



FRANCESCO BRACCI, *Italiani contro l'opera. La ricezione negativa dell'opera italiana in Italia dal dopoguerra a oggi*, Venezia, Marsilio, 2020, pp. 318, ISBN 978-88-297-0730-0.

Taking a look around an Italian opera house today, one may indeed find oneself in tears from time to time: touched by the delights of opera, conversing with insiders over particularly pleasant opera nights that linger in one's mind for a long time on the journey home; or as a lament over rampant cultural ignorance; or, to put it more mildly, about the fact that many simply never come into contact with this form of art, perhaps since the world of theatre has simply remained a world apart for them due to socialization (for the time being, this is by no means a phenomenon that exclusively applies to Italy). A common prejudice among Italians is that the situation in Germany, with its internationally unparalleled density of state-subsidized musical theatres, is fundamentally better. In Germany, on the other hand, there is little doubt, even among the clueless, that Italy is 'the land of opera and *bel canto*'. Even against the background of such superficial

statements concerning a far more complex situation of opera both past and present, the recent book published by the latinist and music historian Francesco Bracci is noteworthy indeed. Not only does it allow for the idea that 'even Italians' might have (had) something against opera at times, but it also touches on a figure of thought that has meanwhile advanced into cultural-political marketing. In this context, for instance, the Board of the Italian National Commission for UNESCO nominated «The Art of the [*sic*] Italian Opera Singing» for intangible world cultural heritage in 2022, ultimately leading to its inscription on the representative list of the intangible cultural heritage of humanity in 2023.¹ Bracci's book, which is based on his musicological dissertation defended at the University of Bern in 2018, helps to differentiate this picture significantly, while revealing deeper resentment towards opera as an art form, which actually exists to a considerable degree in Italy as well.

On the one hand, the author's choice of topic aims at a closer investigation of the relationship of Italians with 'their' opera culture since the post-war period; first and foremost,



¹ Deutsche Presse-Agentur, *Singen statt Kaffee: Italienischer Operngesang als immaterielles Unesco-Erbe*, «Neue Musikzeitung», URL: <https://www.nmz.de/kiz/nachrichten/singen-statt-kaffee-italienischer-operngesang-als-immaterielles-unesco-erbe>, 30.03.2023; UNESCO, *The practice of opera singing in Italy*, «Intangible Heritage. Lists», URL: <https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/the-practice-of-opera-singing-in-italy-01980>, 05.06.2024.

he roots his argument in the canonical repertoire of the *Ottocento* (and partly early *Novecento*), which continues to dominate the international opera stages to this day. In the course of his reflections, the author also seeks to clear up a series of narratives about the Italians and their *melodramma* that are still widespread in everyday culture. Bracci sums up the most common prejudices in passages such as the following, right at the beginning of his study:

gli italiani sarebbero individualisti, superficiali, portati al sentimentalismo e alla teatralità; la tradizione letteraria italiana sarebbe macchiata dal primato di un umanesimo retorico e insincero; la cultura italiana sarebbe diventata marginale in Europa nel corso del Seicento per non riconquistare mai più lo splendore dell'epoca tardomedievale e rinascimentale; nella storia moderna del paese mancherebbe o sarebbe molto debole una civiltà borghese.²

In other words, the author himself faces the challenge of bringing his diagnosis of a hostile attitude towards Italian opera to Italians, especially intellectuals, of the post-war period into resonance with the relatively stable opera repertoire of the last 200 years or so, with varying historical audiences, which have certainly produced a large mass of somewhat striking prose under changing political auspices. This is rounded off by Bracci's classical-philological training, which can be repeatedly traced throughout his writing. It enables him to come up with some original cross-readings between Latin literature and opera history, for example when hinting at long-established conventions such as the accepted artificiality present in both fields.³ Such moments refreshingly broaden not only the historical scope, but also the intellectual overall-radius of the study, to the point that curious readers from various disciplinary backgrounds may continually be engaged.

