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Under Cover in Babylon: Rossini's *Cyrus the Great* for the Lenten Season

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*Rossini's *Ciro in Babilonia*, ossia, *La caduta di Baldassare* (Cyrus in Babylon, or, The Fall of Belshazzar) was performed during Lent in 1812 at Ferrara's Teatro Comunale. This study examines how the opera's librettist Francesco Avanti synthesized disparate sources that included the Greek historian Herodotus and the Biblical prophets, ancient and early modern prose treatises on the Persian king Cyrus the Great, and baroque operatic representations of imperial power; and how Rossini responded to those sources musically for the particular historical moment in March of 1812. The piece is of interest as the first serious opera for the librettist and the composer both. It displays innovative approaches to classicizing material familiar from the eighteenth-century, as exemplified in Metastasio's *Ciro riconosciuto* and Sarti's *Giulio Sabino*, and it presents the secular hero Cyrus as a Christological figure that suffers and then triumphs with divine help. Musically it anticipates developments in Rossini's own *Mosè in Egitto* and *Semiramide*. The title "Under cover in Babylon" refers first to Avanti's and Rossini's use of the standard operatic plot device of the disguised lover to motivate Cyrus's entry into the enemy city of Babylon. Second, by calling the piece an "oratorio" and including Biblical material, they disguised an opera as an entertainment appropriate for Lent. Finally, the piece carries possible but subtly expressed messages connected with Napoleonic Italy and the Ferrarese Jewish community.*

Gioachino Rossini composed *Ciro in Babilonia, ossia, La caduta di Baldassare* (Cyrus in Babylon, or, *The Fall of Belshazzar*) for Ferrara's Teatro Comunale in March 1812 as an opera for Lent.¹ The librettist was Francesco Avanti (or Avventi), a Ferrarese count who was a producer and managerial director for the Teatro Comunale beginning in 1808, and who later authored an extensive manual on the practical aspects of opera

¹ Francesco Avanti, libretto; Gioachino Rossini, composer; *Ciro in Babilonia, o sia, La caduta di Baldassare: Dramma con cori per musica: da rappresentarsi nel Teatro Comunale di Ferrara la Quaresima dell'anno MDCCCXII. Pe' socj Bianchi e Negri al seminario, Ferrara, [1812?]: www.loc.gov/item/2010660657, accessed 8 May 2021. Libretto citations are taken from this source. Research for this article was supported in part by grants from the University of Iowa Arts and Humanities Initiative, the University of Iowa Committee of the Newberry Library Renaissance Consortium, and the Gladys Kriebel Delmas Foundation.*

production titled *Il mentore teatrale* (Ferrara, 1845).² *Ciro in Babilonia* is a work by neophytes – this was the first serious opera for both librettist and composer³ – and it is of considerable interest both for its subject matter and its place in operatic history. The events of the drama are adapted from classical and Biblical history and legends surrounding Cyrus the Great, conqueror of Babylon and founder of the Persian empire, in the sixth century BCE. Cyrus was a historical figure, well known and frequently represented in the arts throughout the early modern era, but this particular episode from his life was rarely presented on the stage. As an opera, *Ciro in Babilonia* is also of interest because it appeared during the period of transition between the eighteenth-century mode of presenting ancient orientalist subject matter and that of the Italian operas of the nineteenth century. Metastasio's libretto *Ciro riconosciuto* was arguably the culmination of the former, a libretto that premiered in 1736 with music by Caldara and continued to be set throughout the eighteenth century and into the nineteenth by composers that included Jommelli, Galuppi, Hasse, Piccinni, Sarti and Tarchi. In the decade that followed the premiere of *Ciro*, Rossini himself returned in new and different ways to ancient eastern subject matter with a second Lenten piece, *Mosè in Egitto* (Naples, 1818–19) and his last opera for Italy, *Semiramide* (Venice, 1823); I will examine these again at the conclusion of this essay.

The goal of this study is to examine how the librettist of *Ciro in Babilonia* synthesized these disparate sources – from the earliest account of Cyrus's life in the Greek historian Herodotus and the Biblical prophets to Metastasio's libretto – and how the composer responded to them musically for the particular historical moment in March 1812. The librettist Aventi was well-educated and a cultural leader in Ferrara, and certainly aware of the literary forebears of his material.⁴ Rossini for his part may have been less aware of the rich literary background – his education was of a different kind from Aventi's, though it did include Latin.⁵ With respect to the libretto, Aventi's choices of subject and development of material turn out to be original and thematically more synthetic than they have been given credit for in the relatively brief discussions of the opera that exist.⁶ The work that resulted from Rossini's setting of Aventi's libretto finds solutions to the problem of presenting an ancient subject during a period when taste was finally shifting away from the old classical models that had prevailed for the first two hundred years of operatic production. As discussed later in this essay, these solutions were also a response to local social and political trends in Ferrara and northern Italy in the final phase of Napoleonic rule.

² Paolo Fabbri, 'Il conte Aventi, Rossini e Ferrara', *Bollettino del Centro rossiniano di studi* 34 (1994): 91–157. More detailed discussion of his work on the libretto appears below. On Aventi's *Mentore teatrale*, see Bianca Maria Antolini, 'Il mentore teatrale di Francesco Avventi e l'organizzazione teatrale in Italia nel primo Ottocento', in *Gioachino Rossini, 1792–1992: Il testo e la scena*, ed. Paolo Fabbri (Pesaro: Fondazione Rossini, 1994): 385–402.

³ Fabbri, 'Il conte Aventi', 91, 103. The year 1812 also saw the productions of Rossini's student drama *Demetrio e Polibio* and the new opera buffa *L'equivoco stravagante*.

⁴ For Aventi's background and his awareness of the sources, see Fig. 1 and the accompanying discussion.

⁵ Richard Osborne, *Rossini* (London: J.M. Dent, 1986): 4.

⁶ See Osborne, *Rossini*, 138–9; Luigi Rognoni, *Gioachino Rossini* (Turin: G. Einaudi, 1977): 101–2; these two analyses are mostly interested in how the piece anticipates later developments in Rossini's opera writing. Richard Osborne, 'Ciro in Babilonia', *Grove Music Online, Oxford Music Online*, www.oxfordmusiconline.com (accessed 30 June 2020) calls the libretto 'poorly planned', a statement with which this essay takes issue.

The cast of *Ciro in Babilonia* is as follows; the published libretto records the original singers' names:

Baldassare (Belshazzar), King of the Assyrians in Babylonia (tenor)	Eliodoro Bianchi
Ciro (Cyrus the Great), King of Persia in the guise of an ambassador (contralto)	Maria Marcolini
Amira, Wife of Ciro, prisoner of Baldassare (soprano)	Elisabetta Manfredini
Argene, Persian confidante of Amira (mezzosoprano)	Anna Savinelli
Zambri, Babylonian prince (bass)	Giovanni Layner
Arbace, Captain of Baldassare army (tenor), in love with Argene	Francesco Savinelli
Daniele, the prophet (bass)	Giovanni Frasci
Son of Ciro, a child (mute role)	
Nobility of the kingdom (chorus)	
Soldiers (chorus)	

The preface to the libretto calls *Ciro in Babilonia* an oratorio to legitimize it for the Lenten season, but it is usual to regard it as an opera with a Biblical component: its central scenes depict Belshazzar's feast as narrated in the Book of Daniel.⁷ Much later in life, Rossini referred to *Ciro* as one of his fiascos. He reportedly even celebrated the perceived debacle at a party by providing an elaborate dessert that depicted a battered marzipan ship in an ocean of cream, flying a pennant that read 'Ciro'.⁸ Rossini may have misremembered the premiere in light of his later successes, for the local *Giornale di Dipartimento del Reno* reported applause after every number.⁹ Or perhaps he was remembering something that happened during a revival of *Ciro*. For there were revivals: it was played in 1813 at the Teatro della Pergola in Florence; in 1816 it was among the first Rossini productions in the Munich Hoftheater; at the Teatro alla Scala in Milan in 1818 it received rich stage designs by Alessandro Sanquirico; there was a concert version at the Haymarket Theatre in London in 1820. Reto Müller reports more than 30 Italian productions by the end of the 1820s, as well as foreign productions in Dresden, Vienna, Lisbon and Weimar.¹⁰

As noted, the inclusion of the story of Belshazzar's feast and the divine handwriting on the wall as reported in Chapter 5 of the Book of Daniel provides the chief justification for calling *Ciro* a Lenten piece. Aventi inserted this episode

⁷ The opera had predecessors in Ferrara at other venues during Lent: Biblical pieces such as Guglielmi's *Debora e Sisara*, and Metastasio's *Giuseppe riconosciuto* (Sala de' signori Intrepidi, 1790) and *Il trionfo di Giuditta, o la morte di Oloferne* (Teatro Bonacossi, 1800). See Claudio Sartori, *I libretti italiani a stampa dalle origini a 1800* (Cuneo: Bertola e Locatelli, 1990–94), nos. 7259 (*Debora e Sisara*), 12347 (*Giuseppe riconosciuto*), 24000 (*Trionfo di Giuditta*).

