six characters in search of an author*, 1921), Pirandello’s most consistent form of expression was the short story, so much so that in 1922 he resolved, Balzac-like, to group all his past and future production in the genre into a single meta-work, the *Novelle per un anno* (*Short stories for a year*). The set was to contain a short story for every day of the year, and, just as in the *Comédie humaine* (*Human comedy*, 1834–1850) its acknowledgement of illustrious literary precedents, its systematic organisation into volumes and its grand ambition to represent an entire social culture were key aesthetic elements.³ When it came to representing the place of opera in that culture, Pirandello clearly inherited other things from Balzac, and from nineteenth-century literature more broadly. Prominent among these are commonplaces such as the idea that opera-going is essential to (and revealing of) social structures, and that immersive fictions can be perilous for women. ‘Leonora, addio!’ makes use of both of these novelistic tropes, but filters them through a new, incipiently Modernist sensibility.

More important, Pirandello’s story can also be read as updating tropes of opera reception in the larger cultural context. Among the ‘texts from elsewhere’ most commonly carried into written accounts of nineteenth-century Italian operas—then as now—were their political resonances, the relative audibility of which depended on the writer. In the process of carrying into his prose certain texts from opera, Pirandello self-consciously played with this—that is, with both musical and cultural audibility. A great deal has been written in the last twenty years on the place of opera in the idea of Italy pre- and immediately post-unification; close reading of ‘Leonora, addio!’ uncovers valuable clues to what it may have been in later, less

² First published in the *Corriere della Sera* (6 November 1910), 3, and subsequently in *Novelle per un anno: Volume XII* (Florence: R. Bemporad & F., 1928), 211–224.

³ Models included Petrarca’s *Canzoniere* and the *Thousand-and-One Nights*. Some of the *Novelle* had already appeared in volume form, but in different configurations.

thoroughly examined reception, in particular that of the decade or so immediately preceding Fascism.

To begin with, the story apparently takes for granted both the cultural integration of opera and its role in historical revisionism (important concerns, of course, for musicology a century later). In ‘Leonora, addio!’ opera is represented as fully shared by all Italians, even if Italy itself is not. The differences between regional cultures are constantly invoked. As the story opens in a provincial Sicilian town (plausibly Pirandello’s native Agrigento) at some point in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, some army officers, mostly from the mainland, have been concentrating their attentions on the four daughters of the La Croce family. Perhaps because their mother is Neapolitan, they are the only locals who will accept the officers socially, and the latter take full advantage—at least until the only Sicilian among them, Rico Verri, decides he actually wants to marry one of the daughters, Mommina. The flirting, and indeed all the group’s socialising, revolves around the consumption of opera: in the theatre, at home around the piano, and in arrangements played in the park by the regimental band. Mother, daughters and soldiers all know the classics, and also the latest hits, in spite of frequent references to Sicily’s isolated geographical position in the ‘African’ sea. And the understanding is always that, in the realm of male-female relations as much as opera appreciation, ‘this is what they do on the mainland’.⁴ After the marriage, however, Rico’s retrospective jealousy leads him to imprison Mommina (and later their two daughters) at home, until one day they learn, from a playbill in his pocket, that *La forza del destino* is on in town. Precisely because the sequestered little girls are now the only ones who do *not* know about opera, Mommina insists on passing on to them their cultural inheritance all at once, by acting out back-to-back one-woman performances of the entire canon. In classic operatic style, this self-sacrificing effort appears to cause her death.

In fact, it is heart failure that is responsible, and one unmistakably twentieth-century aspect of the narrative is the de-romanticised way in

⁴ The recurring phrase is ‘in Continente si faceva così’.

which Mommina's 'heartache' has a carefully prepared medical, rather than emotional, explanation, and her increasing corpulence linked to a rather modern stereotype of the absurdity of operatic performance. But there are several others, mainly to do with the harsh geopolitical realities of post-unification disillusionment and regional difference. The most subtle, but perhaps also the most important, concerns the character of Mommina's father, a distracted figure who seems unable to take any part in family life, still less exercise the traditionally strict Sicilian patriarchal control. One of very few things said about him is that he is a mining engineer at the sulphur works, the main symbol in Sicily of the economic (and social) oppression associated with Italy's difficult industrialisation, in particular with the post-unification fiscal policies that forced mass emigration from the island. In this sense he represents the problematic future of the unified nation. Neatly complementing this, almost the only other thing we learn about him is that he is (or pretends to be) deaf, hence also disconnected from the nationally integrating force of opera.