Bracci's book combines three perspectives that are immediately apparent in the conception of the table of contents. In the first two major chapters (I: *L'opera e i suoi nemici: il mondo musicale*; II: *L'opera e i suoi nemici: il mondo letterario*), the essential antipodes of opera – meaning here essentially the Italian *melodramma* – are discussed in an attempt to bundle central historical problem areas together. The fact that musicians, of all people, and in the second instance also writers, are treated by Bracci as the most vehement opponents of opera is only one obvious example of the numerous and refreshing insights this study has to offer. Finally, in the third major section of his book, Bracci makes an attempt, not without risk for a scholarly exploration, to capture how opera is dealt with in contemporary society (III: *La percezione dell'opera nella società contemporanea*). In doing so, while shedding critical light on established opera research, Bracci remains aware of the risk of lumping together questions of taste that would all be too far removed by historical distance, instead of taking the constructiveness of history and musical aesthetics into account by enduring the tension of contradictions and voids that inevitably results from genuine scholarly investigation.

² FRANCESCO BRACCI, *Italiani contro l'opera. La ricezione negativa dell'opera italiana in Italia dal dopoguerra a oggi*, Venezia, Marsilio, 2020, p. 18.

³ For example, see *ivi*, pp. 16-17.

In the first two main sections of the book, however, the author demonstrates a largely unbiased view by including numerous sources in the form of quotations that stem from everyday discourse and are thus, at first glance, of seemingly 'unprofessional' provenance. In fact, this is intentional, as everyday discourse on Italian opera extends beyond the circle of opera experts and enthusiasts and thus determines its public image to a considerable degree. While in sections I and II the methodology is essentially based on historical source criticism in combination with the cultural or intellectual contextualization of central moments in the history of opera reception, the music historian Bracci – by no means as a matter of course – also makes use of qualitative research methods and adopts a primarily sociological perspective on the tastes of the opera audience in the third part of his book. At this point, he seeks to reveal the patterns of evaluation with regard to the dissemination and neglect of Italian opera culture. The qualitative interviews conducted with just 20 people (50% female, 50% male) from three age groups (20-40, 40-60, over 60) and from different educational and professional groups (including musicians) serve as the starting point for the final part of Bracci's study. After recording the participants' educational backgrounds, professions, social images, specific intellectual interests, if any, and questions in terms of musical taste, surveys were then conducted following their first visit to the opera with questions on general judgements about this experience, opera-goers in their circle of acquaintances as well as concrete memories of individual operas, scenes and aesthetic preferences, as well as questions on the boundaries between symphonic repertoire and musicals.

The study thus not only spans half a century of engagement with different publics of historical opera repertoire, both near and far from music, but also a broad field in terms of sources and methods. Accordingly, the author's perspective oscillates between musicological and cultural studies, sociological and also Italianistic reflection – in short, an interdisciplinary view without which such a project hardly seems feasible.

Indicative of the author's astute thinking is even a cursory glance at the analytical index of the book. Dichotomies that have long dominated transnational music history (e.g. Verdi and Mozart, Verdi and Wagner) or phenomena such as *wagnerismo italiano* or television are considered, as are politically charged categories: populism, nationalism and orientalism, as well as catholicism and homosexuality. Many of the formative historical circumstances that influenced the European (anti-)opera audience are also touched on, at least in passing, although one may wonder why soccer is discussed as a separate topic, while political movements that had a profound social impact such as the left-wing terrorism of the 1970s are not dealt with more in detail. Is this due to banal prioritizations of the audience in the later 20th century or also due to the fact that, regardless of the cruelty of terror, only the ecstatic collective experience of soccer could ultimately sublimate the commonplace of Italian opera as mere entertainment in such a profane way repeatedly criticized by Bracci?

The author's analytical view of the way opera as a genre has been dealt with does not stop at excursions into the realms of jazz, rock and pop, from the *canzone d'autore* to heavy metal. Admittedly, these categories are not only extremely diverse, but are also often located on divergent social or musical levels, which is why they can only be discussed selectively within the framework of such a monograph. This seems especially noteworthy since Bracci likes to see his study, which one might find quite courageous, as an ambitious attempt to present a fully-fledged reception theory not limited to music («teoria della ricezione [dell'opera] non