⁸ Ferdinand Hiller, *Aus dem Tonleben unserer Zeit*, 2 vols in 1 (Leipzig: Hermann Mendelssohn, 1868), vol. 2, *Plaudereien mit Rossini*, 42.

⁹ Richard Osborne, *Rossini: His Life and Works*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007): 19.

¹⁰ Librettos for Ferrara, Florence, Milan and Munich are available online in the Schatz Collection at the Library of Congress, www.loc.gov/collections/albert-schatz/about-this-collection/ (accessed 7 August 2022). On Milan 1818, see Gabriella Olivero, 'The "New" Babylon by Alessandro Sanquirico', *Music in Art* 40 (2015): 125–38, esp. figures 7, 10, and 11; Reto Müller, booklet notes for *Gioachino Rossini: Ciro in Babilonia ossia La Caduta di Baldassare*, Antonino Fogliani, conductor, Württemberg Philharmonic Orchestra, Naxos/SWR, pp. 4–5.

into Act II, where the prophet Daniel appears in two scenes (II.vii–viii) to interpret the handwriting and predict the outcome of the opera. To a modern viewer or reader of the libretto, the sudden appearance of this Biblical element can feel a little artificial, given the context in which it is placed: Aveni's two-act plot is really structured around the conquest of Babylon by Cyrus and his army, an event narrated in detail in Herodotus's nine-book *Histories* of the Persian invasions of Greece in the fifth century BCE, as well as in other ancient sources. Moreover, the specifics of the action are moved by an entirely ahistorical, typically operatic situation in which Cyrus's wife Amira and their son are held as prisoners of war in Babylon by King Belshazzar, who has fallen in love with Amira and intends to make her his queen. On the advice of Arbace, a Persian general serving in Belshazzar's court, Cyrus arrives in Babylon disguised as a Persian envoy to rescue his family. He is discovered and imprisoned. Cyrus, his wife and child are nearly executed before his troops enter at the last moment to rescue them and depose Belshazzar. The central drama is therefore the threat to a nuclear family by a powerful villain whose passion for the *prima donna* overwhelms his obligations as a ruler. It is a story that had been told in multiple ways on the secular opera stage throughout the eighteenth century – examples include operas such as Handel's *Rodelinda*, Mozart's *Lucio Silla*, and especially Sarti's *Giulio Sabino*, about which more will be said below; but it would not seem to be a story immediately appropriate to religious drama. In what follows, I first examine the classical sources of the legend of Cyrus that were familiar to an educated audience in early modern Europe to elucidate what knowledge and expectations they might bring to an opera about Cyrus. I then discuss the Biblical passages and show how Aveni, following precedents in early modern historiography, combined these secular and religious sources into operatic drama.

Cyrus the Great: Ancient Sources and Early Modern Reception

Beginning in 550 BCE, Cyrus moved his troops outward from a small kingdom in Persia to conquer the Medes in northwest Iran, the Lydian empire in Anatolia, and Babylonia, which in the sixth century BCE controlled the area from Mesopotamia south through Syria-Palestine and northern Arabia. He thus created the Persian Empire. In 539 BCE, at the battle of Opis, Cyrus had defeated Nabonidus, the last king of this neo-Babylonian empire, and then took Babylon itself. The city of Babylon, as built up by its king, Nebuchadnezzar II (604–562 BCE), was bisected by the Euphrates River and surrounded completely by impenetrably high and thick walls. Cyrus may in reality have simply entered Babylon without a fight; in Herodotus's telling, however (*Histories* 1.191–92), Cyrus took Babylon in 539 BCE by diverting the Euphrates into canals outside the city to lower the water level, thus allowing the Persian troops to wade in via the riverbed and catch the Babylonians unaware as they celebrated a religious festival. Nabonidus's son Belshazzar may in fact have been regent in the city in place of his father at the time of its fall.

The historical Cyrus governed his new empire, including Babylonia, through liaisons with local nobility that allowed for continuity of local governance and religious practices. In consequence, he was depicted as an enlightened ruler very early in the historiographical tradition. Already in Herodotus's *Histories*, Cyrus appeared as a model of intelligence and wisdom from his early childhood. Herodotus describes the birth, rearing and young manhood of Cyrus in a lengthy

passage that is essentially a short story embedded in the larger narrative about the rise of Persia. Cyrus was the son of Cambyses I, king of the city of Anshan in Persia, and Mandane, daughter of Astyages, king of the Median empire in northwest Iran. In Herodotus's telling, Astyages received an oracle that Mandane's child would overthrow him and so ordered the newborn be killed. Harpagus, the Persian noble entrusted with the job of destroying the child, suffered qualms. The baby escaped death and was raised by a shepherd named Mitradates. As a child, Cyrus showed his true nature when he played king with other children and was recognized for who he was by his parents and grandfather. He was returned to his grandfather Astyages's court and raised as a prince. As a young man, however, he fulfilled the prophecy. He overthrew Astyages and claimed the kingship of Persia. The tale of the exposed child who survives and returns as a man to reclaim a kingdom is a story pattern widely familiar in the ancient world from the legends of Oedipus, Perseus, Romulus and Remus and Moses, so we may doubt its historical veracity as applied to Cyrus. But this tale of exposure and return was one of the things one knew about Cyrus from Greek antiquity onwards, and it contributed to his reputation for worldly success that was supported by talent and divine approval.

Thus, despite Cyrus's identity as the founder and Great King of the Persian empire, whose descendants would threaten ancient Europe, he was regarded from ancient times as one of the great and wise men of history. Herodotus, writing only a generation or two after the Persians under Xerxes fought the Greeks at the battles of Thermopylae and Salamis, nevertheless saw fit to give Cyrus the final word in the last chapter of the *Histories*. The Persians, says Herodotus, having built an Asian empire under Cyrus, suggest to their King that they relocate from the small and rugged corner of Persia that was their original homeland to some more agreeable, richer territory: 'Cyrus heard them, and found nothing to marvel at in their design; "Do so", said he; "but if you do, make ready to be no longer rulers, but subjects. Soft lands breed soft men; wondrous fruits of the earth and valiant warriors grow not from the same soil."' The Persians heed the advice and choose 'rather to be rulers on a barren mountain side than slaves dwelling in tilled valleys'.¹¹ The ironies here are multiple, given that Cyrus's descendants Darius and Xerxes made precisely the mistakes Cyrus warns against; the passage has sometimes been interpreted as a cautionary tale to the Greeks, and especially a warning to Athens not to extend her own empire. But my point is that Herodotus thought Cyrus, the first king of Persia, was the man most suitable to pronounce the moral of his narrative on Persia's failed invasion of Greece.

Cyrus's positive reputation continued to be developed in ancient historiographical literature after Herodotus, most notably in Xenophon's *Cyropaedia* (*The Education of Cyrus*), a text that was popular and much read in Europe from antiquity through the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Xenophon, a student of Socrates, had famously described in his *Anabasis* his participation in a failed expedition in Anatolia under another, later Persian named Cyrus in the fourth century BCE. His subsequent safe return of the troops under his command established his credentials as a military leader. In the *Cyropaedia* Xenophon combined his military expertise with philosophical reflections on kingship in eight books, stretching from the older Cyrus's birth and boyhood to his successful establishment of the Persian

¹¹ Herodotus, *The Persian Wars* [*Histories*], trans. A.D. Godley, 4 vols, The Loeb Classical Library, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1925), vol. 4, book 9, section 22, page 301.

empire. The book is a combination of biography, military history, details of Persian life, and Socratic reflections on the nature of good leadership in narrative and dialogic forms. It combines factual accounts with inventive fiction. James Tatum has analysed it as part of the genre of ancient novel which by the early modern period had been absorbed into the genre of 'advice to princes'.¹² It bypasses the romantic tale of Cyrus's origins in Herodotus and instead describes in detail Cyrus's education at the court of his grandfather Astyages. By the *Cyropaedia's* fourth book, the figure of Cyrus appears less as an eastern potentate and more as a positive manifestation of a Spartan Greek, a type much admired by Xenophon. Thus the Persian Great King, through the admiration of Xenophon as well as other Greek and Roman writers, became a model for European monarchs. Early modern receivers of the *Cyropaedia* as valuable political advice included Machiavelli, Montaigne, Sir Philip Sydney (*In Defense of Poesy*) and François Fénelon (*Les aventures de Télémaque*). Xenophon's *Cyropaedia* was combined with the account of Herodotus to create a complete, idealized version of Cyrus for an educated public in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

In opera, this idealized Cyrus appeared already in the mid-seventeenth century with Sorrentino's *Il Ciro* (Venice, 1654), which was based on the story of Cyrus's exposure as a child and his return and recognition by his grandparents. There were subsequent settings of the same story in Italian libretti set by Albinoni, Scarlatti, Conti and others. The most significant libretto for this discussion, since it was the most likely to be immediately familiar to Aveni, Rossini and their audience, was Metastasio's *Ciro riconosciuto*, already noted here as an important expression of the eighteenth-century operatic approach to the Cyrus legend.¹³ The main characters of Metastasio's libretto are those from the ancient sources: Astyages, Mandane, Cambyses, Harpagus, Cyrus (incognito, called Alcaeus) and Mitradates the shepherd. It features Cyrus-Alcaeus arriving at court where he is unrecognized and nearly killed by his parents Cambyses and Mandane before Mitradates reveals the young man's real identity to them. Much endangerment of life resolves into last-minute rescue of all concerned. Astyages surrenders the throne of Persia to his grandson Cyrus. As noted above, *Ciro riconosciuto* was set throughout the eighteenth century, from its premiere composed by Antonio Caldara in Vienna in 1736 to a version by Angelo Tarchi for Piacenza in 1796.