As outlined above, hearing and audibility are especially important in the explicitly operatic parts of the narrative, which appear to shift slyly from textual quotation (extracts from Ricordi scores) to misquotation (reporting what characters think the text should be, or what is audible to them), covering many seemingly grey areas in between. Earlier novelists made mistakes when half-recalling operatic lines; Balzac in particular made little effort to get textual details right, especially when they were in Italian. But he nevertheless clearly expected the musical invocation to come across uncompromised. Pirandello, on the other hand, seems to choose references that look convincing on the page, but, for the reader who is also in a sense listening, cannot quite offer the welcome orientation of shared aural experience. The first, from Leonora's aria in Act IV of *La forza del destino*, is

né toglier mi potrò
l'immagin sua dal cor,

[nor will I be able to remove

his picture from my heart,]⁵

a metrically mismatched version of ‘Nè togliermi dal core / L’immagin sua saprò’. Nor does Pirandello’s quotation from the beginning of Marcel’s sectarian song in Meyerbeer’s *Gli Ugonotti*

Pif, paf, pif,
Dispersa sen vada
La nera masnada,

[Pif, paf, pif,
Away, dispersed,
With the whole black band of them,]

quite fit the relevant music: it is (obviously) missing a ‘paf’.⁶ The fact that the Ricordi translation of the libretto has it this way suggests that Pirandello relied on textual prompts rather than musical memory; this merely complicates further the notion of what is ‘heard’ in his own text.⁷ These hints at de-familiarisation seem to find confirmation in the last quotation (Manrico’s second interjection in the Miserere from Act IV of *Il trovatore*, where he finally sings ‘Leonora, addio!’), which Pirandello prefaces by a suggestive aural homing in that neatly encapsulates the effect of his narrative device:

Il giorno dopo, rincasando due ore prima del solito, nell’introdurre le due chiavi tedesche nei buchi delle serrature [Rico] credette di udire strane grida nell’interno della casa; tese l’orecchio; guardò, infoscandosi, le finestre serrate... Chi cantava in casa sua? ‘Miserere d’un uomo che s’avvia...’ Sua moglie? ‘Il Trovatore’?⁸

⁵ All translations are my own.

⁶ *Les Huguenots*, Act I couplets, ‘Pif, paf, pif, paf, / À bas les couvents maudits!’.

⁷ *Gli Ugonotti / opera in cinque atti / versione italiana / parole di Scribe / musica di Giacomo Meyerbeer* (Milan, [1837]).

⁸ *Novelle per un anno: Volume XII*, 223.

[The next day, returning home two hours earlier than usual, while putting the two German keys in the lock, Rico thought he heard strange cries from inside the house; he listened intently; looked, scowling, at the tightly shut windows... Who was singing inside his house? 'Miserere d'un uomo che s'avvia...' His wife? *Il trovatore*?]

This half-heard, half-reconstructed line from the chorus—which should of course be 'Miserere d'un'alma già vicina [...]'—positively thematises the expressively distant sound of music in writing, whether it is muffled by faulty recollection on the part of author or textual performer, by indistinctness in performance or reception, or (and) by deliberate manipulation.

What does come across distinctly here is that the common nineteenth-century literary convention, by which lines quoted from arias invoked operatic plots in intimate dialogue with the 'host' narrative, is being gradually left behind. Here, the 'text carried from elsewhere' engages at a much broader level, articulating a notion of Italian opera as an undifferentiated canon—full of various Leonoras, and, given the references to *Les Huguenots* and elsewhere *Faust*, not even exclusively Italian—but engages no less incisively for all that. Pirandello's manipulation of that canon, in the cause of characteristically Modernist questions of historical and cultural alienation, was to be further worked out in the last play of his *teatro nel teatro* ('theatre within the theatre') trilogy, *Questa sera si recita a soggetto* (*Tonight we improvise*, 1930),⁹ in which the 'play within a play' is a version of 'Leonora, addio!', and in which the latter's implicitly revisionist and deconstructive text is itself radically deconstructed. But that's (yet) another narrative.

⁹ With *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore* and *Ciascuno a suo modo* (*Each in his own way*, 1924).