solo in musica»⁴).⁴ Nonetheless, the disparate analytical categories are useful as intellectual stimulation for a concentrated examination of Italian opera from the post-war period to the present. By constantly remaining aware of the musical parallel worlds of the 20th century, Bracci seeks to broaden exclusive views of the world of opera and thereby avoids a short-sighted perspective on the musical-intellectual relationship of contemporaries to opera as a form of art. In this way, the author aims to get to the bottom of the tense relationship to opera within Italy, especially in the first two main sections. Thus, in the course of the book there are numerous thought-provoking confrontations, for instance when Bracci investigates a text by the jazz pianist Stefano Bollani on Puccini and Gershwin,⁵ pointing out parallels between Bollani's narrative from the jazz scene and that of Luciano Berio. One may occasionally consider this approach too eclectic, yet it by no means fails to achieve the goal of revealing sweeping, sometimes banal self-images, even among Italians who speak the word of a polemic against opera without falsely shying away from music-historical authorities. Especially in contrast to the results of the qualitative surveys of contemporary audiences towards the end of the book, Bracci's explanations prove to be as instructive as they are depressing, at least from the perspective of passionate opera lovers. In any event, Bracci's gripping style allows him to make original observations over long stretches. He consistently provides the reader as well as contemporary opera naysayers with opportunities to consider the treatment of Italian opera from a more impartial perspective, thereby inspiring renewed questioning of established yet simplistic explanations for audience decline that only scratch the surface of the issue itself. The author also succeeds in this endeavor as he gets to the point right from the start; for example, when he clearly names the often rather simple factors that keep broad portions of society and supposed 'intellectual elites' away from opera houses, not only in Italy:

Tra i fattori di questo declino ci sono il fastidio, comune nella società attuale, nei confronti del canto lirico e la difficoltà di buona parte del pubblico odierno nel seguire un'opera intera comprendendone la trama e soprattutto senza annoiarsi.⁶

Overall, it can be said that the study is held together throughout by clever observations that also take into account the specifics of Italian musical life rooted in everyday culture, while never losing sight of its international perspective (primarily with a view to Austro-German, French and occasionally English specificities). For this reason, too, Bracci succeeds in overcoming entrenched thought patterns over long stretches. For example, he shows great historical sensitivity in underlining how strongly the post-Weberian avant-garde also participated in the reception of 19th century Italian opera, and thus subcutaneously criticizes exaggerated depictions of the European avant-garde as a radical break with music-historical traditions. Even if Bracci's reading of Verdi as the paradigm of opera composition in the 19th century is not necessarily surprising, the discussions on Verdi among composers and

⁴ *Ivi*, p. 12.

⁵ *Ivi*, pp. 97 and following.

⁶ *Ivi*, p. 12.

conductors of the *generazione dell'Ottanta* such as Alfredo Casella or the avant-garde, above all Luciano Berio, but also Pierre Boulez or René Leibowitz, make for insightful reading. The same applies to the study of Puccini, whereby Bracci adds important historical nuances to the widespread assessment of his supposedly indisputable popularity, which is based on his success with the public: from the initial skepticism of a conservative like Ildebrando Pizzetti to the critical attitude of influential Italian publicists such as Andrea Della Corte, not to mention Luigi Nono. At times, one would like to see more in-depth discussions on the complex relationship of such protagonists – in particular when it comes to the musical left – to the Italian opera tradition and especially to *verismo*, which has been neglected to this day, yet this would certainly provide enough material for separate research.⁷

In any case, Bracci demonstrates with aplomb that a historical judgement about an opera or a composer must be fundamentally distinguished from the mere fact that a work has made it into the performance repertoire or is treated as canonical within academic musicology. Indeed, this is one of the decisive merits of this book, founded on the basis of solid knowledge of repertoire and literature against a broad panorama of recent scholarly as well as popular debates about Italian opera. This study is also a book on the history of music research and the recent past, in that Bracci not only critically examines the statements on Italian opera made by various still active, primarily Italian musicologists (and not to be left out: Richard Taruskin) in the first chapter of his work. As the book progresses, Bracci's insightful remarks on journalistic authors who proved to be influential for the later public reception of opera in Italy, such as Piero Buscaroli,⁸ are worth mentioning as well. Lastly, the author shows in such passages that he neither succumbs to the vain temptation to overestimate the scope of his own academic discipline nor to simplistically romanticize the complex fascination of opera. Accordingly, his basic insights include both the fact that musicological debates largely take place in a circle of insiders and are therefore not necessarily representative of the musical tastes of the masses, as well as the fact that program notes are still predominantly written for the musically trained part of much more diverse audiences.