The continued popularity of Metastasio's version of Cyrus's story was part of a second wave of eighteenth-century Cyrus narratives. As James Tatum has shown, during the eighteenth century, while the Cyrus operas were being produced, Xenophon's *Cyropaedia* was gradually becoming a classic in the sense that everyone knew about it but very few people actually read it.¹⁴ The image of Cyrus that Xenophon's work had promulgated remained instead a part of general knowledge. Metastasio's opera was one example of the story's elaboration in this period. Another was *The Travels of Cyrus* by Sir Andrew Ramsay, an English Catholic follower of Fénelon. This prose work was an imitation of Fénelon's *Télémaque* and

¹² James Tatum, 'The Classic as Footnote', in his *Xenophon's Imperial Fiction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989): 3–35, esp. 5–9.

¹³ Behind Metastasio's libretto is Scipione Maffei's very influential spoken drama *Merope* and François-Joseph de Lagrange-Chancel's *Amasis*, which derives from Maffei's piece. See Francesca Menchelli-Buttini, 'Literary Motifs in Metastasio's and Jommelli's *Ciro riconosciuto*', in *Music as Social and Cultural Practice: Essays in Honour of Reinhard Strohm*, ed. Melania Bucciarelli and Berta Joncus (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2007): 250–74, at 253–7.

¹⁴ Tatum, 'The Classic as Footnote', 3–4.

appeared in English and French in 1727, then was expanded and much republished to the end of the eighteenth century. It came out in an Italian bilingual edition in 1781 with English and Italian on facing pages.¹⁵ Ramsay in his introduction emphasizes the didactic point that

conquerors generally have no other view than in extending their dominion, than to satisfy their unbounded ambition: Cyrus on the contrary made use of his victories to procure the happiness of the conquered nations. The Author's intention in making choice of such a Prince was to shew, that courage, great exploits and military talents may indeed excite our admiration, but do not form the character of a true hero, without the addition of wisdom, virtue and noble sentiments.¹⁶

Ramsay invents an early encounter between Cyrus and the Babylonians, in which Cyrus observed the madness, repentance and acknowledgement of the Hebrew God by Nabuchodonosor (Nebuchadnezzar; compare Daniel Chapter 4). In Ramsay's account, Cyrus had conversations with a Jewish sage named Eleazar:

The [repentant] words of Nabuchodonosor augmented the young Prince's respect for the Deity, and redoubled his desire of being fully instructed in the religion of the Hebrews; he frequently saw [the Jewish sage] Eleazar, and by degrees contracted a close friendship with him. The Eternal being watchful over Cyrus, whom he had chosen to bring about the deliverance of his people, thought fit to prepare him, by his conversation with the Hebrew sage, to receive soon after the instructions of the prophet Daniel.¹⁷

This brings us to the Biblical perspective on Cyrus, that of the Jews exiled to Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar after the capture of Jerusalem and the destruction of Solomon's temple in 586 BCE. In the Hebrew Bible, Cyrus was a saviour figure who returned the people of God to their native land and authorized the rebuilding of the destroyed temple in Jerusalem.¹⁸ In Isaiah 45, God calls Cyrus his 'anointed ... whose right hand I have grasped / to subdue nations before him / and strip kings of their robes ... so that you know that it is I, / the God of Israel, who call you by your name'. (45: 1,3). Isaiah 45: 13 continues: 'I have aroused Cyrus in righteousness, / and I will make all his paths straight; / he shall build my city / and set my exiles free, / not for price or reward, / says the Lord of hosts'. Isaiah 45–47 glorify Cyrus and celebrate the fall of other idols and of Babylon. Ezra 6: 2–5 reports that 'it was in Ecbatana, the capital in the province of Media, that a scroll was found on which this was written':

A record. [3] In the first year of his reign, King Cyrus issued a decree: Concerning the house of God at Jerusalem, let the house be rebuilt, the place where sacrifices are offered and burnt offerings are brought; its height shall be sixty cubits and its width sixty cubits, [4] with three courses of hewn stones and one course of timber;

¹⁵ Andrew Ramsay, *Viaggi di Ciro con un discorso sopra la teologia, e la mitologia de' pagani. Opera in Quattro Volumi di Cavaliere Ramsay: Il Testo è tratto dalla nona edizione dell' originale inglese* (Padua, [s.n.], 1781).

¹⁶ Ramsay, *Viaggi di Ciro*, vol. 1: 20; Italian, p. 21.

¹⁷ Ramsay, *Viaggi di Ciro*, vol. 3: 176; Italian, p. 177.

¹⁸ Robert Bartlett, 'Ancient Iran in the Imagination of the Medieval West', in *Perceptions of Iran: History, Myths, and Nationalism from Medieval Persia to the Islamic Republic*, ed. Ali M. Ansari (London: I.B. Tauris, 2014): 37–46, esp. 38–42, surveys the Biblical and Classical 'filters or lenses' by which the medieval and early modern west received the Cyrus narrative.

let the cost be paid from the royal treasury. [5] Moreover, let the gold and silver vessels of the house of God, which Nebuchadnezzar took out of the temple in Jerusalem and brought to Babylon, be restored and brought back to the temple in Jerusalem, each to its place; you shall put them in the house of God. ([N]RSV)

It is therefore this broader perspective on Cyrus provided by prophetic texts of the Bible, in combination with the story of Belshazzar's feast, that justifies him as a suitable hero for a sacred or Lenten opera and makes the idea for Aventi's 1812 libretto an imaginative and even innovative move on the opera stage. We have already seen that Ramsay in his *Voyages of Cyrus* had conflated the secular with the Biblical Cyrus for the purpose of moral instruction in a prose work. Aventi similarly conflated the Biblical and the secular in his libretto for *Ciro in Babilonia* to make a drama in which historical action and Biblical salvation could reinforce and validate one another, while providing plenty of interesting stage action and opportunities for musical affect.

Before moving to a discussion of the opera, I should note one final episode of Cyrus's life as reported in Herodotus and the classical authors, because it was well known, and somewhat surprisingly it undercuts the otherwise positive representations of his character. One of Herodotus's major themes was the danger of overextension, either geographical by empires or behavioural by individuals; and of course, at the highest levels of power, the two are interconnected, a fact exploited for its dramatic potential in Greek tragedy and its dramatic heirs. The central example in Herodotus's *Histories* is King Xerxes's disastrous invasion of the Greek peninsula that resulted in Persian defeats at Salamis and Plataea and the exclusion of Persian power from the Aegean and eastern Anatolia. Cyrus's death, in Herodotus's telling, is an earlier analogue to Xerxes's failure. Cyrus attempted to extend his empire to the north and conquer a nomadic Scythian tribe, the Massagetae, commanded by their Queen Tomyris. During the campaign Cyrus captured Tomyris's son and, despite her request, would not return him. The young man committed suicide in captivity. Subsequently Cyrus's troops lost a battle and Cyrus was killed. In revenge for her son's death Tomyris insulted Cyrus's body and dunked his head in a wineskin of blood, to sate at last, as she declared, Cyrus's lust for the blood of conquest. For Herodotus it was a symbolically shameful end for a king who had not been satisfied with his accomplishments and overreached his bounds. The story was repeated in the late-antique Latin compilers Justin and Orosius, whence it became known in the west, receiving references, for example in Dante's *Purgatorio* and Shakespeare's *Henry VI*, Part 1.¹⁹

The story of Tomyris and Cyrus's head is probably not true: Cyrus did die on the expedition to central Asia, but his body was buried in a royal tomb at Passargadae (now in west central Iran) by his son Cambyses II. Readers in Rossini's day, unlike in Dante's, had the text of Herodotus as well as the Latin sources available to them, but for Rossini's theatrical public the story was also a free-floating piece of cultural knowledge. The tale and the figure of Tomyris had caught the imagination of western artists and writers in the renaissance and the baroque periods. Peter Paul Rubens (1622–23), Mattia Preti (c. 1670) and Luciano Gómez (1670) made paintings of Tomyris with the head of Cyrus.²⁰ The

¹⁹ Justin, 1.8; Orosius, 2.7; Dante, *Purgatorio*, xii. 55–57; Shakespeare, *Henry VI*, Part 1, II.iii.

²⁰ Peter Paul Rubens, Head of Cyrus Brought to Queen Tomyris, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Tomiris.jpg> (accessed 25 January 2020); Preti, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Tomiris.jpg>

story also attracted early eighteenth-century musical settings, most of them freely imagined extensions of the original story, including a pasticcio opera *Thomyris, Queen of Scythia* (London, 1707), Scarlatti's *Tigrane* (Naples, 1715), a *Ciro* libretto by Matteo Noris for Florence (1716), and Domenico Lalli's *L'amor di figlio non conosciuto* with an adaptation by R. Keiser titled *Die grossmüthige Tomyris* (1717). Closer to Rossini's time, there was a Venetian *Tomiri* with music by Pietro Guglielmi (Teatro San Benedetto, 1795) and a ballet *Cyrus und Tomyris* composed by Thaddeus Weigl (performed in Vienna in 1797).

I am not asserting that Aveni and/or Rossini necessarily knew these stage versions of the story, but rather that there was broad cultural knowledge of the Cyrus legend that regularly found its way into Ancien Régime art and theatre. A part of this general knowledge came from a group of operas associated with the story of the recognition of the young Cyrus and, to a lesser extent, with the story of Cyrus and Tomyris. On the operatic stage, Metastasio's *Ciro riconosciuto* continued to be performed in the nineteenth century with newly composed versions appearing until at least 1818.²¹ Fewer dramas were produced based on the siege and capture of Babylon, perhaps because canalizing rivers is not easily staged, but also because the liberation of the Jews was a Biblical subject, not to be used in carnival operas: its inclusion would still cause trouble in London as late as 1850 with Verdi's *Nabucco*.²² Such subjects were normally reserved for oratorio and sacred cantatas, as notably for Handel's *Belshazzar* (1744). Venice saw a *Balthassar*, an *actio sacra pro virginibus* that included Belshazzar and Daniel in the cast, in 1781 and 1784 at San Lazzaro dei Mendicanti.²³ Rossini's audiences, if they had any dramatic preconceptions about Cyrus on the secular side of his story, would have come principally from the idealized conceptions of Cyrus included in the recognition story, and his tragic ending with Tomyris.

Aventi's and Rossini's Cyrus for Lent

Turning now to the plot and music of *Ciro in Babilonia*, we find all of the dramatic structural elements: Cyrus's conquest of Babylon, Belshazzar's feast, and the drama of the endangered family. The librettist did his homework, as his 'Reflessioni sull' argomento' in the published libretto makes clear (Fig. 1), and he showed his sources in footnotes. These notes provide an extensive list of major and minor Classical and Biblical sources, as well as early modern scholars and chronographers including Joseph Scaliger and the Jesuit chronographer Dionysius Petavius (Dénis Petau). But Aveni also noted at the conclusion of his 'Reflessioni' (page 7), 'The opinions of the historians, sacred and profane about this event are so varied in regard to names, historical periods and circumstances', that he felt justified in taking a very free attitude toward the invention of his drama. The result is a libretto that is unified in theme and action despite the multiplicity of

[wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Preti,_Mattia_-_Queen_Tomyris_Receiving_the_Head_of_Cyrus,_King_of_Persia_-_1670-72.jpg](https://www.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Preti,_Mattia_-_Queen_Tomyris_Receiving_the_Head_of_Cyrus,_King_of_Persia_-_1670-72.jpg) (accessed 25 January 2020).

²¹ Don Neville, 'Metastasio [Trapassi], Pietro: Works: Operas', *Grove Music Online, Oxford Music Online*, www.oxfordmusiconline.com (accessed 11 March 2020).

²² In London *Nabucco* was performed in altered form in 1846 as *Nino* and 1850 as *Anato* because scriptural subjects were regarded as unsuitable for the stage by the censors. See Roberta Montemorra Marvin, 'The Censorship of Verdi's Operas in Victorian London', *Music & Letters* 82 (2001): 582–610, esp. 590–93 and 607–8.

²³ Sartori, *I libretti italiani*, items 3717 [1781] and 3718 [1784].

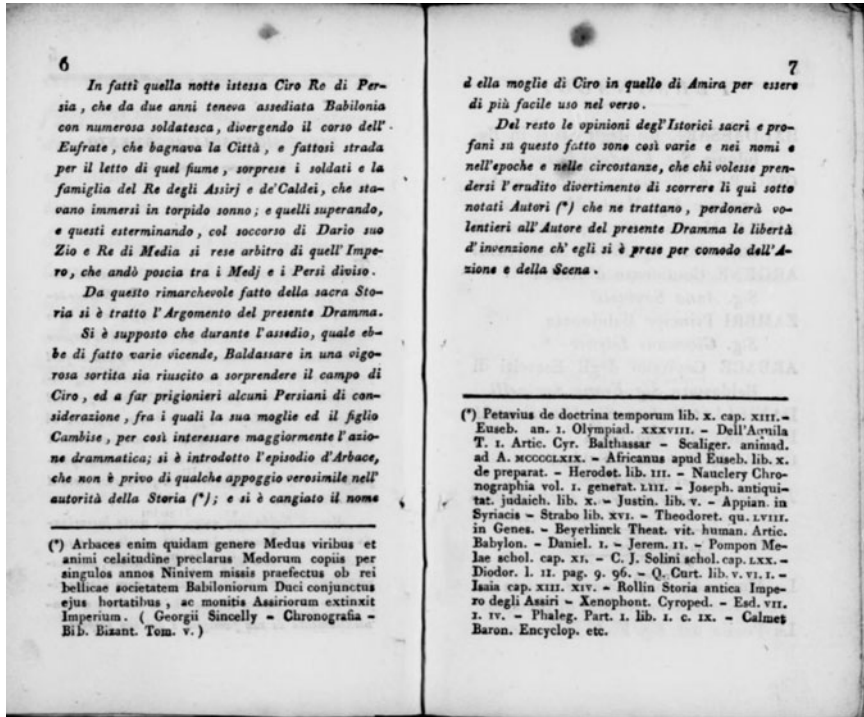


Fig. 1 'Reflessioni' from the 1812 Ferrara libretto, pp. 6–7, showing footnotes with sources for the plot. *Ciro in Babilonia, o sia, La caduta di Baldassare, dramma con cori per musica* (Ferrara: Pe' Soci Bianchi e Neri al Seminario, 1812). Music Division, Library of Congress, ML48 [S8943] Microfilm Music 1854, reel 183 (by permission).

sources. The analysis in this section describes the choices Aventi made among those sources to achieve that unity and the elements Rossini's music emphasized for dramatic effect.

The 'Reflessioni' begin with the observation that God had decided on the destruction of Jerusalem owing to the wickedness of the Babylonians and Belshazzar. They cite the handwriting at Belshazzar's feast and the interpretation of Daniel, and then connect that with Cyrus's conquest of the city, declaring that the two events happened the same night. This is suggested in Daniel 5: 30: 'That very night [of the banquet] Belshazzar, the Chaldean king, was killed'. Aventi thus equates Belshazzar's feast with the festival that in Herodotus's account allowed Cyrus's entrance to Babylon and is able to conclude: 'The plot of the present drama is taken from this remarkable fact of sacred history' ('Da questo rimarchevole fatto della sacra Storia si è tratto l'Argomento del presente Dramma'). Like Ramsay in the *Voyages*, he connects Biblical and secular historiography and then declares the whole to be 'sacred history'.²⁴

²⁴ Aventi found a similar combination of secular and sacred sources in Denis Petau's *Rationarium temporum* (1633), a narrative chronology of the ancient world that is cited in Aventi's footnote (Fig. 1) as Petavius, *De doctrina temporum*.

Cyrus's is only one of several musical voices in the opera who must have their say; not least is that of his captive wife Amira, whose heroic struggle to resist the demands of the villain Baldassare forms a gravitational centre of the family drama that moves this opera. The characters are standard *opera seria* roles: Amira, the distressed *prima donna*; Arbace and Arsene, who provide a secondary love interest; and Baldassare himself, the tyrant threatening the *prima donna's* virtue. Cyrus (Ciro) is given an *opera seria* role of the defiant and then imprisoned husband such as one finds in Handel's *Rodelinda* or Sarti's *Giulio Sabino*.