The fact that leading Italian musicologists, of all people, prepared the ground for early «anti-Verdianism», and that they themselves only found access to opera later in life in various cases, offers further surprising insights. Starting with an account of the experiences of the well-known Verdi expert Pierluigi Petrobelli (and in particular his 'conversion' to opera), Bracci succeeds in showing the training of numerous later Italian opera experts, including Marcello Conati, in the Austro-German Romantic or modern repertoire (Wagner, Strauss, Schönberg, Berg, Webern), which then had an even greater impact on the negative assessment of Verdi in some cases.⁹ With gusto, Bracci also focuses on central figures of international musical life in the post-war period, such as Claudio Abbado or Giuseppe Sinopoli, at the

⁷ In this context, Bracci primarily refers to the monograph by MICHELE GIRARDI, *Giacomo Puccini. L'arte internazionale di un musicista italiano*, Venezia, Marsilio, 1995. However, numerous further examples mentioned from the circles of the Italian avant-garde suggest that a panoramic study beyond individual canonized authors of opera history would be worthwhile.

⁸ *Ivi*, pp. 85 and following.

⁹ See *ivi*, p. 36.

crucial junctures of Italian and Austro-German music history. Especially regarding Sinopoli, his turn to Verdi is impressively traced on the basis of compositions and selected quotations. By keeping the coexistence of the Austro-German Romantic repertoire and Italian opera within Italian musical culture in view at all times, Bracci succeeds in clearly elaborating the essential tension that characterizes the oftentimes ambivalent relationship of various musicians, critics and musicologists in regard to Italian opera.

In this context, the chapters on basic ways of dealing with Italian opera in popular discourse such as Bracci's historical sketch of the different forms of designation of musical theatre (*opera*, *melodramma*, *dramma per musica*) in the journalistic and literary spheres are both enlightening and enjoyable to read. In such passages, he not only succeeds in using his linguistic skills and knowledge of Italian opera history specifically to clarify terminology; he also broadens the perspective on Italian opera history through solid excursions on important aesthetic developments in the French and English-speaking worlds, so that it becomes clear that Italian opera history has long required international music history to be interpreted and is by no means just a topic for postcolonial studies of current musicology.

The differentiated analyses of the qualitative interview series in the third part of the book are also embedded in historically relevant international studies on the (dis)interest of the public in opera since 1968. Apart from some predictability, they offer quite a few insights that may astonish passionate representatives of highbrow culture. For example, according to the survey, interest in certain writers (from Roberto Saviano to Elena Ferrante) still occasionally triggers a night out at the opera among contemporaries, just as die-hard jazz and rock fans are indeed put off by the under-complexity (!) of opera. Ultimately, Bracci's music-historical panoramas remain the most beautiful to read in this chapter, in order to put contemporary sweeping accusations of opera – first and foremost boredom, which one is inclined to quickly wave off as modern philistinism – into historical perspective.¹⁰ For example, his elaborations on the pre-Kantian view of opera as an 'event' create remarkable historical proximity between the present and the past, despite completely differing socio-political contexts. In the brief conclusion, what Bracci has already hinted at several times earlier comes to the fore, namely that he infers, at least in part, directly from the statements of the audience to the artistic essence of the opera when it reads:

In questo capitolo ho provato a dimostrare che l'opera suscita reazioni negative in due diversi settori del pubblico collocati agli estremi dello spettro in termini di preparazione culturale, e che queste reazioni dicono qualcosa di essenziale sulla sua natura artistica.¹¹

Even if this step can be called daring by any means, it is essential to conclude with a very memorable statement by the author in the outlined context: «L'esistenza di una ricezione ostile è connessa alla presenza dell'opera nell'immaginario collettivo, sia come mezzo artistico sia come fatto sociale.»¹² In this respect, in view of opera's decline between *patrimonio storico*

¹⁰ *Ivi*, pp. 279 and following.

¹¹ *Ivi*, p. 288.

¹² *Ivi*, p. 289.

and middlebrow culture in times of nationalism and the crisis of debate culture, as lucidly analyzed by Bracci, it remains desirable that Verdi and a few others, in addition to their presence in contemporary Italian literature,¹³ may see greater musical resonance beyond Italy. Francesco Bracci, at any rate, has made a competent, thoughtful contribution to this that is certainly well worth reading.

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¹³ To point to just one of the various examples brought up by Bracci for discussion, one learns that the contemporary author Antonio Moresco speaks of the «...melodramma del cazzo!» in his 2007 play *Merda e luce*, in which the curtain caller backstage comments on the genres performed on stage (absurdly, in the presence of an inflatable penis). *Ivi*, p. 161.