Giulio Sabino is relevant here as a conceptual and perhaps even a direct model for *Ciro*. It premiered in Venice in 1781, was one of the most popular operas of the late eighteenth century, and had been produced at the Teatro Comunale in Ferrara as a carnival opera in 1806–07, when Aventi was already involved in the organization of theatrical life in Ferrara and just five years before the premiere of *Ciro in Babilonia*.²⁵ In Sarti's opera, the rebellious Gallic captain Julius Sabinus, in hiding from the Roman occupational forces, disguises himself as a common soldier to rescue his wife and children from the unwanted attentions of the Roman general Titus. On discovering the ruse, Titus imprisons the family, threatening to execute them all. A last-minute rescue is effected by a change of heart by Titus, who follows his Metastasian namesake's lead and in an act of clemency restores the family and wins the Gauls as allies. The plot caters to a growing bourgeois sentimentality and particularly a fondness for the family drama on the part of opera audiences, recommended also in the writings of Diderot.²⁶

The dramatic situation of a family endangered by a tyrannical ruler was therefore a familiar structure on which to build the plot of *Ciro in Babilonia*, and one that provided a solid core of heroics and pathos for the *primo uomo* and *prima donna*. More surprisingly, perhaps, the opera's generic plot is the right vehicle for interplay with aspects of the original story that we have already noted. One may doubt, for example, that the idealized military leader of Herodotus and the *Cyropaedia* would have kept his family with him in camp, and even more that he would have risked disguising himself to enter Babylon and bargain his conquests with Baldassare for their freedom, as he does in the first act of *Ciro*. But, as we have seen, Cyrus's early history says he came into his own as the supposed son of a shepherd boy, a role that was expanded into a major plot device in Metastasio's *Ciro riconosciuto*, so one might reasonably expect Cyrus to be incognito at some point in a drama that features him as a character. Additionally, the near-fatal situation for Cyrus in Babylon, as a captive of Baldassare, resonates with the ancient story that Cyrus died a violent and humiliating death at the hands of the barbarian queen Tomyris. And finally, the capture of the family of the Persian king Cyrus as a result of a battle reflects the famous story of Alexander the Great's clemency to the family of Darius whom he captured at the battle of Issus. The difference here is telling. Alexander famously refused to harm or molest the women of Darius's family

²⁵ The Ferrarese libretto is *Il Giulio Sabino: dramma serio da rappresentarsi nel Teatro Comunale di Ferrara il carnevale dell' anno 1806 al 1807* (Ferrara: Per Francesco Pomatelli, 1807); OCLC accession no. 214959221. For Aventi's early involvement in the theatre, see Fabbri, 'Il conte Aventi', 97–100.

²⁶ Susanna Guggenheim, 'Drammi e teorie drammatiche del Diderot e loro fortuna in Italia', *Études italiennes* 3 (1921): 156–69; Robert Ketterer, 'Inventing Antiquity, Creating Modernity in *Medonte, rè di Epiro*', in *Giuseppe Sarti: Ästhetik, Rezeption, Überlieferung*, ed. Christin Heitmann, Dörte Schmidt, Christine Siegert, *Forum Musikwissenschaft* 12 (Schliengen: Edition Argus, 2019): 10–25, at 10–11.

whom he had captured when King Darius fled, but gave them full respect and honours as royalty. This operatic Baldassare, by contrast, chooses to force his attentions on Amira while Cyrus comes to the rescue, thereby making the Persian king the hero and Baldassare a lustful barbarian.²⁷ I do not mean to suggest that there are direct, deliberately identifiable references to these parallels in the text of the libretto that were meant for the audience to catch. Rather it seems to me that Aventi, who makes clear he knows the source literature, was using familiar operatic plot elements that overlapped with equally familiar elements of Persian history.

From this point I will concentrate on Cyrus's role in the opera and on the ebb and flow of Classical, Biblical and standard operatic elements as the piece finds its way to its happy ending. The characters will be referenced by the Italian forms of their names as they appear in the opera. By the *scena ultima*, Rossini has put more creative energy into the musical possibilities of domestic pathos than of military conquest, but the Classical and the Biblical elements are deftly interwoven.

In scene I.v of the opera, Baldassare's captain Arbace, motivated by his love for Amira's confidante Arsene, has persuaded Ciro not to make a frontal attack on Babylon to rescue his family, but instead to try subterfuge and get into Babylon disguised as a Persian ambassador. The plot device seems contrived and in any case by the end of the first act has been a notable failure, because Amira unintentionally reveals Ciro's identity to the hidden Baldassare and Ciro is put in chains. Aventi's contrivance nevertheless serves to intensify the religious aspects of the opera. It brings Ciro, the Biblical saviour figure, face to face on stage with Baldassare, the enemy of God, putting Ciro in extreme danger of death and then elevating him in triumph: in this way, the libretto uses standard operatic plot elements to turn the Cyrus narrative, taken from secular and Biblical history, into a typological parallel of the Christian narrative of the arrest, humiliation and triumph of Jesus. The structure of an *opera seria* is thus transformed into an appropriate entertainment for the season of Lent.

Scene II.ii provides a vivid illustration of ways in which librettist and composer folded the Biblical sources and Herodotean narrative into the operatic plot of the second act. Ciro is chained alone in Baldassare's prison. The prison scene was an old standard, used in opera throughout the long eighteenth century.²⁸ Ciro begins

²⁷ The story is told in full in Plutarch, *Alexander*: [21.1]. 'But as [Alexander] was going to supper, word was brought him that Darius's mother and wife and two unmarried daughters, being taken among the rest of the prisoners, upon the sight of his chariot and bow, were all in mourning and sorrow, imagining him to be dead. [21.2] After a little pause, more lively affected with their affliction than with his own success, he sent Leonnatus to them, to let them know Darius was not dead, and that they need not fear any harm from Alexander, who made war upon him only for dominion; they should themselves be provided with everything they had been used to receive from Darius . . . [21.5] But the noblest and most royal part of their usage was, that he treated these illustrious prisoners according to their virtue and character, not suffering them to hear, or receive, or so much as to apprehend anything that was unbecoming. So that they seemed rather lodged in some temple, or some holy virgin chambers, where they enjoyed their privacy sacred and uninterrupted, than in the camp of an enemy'. Evelyn/Dryden translation; Livius.org, www.livius.org/sources/content/plutarch/plutarchs-alexander/alexander-and-the-wife-of-darius, accessed 16 March 2020. See also Quintus Curtius Rufus, *Historiae Alexandri Magni* 3.12.13–1. Veronese's painting of the scene is well known; www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/paolo-veronese-the-family-of-darius-before-alexander, accessed 16 March 2020.

²⁸ To note only a few examples, there are prison scenes in Matteo Noris's libretto *Tito Manlio* (1696, set by Vivaldi in 1719), Handel's *Rodelinda* (1725), Gluck's *Iphigénie en Tauride* (1779) and Beethoven's *Leonore/Fidelio* (1805/1814).

his lament in accompanied recitative with reference to a famous Herodotean episode – the defeat of Croesus and conquest of Lydia. The contrast between former fortune and present suffering is a major theme in Herodotus, illustrated through Croesus, and reference to it here heightens the irony of Ciro's current position.²⁹ He moves in his lament to his projected conquest of Babylonia, for which he believes that he is the designated agent of vengeance for the God of Israel. Rossini builds the recitative to an emotional climax at Cyrus's oath to free Israel's religion from its bond with a direct address to its god (*Nume*). And then, as if Ciro were waking from a vision, his intensity collapses and he returns to thoughts of Amira and the family drama.

Dunque fia ver che il vincitor di Creso,
 De' Lidj il domator di ferri cinto
 Penar debba così? ... Misero! ... ah! quanto
 Il destino crudele
 Ti persegue, e t'opprime! ...
 E pur quello son'io,
 Cui d'Israello il Dio
 Dee confider la sua vendetta! ... Il guiro,
 Nume, che pur ti sento entro il mio cuore,
 Vendicato sarai ... Nel giorno istesso
 Ch' io vincerò per te, de' fidi tuoi
 Sciolti saranno i ceppi e le catene,
 Libero il culto suo! ... Ma dove sono? ...
 A chi parlo infelice? ... e che ragione? ...
 La consorte adorata
 Potessi un solo istante
 Almeno riveder ... No, tal contento
 Io più sperar non oso.

Therefore, could it happen that the conqueror of Croesus, the lord of the Lydians, should suffer thus bound in chains? ... Wretched! Oh how cruel destiny pursues and crushes you! Really, is it I to whom the God of Israel should entrust his revenge! ... I swear, oh Lord, that I feel you in my heart, you will be avenged On the very day that I conquer for you, the fetters, the chains on your faith will be removed, your worship free! ... But where am I? ... To whom do I speak, unhappy as I am? ... and why? Could I at least see my beloved wife again for just a moment, ... No, I dare no longer hope for such happiness.

The family drama returns immediately after this as Amira enters, and the scene develops into a duet between Ciro and Amira in which the couple lament their danger and swear eternal faithfulness. Their reunion is interrupted by the entry of Baldassare, and the sequence builds into an angry and defiant *terzetto* in which the couple declare their willingness to die together. The situation expressed in a *terzetto* is once again an operatic convention that appeared in the later eighteenth century, but it has been given historical and religious colour by Ciro's

²⁹ The account of Cyrus's conquest of Lydia is in Herodotus, Book I; see also Xenophon, *Cyropaedia*. VII.1–2. In a famous encounter in Herodotus I.29–33, Croesus had received a lecture from the Athenian statesman Solon on the transitory nature of human happiness and prosperity: 'Until [a man] is dead, keep the word "happy" in reserve. Till then he is not happy, only lucky.' Croesus's loss of his kingdom to Cyrus was an illustration of that lesson. The allusion to that episode here makes ironic Cyrus's own state in the prison scene.

recitative at the beginning of the act. All three threads in the opera are now interwoven: husband and wife are threatened by a tyrant; Cyrus the Great is threatened by Belshazzar; God's avenger is threatened by the enemy of the people of Israel.

Belshazzar's feast and the scenes with Daniel (II.vi–viii) develop the threat made in Ciro's recitative. Using the goblets and plate ware pillaged from the Temple in Jerusalem, the banquet is staged to try to impress Amira with its magnificence and to get her acquiescence. Instead, of course, it results in the handwriting on the wall and the subsequent interpretation of the writing by the prophet Daniel with a message that duplicates Ciro's oath to take vengeance (II.ii). Following the Biblical description in the Book of Daniel, Baldassare's fear makes him temporarily sympathetic.³⁰ Ominous storm music – a type of interlude that would become typical for Rossini as, for example, in *La Cenerentola* or *Guillaume Tell*³¹ – accompanies the mysterious handwriting in II.vii and generates a terrifying accompanied recitative from Baldassare, 'Qual cupo orror m'assale' ('What dark horror assails me!') as he summons his Magi for an interpretation. His subsequent aria is introduced by further recitative expressing remorse: 'Oh, rimorso del cor! Oh mano! Oh fato!' ('Oh, my heart's remorse! Oh, the hand! Oh fate!') The *agitato* aria 'Qual crudel, qual triste sorte' ('How cruel, how sad a fate!') is his star turn, and his responses dominate this portion of the opera, musically and dramatically overshadowing Daniel's interpretations of the handwriting on the wall and predictions of Babylon's fall, which are delivered in accompanied recitative. Baldassare's fear, like Ciro's, is both paternal and dynastic: 'Penso ai figli, al regno, al soglio, e non vedo che terror!' ('I am thinking of my children, my kingdom, my throne, and I see nothing but terror!') At this moment, Baldassare might repent of his actions and produce a standard scene of clemency (*clementia*), as had his tyrannical predecessors in Metastasian *opera seria*. That is impossible, of course, and he is returned to the status of villain when an extended dialogue between Baldassare and the chorus of Magi diverts his fears to the belief that the gods (*Numi* – plural) demand the sacrifice of Ciro and his family.

The scenes taken directly from Biblical history conclude with a brief aria by the prophet Daniel that puts Baldassare's actions into the context of the divine plan that obliterates even the memory of Babylon's location.³² In a militant march rhythm he declares (II.viii):

Dei nemici, le spade, le faci
Struggeranno le torri, le mura,
E de' rettili e serpi l'impura
Cruda stirpe sol qui regnerà.
D'atra polve, e di cenere asperso

³⁰ Cf. Daniel 5:9: 'Then King Belshazzar became greatly terrified and his face turned pale, and his lords were perplexed.'

³¹ On storm music and its use to emphasize dramatically and psychologically intense moments in Rossini's operas, see Emanuele Senici, *Music in the Present Tense: Rossini's Italian Operas in Their Time* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019): 226–7.

³² It is perhaps an accidental irony that in 1811–12 Claudius James Rich, an Englishman working for the East India Company in Baghdad, was first excavating the ruins of Babylon. His memoir of that excavation was first published as 'Memoir on the Ruins of Babylon' in the Viennese journal *Fundgruben des Orients / Mines de l'Orient* 3 (1813): 129–62, 197–200. See David Gange and Michael Ledger-Lomas, *Cities of God: The Bible and Archaeology in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013): 167–9.

Rimarrà questo suolo infecondo,
 Nè avrà alcun più memoria nel mondo
 Dove fosse l'ingrata Città.

The swords, the firebrands of the enemy will destroy the towers and the wall. And the vile, low offspring of reptiles and serpents will rule the land here. This earth, scattered with black dust and ashes, will be sterile, nor will there be any longer any memory in the world where this ungrateful city had stood.

The subsequent scenes of Act II that climax in the pathos of Amira and Ciro (II.[xvii]) and then resolve into Persian triumph over Babylon gradually move back into the narrative of the Herodotean siege. During these scenes, for better or for worse for the coherence of *Ciro in Babilonia* as a sacred drama, the intervention of the Hebrew God fades somewhat into allusive references. Amira's aria 'Deh per me non v'affiligete' (II.ix) is a bravura prayer with violin obbligato addressed to 'il Nume dei Numi' ('the God of gods') to aid her, her son and her husband; it climaxes with the phrase 'soccorri dal Ciel' ('send aid from heaven'), including an eight-bar melisma on 'Ciel'. Argene continues her sentiment, but is somewhat less precise with her aria *di sorbetto* 'Che disprezza gli infelici', where she observes briefly that Heaven knows how to punish the cruel.³³ By the time we get to Ciro's lengthy farewell scene to his family (II.xi–xii), divine power is temporarily expressed in a polytheistic plural, both in the mouths of the Babylonian chorus that speak of 'Numi irati' (angry gods), and Ciro himself who uses the phrase 'finche piacque agli Dei' ('as long as it is pleasing to the gods'). Ciro speaks of his family finally being in the conventional Greco-Roman good place 'Eliso' ('Elysium'), rather than a Judaeo-Christian heaven.

Once again a comparison with Sarti's *Giulio Sabino* suggests the dramatic effects Aventi and Rossini may have been trying to achieve. Two scenes in Sarti's opera feature the pathos of the suffering couple Sabino and Epponina as they face their own deaths or victimization at the hands of the Roman Tito. In Act II Tito discovers Sabino and his family hidden in a subterranean chamber and sends him to prison and death. There is a lengthy farewell, including an aria that became a popular independent number 'Cari figli' ('Cari figli, un altro amplesso, / Dammi o sposa un altro addio' ('Dear sons, give me one last embrace, o my wife one more farewell')).

III.iv–v is set in a 'mournful place intended for the execution of Sabinus' ('luogo lugubre destinato al suplicio [*sic*] di Sabino'), where Sabino, guarded and in chains, is led to a sad march (*Marcia Lugubre*). He is joined by Epponina, and he begins a parting rondo lament which develops into a duet: 'In qual barbaro momento / Io ti do l'estremo addio?' ('In such a barbarous moment am I giving you my final farewell?').

Rossini and Aventi push these same emotional buttons with similar prosody. In *Ciro in Babilonia* (II.xii) a *marcia funebre* brings Ciro and his family with their escorts 'al luogo destinato al supplizio' ('a place designated for punishment'). Ciro is given an aria: 'T'abbraccio, ti stringo / Mi tenero figlio / Col pianto sul ciglio, / Coi baci d'amor' ('I embrace you, I hug you, my tender son, with tears in my eyes, with kisses of love'). Baldassare interrupts to ask why the process of execution is being delayed; there are expressions of dismay from a quartet of Amira, Argene,

³³ This aria is remarkable for its single-pitch vocal line (on B-flat), supposedly because Rossini determined that this was the singer Anna Savinelli's one good note and deliberately restricted her to it; Osborne, *Rossini: His Life and Works*, 195.

Arbace and Zambri; and then *Ciro* continues with a defiant, 'Si, vedrai, crudel tiranno, / Me, la Sposa e'l figlio esangue, / Ma innocente è questo sangue, / e dal Ciel vendetta avrà' ('Yes, you will see, cruel tyrant, me, my wife and son with our blood shed, but the blood is innocent, and will have vengeance from Heaven'). This is purely generic pathos, because *Ciro's* blood is scarcely 'innocent'. His troops are besieging Babylon; he and his family are prisoners of war, enemies whose army threatens Baldassare, his children and his kingdom. The sequence concludes with *Ciro* offering Amira and his son one last time 'A te un bacio, ... a te un amplesso' ('To you a kiss ... to you an embrace'). At the root of this scene, then, are words and ideas familiar from *Giulio Sabino* or from generic scenes like those in operas where a family is threatened by a tyrant, which are reproduced to create the climactic pathos of *Ciro in Babilonia*.

However, important differences from *Sabino* in staging and musical treatment connect *Ciro* back to the historical and public nature of the action and the Lenten message it was intended to convey. The scenes in *Sabino* take place in an underground hideaway and solitary place of execution. The final sequence of *Ciro* is in a public square that features the royal palace and an arched gate through which the final triumphal procession will proceed. The entire cast accompanies *Ciro* and his family. Most important, Baldassare's intrusion to hasten the proceedings results in a reply by *Ciro* in which the *vendetta* theme that *Ciro* introduced in his accompanied recitative (II.ii) returns. The farewell scene concludes with a reprise of the phrase 'Ma innocente è questo sangue, / e dal Ciel vendetta avrà' ('But the blood is innocent and will have vengeance from Heaven'). Elaborate runs and melismas around the phrase 'dal Ciel vendetta avrà' are set against a choral background that repeats the invocation 'Oh Dio'. Ultimately God's vengeance against Baldassare for the destruction of Jerusalem and for *Ciro's* domestic tragedy are one and the same. This is confirmed briefly, if not very vigorously, by *Ciro* in the opera's *scena ultima*: he and Amira are borne back through the triumphal arch on a chariot, and he asserts, 'Sento che Dio m'ispira / L'insolito vigore, / Per sè di *Ciro* il core / Tanto valor non ha' ('I understand that God inspires me with unusual strength; Cyrus's heart does not by itself have so much bravery'). The opera returns at the end, however, to the triumph of the royal family. They are blessed by their community rather than by heaven, and they bring blessings to it.

Under Cover in Babylon

The subject of community brings us finally to a question of whether contemporary Italian social and political issues might be embedded in this sacred history of vengeance and liberation from tyranny. In the early modern period, and well into the eighteenth century, Cyrus had been a model for monarchs. Ruth Smith observed that Ramsay's *Voyages* was meant as a guide for the Young Pretender, Charles Stuart, and described Handel's *Belshazzar* as an exemplification of Cyrus as a model of the English patriot king.³⁴ As the century progressed, however, interest in Cyrus and particularly in Xenophon's *Cyropaedia* gradually passed with the mounting political and ideological challenges to the Ancien Régime,³⁵ and the political spirit in France and northern Italy was assuredly anti-monarchical during

³⁴ Ruth Smith, *Handel's Oratorios and Eighteenth-Century Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995): 317–19.

³⁵ Tatum, 'The Classic as Footnote'.

Rossini's first two decades. Jacques-Louis David is supposed to have said that the people would rather tear down the Opéra than see a king triumph on the stage.³⁶ However, the parallel with the Passion narrative that I suggested above also allows for a different, Christological construction of Cyrus in this opera: instead of an ideal prince he is at first a victim who is subsequently rescued through the favour of God. Only then does he triumph as a liberator of Babylon, to be hailed by the chorus in the *scena ultima* as an operatic *vincitor clemente*.

The question of whether there might be intentional political themes, or at least tendencies, in this opera must involve both Aveni as the wordsmith and Rossini as the composer. During Rossini's youth, the northern states of the Italian peninsula experienced an unstable see-sawing between French and Austrian domination. His father backed the revolutionary French invaders and as a result was interrogated and imprisoned. Although Rossini himself denied later in life that he was any kind of reactionary, this was perhaps a result of his disillusionment with the course reactionary politics had taken. French occupation was a positive influence in his early life and opened up Italian society in ways that benefitted both his family and his career.³⁷

Some modern commentators have identified patriotic fervour in Rossini's *L'italiana in Algeri*, written for Venice in the next year, 1813: Rossini included a brief orchestral reference to the *Marseillaise* in the chorus that precedes Isabella's rousing aria (II.xi) 'Pensa alla patria, e intrepido / Il tuo dover adempi: / Vedi per tutta Italia / Rinascere gli esempi / D'ardire e di valor' ('Think about the fatherland, and intrepidly do your duty: see for all Italy the birth of the examples of courage and valour'). The music was found sufficiently challenging by some authorities that very occasionally it was censored in production. It is difficult to identify what a quotation of the *Marseillaise* might have meant at the premiere in Venice in 1813, a time when the popularity of French rule had waned in Italy, and Philip Gossett has suggested it might simultaneously be read as an ironic comment on the French and a straightforward statement of patriotic defiance of foreign power.³⁸ But Emanuele Senici has cautioned against finding any expression of personal political beliefs in the music for that opera, observing that 'during his Italian career, Rossini was happy to set to music texts from across the political spectrum – or at least, did not object to doing so – depending on his professional circumstances and geographical location at any given moment'.³⁹ This caveat might therefore apply also to any political reading of Rossini's music for *Ciro*.

³⁶ John A. Rice, *W.A. Mozart: La clemenza di Tito* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991): 11–12, n13.

³⁷ Osborne, *Rossini*, 3. On Rossini's later views, see his letter of 12 June 1864 from Paris to Filippo Santocanale in Palermo; Giuseppe Mazzatinti, Fanny Manis and G. Manis, eds, *Lettere di G. Rossini* (Florence: Barbera, 1902): letter 279, pp. 270–72.

³⁸ On the *Marseillaise* parody, see Philip Gossett, 'Becoming a Citizen: The Chorus in Risorgimento Opera', *Cambridge Opera Journal* 2 (1990): 41–64, at 46–7. Gossett suggests possible resonances for the contemporary audience. In France, the *Marseillaise* of course had a revolutionary connotation, which put it out of favour with Napoleon Bonaparte. It could still be sung to raise patriotic spirit, but sometimes also in opposition to the imperial government. See Louis Fiaux, *La Marseillaise: Son histoire dans l'histoire des Français depuis 1792* (Paris: Charpentier et Fasquelle, 1918): 189–94. For a survey and assessment of thoughts about politics in Rossini's Italian operas, see Emanuele Senici, "'An Atrocious Indifference": Rossini's Operas and the Politics of Musical Representation in Early Nineteenth-Century Italy', *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 17 (2012): 414–26.

³⁹ Senici, "'An Atrocious Indifference'", 416.

Aventi, for his part, was a lively member of the local Ferrarese aristocracy, an intellectual, and a successful military man serving the French government in Ferrara as supreme commander of the National Guard with the rank of colonel. He 'experienced intensely the season of patriotic fervour of the Napoleonic period'.⁴⁰ After Ferrara's return to the Austrian and Papal sphere of influence in 1815, Aventi suffered a brief banishment from public life, following which he declared officially that his service had been to his own *patria*, and that he hated tyranny although he had had to serve it. In Ferrara throughout his life he continued to have a distinguished public career, which included formal recognition by both the Emperor of Austria and Louis XVIII of France. In addition to his directorial duties at the Teatro Comunale, in 1811 he produced a libretto for a cantata to be sung in Ferrara in celebration of the birth of Napoleon's son 'the King of Rome'.⁴¹ This composition was above and beyond the call of duty for Aventi and suggests he was more willing to celebrate French governance of Ferrara than his later recantation suggested. At the very least it indicates that he was interested in acknowledging the reigning French power structure by composing original poetry for public performance.

It seems reasonable to suggest, therefore, that Aventi as librettist and manager of the theatre, found it desirable to embed in his libretto political expression of a French liberationist type, dutiful to the current regime, if not necessarily enthusiastic about it. Although the libretto does not emphasize the theme of *libertà* that is found 15 years earlier in, for example, Tarchi's *La congiura pisoniana*, for those who wanted to hear it the celebration of conquest by a *vincitor clemente* might have resonated with the revolutionary spirit of Napoleonic Italy.⁴² Rossini as composer seconded the effort with suitably celebratory music for the triumphant finale. In 1813, *Ciro* was evidently perceived by official programmers at the Teatro della Pergola in Florence as supportive of the current regime and was produced as a *dramma sacro* 'under the protection of His Majesty Napoleon I'.⁴³ (Fig. 2).

There is another consideration, as one thinks about possible contemporary social and political readings of the libretto. Ferrara was home to an old and important Jewish community that had suffered oppression in varying degrees of severity under the governance of the Papal States. Ferrara had a walled ghetto with gates that were used to enforce sometimes severe restrictions on the Jewish population's movement and social participation in the life of the city.⁴⁴ With the coming of the

⁴⁰ Fabbri, 'Il conte Aventi', 91: 'visse intensamente la stagione di entusiasmo patriottico del periodo napoleonico'.

⁴¹ Fabbri, 'Il conte Aventi', 103.

⁴² *La congiura pisoniana* was performed in Milan in 1797 after the city's occupation by French Republican forces under Napoleon. See Robert C. Ketterer, *Ancient Rome in Early Opera* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009): 173–5; and idem, 'Roman Republicanism and Operatic Heroines in Napoleonic Italy': 99–124, in *Operatic Migrations: Transforming Works and Crossing Boundaries*, ed. Roberta Montemorra Marvin and Downing A. Thomas (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006): 104–11.

⁴³ There might, of course, have been a disconnect between the official French patronage expressed by the title page of this libretto and a more ironic view of French imperialism on the part of the Florentine audience, a disconnect similar to that suggested by Gossett with regard to the citation of the *Marseillaise* in *L'italiana in Algeri*. For a description of the impact of French influence on northern Italian self-image and connection with French officialdom, see Senici, *Music in the Present Tense*, 152–3.

⁴⁴ Isidore Singer, 'Ferrara: Under French Rule', in *The Jewish Encyclopedia* 1906, www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/6090-ferrara, accessed 17 March 2020.

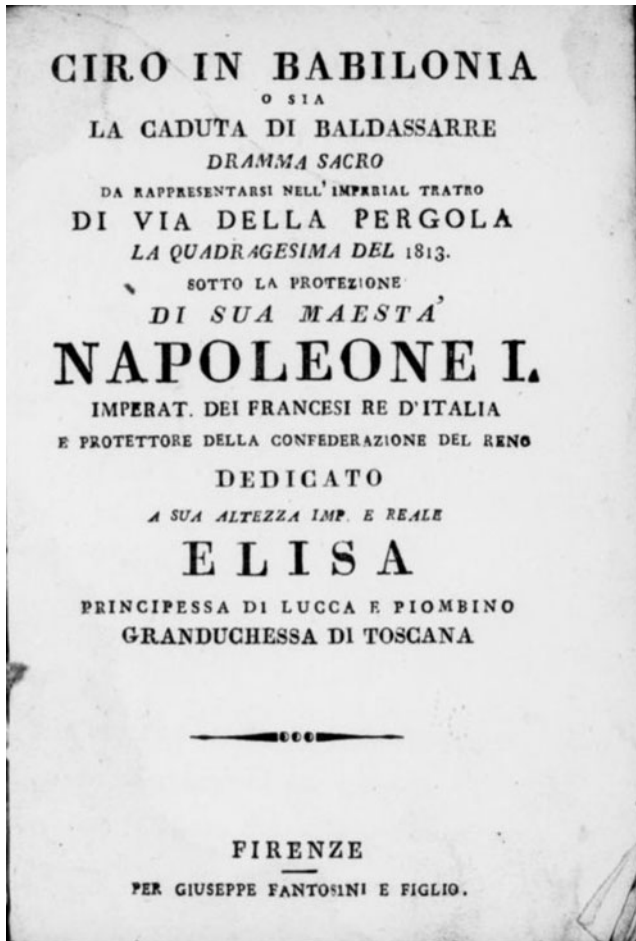


Fig. 2 Title page, *Ciro in Babilonia, o sia La caduta di Baldassarre: dramma sacro* (Florence: Giuseppe Fantonini e Figlio, 1813). Music Division, Library of Congress, ML48 [S11933] Microfilm Music 1854, reel 241 (by permission).

French, all of that changed for a few years. The gates were torn down, and three Ferrarese rabbis joined a 'grand Synhedron' of 71 distinguished rabbis convened by the imperial government in Paris. The chronicler Abramo Pesaro declared that 'the gathering of such a Congress in the premiere city of the world, and after such great demoralization that had held the Jews, awakened everywhere great emotion', and concluded that 'from 1808 until 23 July 1815, the position of the Israelites of Ferrara was very positive, being at peace with their other fellow citizens'.⁴⁵ In gratitude for the newly granted recognition and freedom, the Jewish Società di Pagatori, in a three-year economic plan for the community, included

⁴⁵ Abramo Pesaro, *Memorie storiche sulla comunità israelitica ferrarese* (Bologna: Forni / Reprint of Ferrara 1878–80): 'La riunione di tale Congresso nella prima città del Mondo, e dopo tanta depressione in che erano stati tenuti gli Ebrei, destò grande emozione ovunque'

an article with a patriotic call for military service to the State and the Sovereign, and budgeted a monthly stipend and pension for any of the Jewish community who either volunteered or were conscripted to military service, 'exhorting the said individuals to behave with courage and exacting faith in regard to their own glory'.⁴⁶

I do not wish to claim absolutely that *Ciro in Babilonia*, written to be a Lenten entertainment, was a covert celebration for the Jewish community of Ferrara. On the other hand, the choice of the conquest of Jerusalem as the plot was unusual, as we saw, even for an opera about Cyrus the Great. The parallel of Jewish liberation by an invading army that included the explicit agency of the God of the Jews is striking and would have been available to anyone who wanted to see it as part of the new if temporary concord between the Jewish population and Ferrara's Christian citizenry. Rossini may not have cared about such a rapprochement, but Aveni, both as military and as community leader, might well have had an interest. Supposing a Jewish context is possible, then the opera, like its hero, was under cover in Babylon: an 'oratorio' that is really Rossini's first *opera seria*, an opera for Christian Lent that could also be heard explicitly and implicitly as a celebration of Jewish liberation and more widely as the liberation of north Italy.

Transforming Classical History in the Early Nineteenth Century

Opera librettists of the early nineteenth century were trying out multiple approaches to script writing. The reign of Metastasio's classicizing librettos was over. The elevation of the composer inspired by individual genius and a nationalist spirit was only beginning. In this period of experimentation and progressive change, librettists of serious operas began including new elements of patriotism expressed through local legend, choral spectacle (where there had been none in the Metastasian libretto), and tragic and deadly denouements (replacing the standard *lieto fine*). None of these elements was common to all new librettos, and, as Rudolph Angermüller observes: 'It can generally be stated that different tendencies result in a multi-coloured portrait; that innovation and tradition run parallel; really no unified progressive trend is established in this period, but modern forms intrude slowly, and in that way become a determining factor in librettos'.⁴⁷

Among the shifts and changes during this period was a struggle with the heritage of classical antiquity that had been, since the beginning of the seventeenth century, fundamental to opera's subject matter and to the dramatic theory that supported its practice. For a century or more, there had been operas taken from medieval history and Renaissance epic, but the age of revolution at the end of the eighteenth century brought with it a fresh interest in national legends and histories from after the fall of Rome. Creators of new operas moved away from and

(74). 'Dal 1808 sino al 23 Luglio 1815 la posizione degli Israeliti ferraresi fu ottima, essendo pacificati agli altri concittadini' (77).

⁴⁶ Pesaro, *Memorie storiche sulla comunità israelitica ferrarese*: 'esortando detti individui a disportarsi con corraggio e fedele esattezza a gloria lero [loro?]' (76).

⁴⁷ Rudolph Angermüller, 'Grundzüge des nachmetastasischen Librettos', *Analecta musicologica* 21 (1982): 192–235, at 235: 'Allgemein kann konstatiert werden, daß verschiedene Strömungen ein buntes Bild ergeben, daß Fortschrittliches und Konventionelles nebeneinander herlaufen, im Grunde keine einheitliche progressive Tendenz in dieser Zeit festzustellen ist, modern Formen sich aber langsam durchsetzen und damit für das Libretto bestimmend werden.'

even overtly rejected engagement with classical subject matter. Old habits and good stories die hard, however, so means were still sought to make them fresh. *Ciro in Babilonia* was one such effort. The idea of featuring Cyrus the Great in an opera dated back to the mid-seventeenth century in Venice. The eighteenth-century understanding of the classical tradition presented him in its own way, culminating in Metastasio's interpretation. Aveni and Rossini, living under the shadow of post-revolutionary France, introduced the Biblical element to present a new, seldom-depicted episode from the life of Cyrus. In their version, Cyrus was turned from a political model for a monarch into a Judaeo-Christian hero and, by extension, on the model of Napoleon, a liberator of Jews and Christians alike. Additionally, the opera explored the edgy possibility of presenting, in the secular genre of *opera seria*, Judaeo-Christian religious material that included references to polytheism and complicated love interests, and all this during the Lenten season, which did not typically allow opera.

Ciro in Babilonia opened a door through which Rossini was to walk again. Five years later (1818), he wrote a second, more maturely developed Lenten opera for Naples, *Mosé in Egitto*. As in *Ciro*, the story of Mosè follows overtly the salvational pattern of danger and rescue of God's chosen, this time the exodus from Egypt. But, as its 'Argomento' states,

This event, extracted from the first through fifteenth chapters of Exodus, has provided the plot for the present tragedy, which, without violating the outlines of the sacred story, and following the lead of the familiar tragedy by Sig. Ringhieri,⁴⁸ I have thought to make it more interesting with the episode of the love of a Hebrew maiden with the first-born son of Pharaoh, because he could with greater passion bind his father by oath to keep the people of Israel in Egypt.⁴⁹

In this opera, Pharaoh's son rather than God hardens Pharaoh's heart against releasing the Jews from Egypt. (Compare Exodus 7: 1–5.) Biblical history thus complicated by love interest gave the events of Exodus a new human agency and freed Rossini and his librettist Andrea Leone Tottola to abandon a strictly happy ending and explore human tragedy, first with the death of the Pharaoh's son and then with the obliteration of the Pharaoh and his troops in the Red Sea. The ancient world could after all have its use in a post-Metastasian opera. Rossini would make a return visit to Babylon five years after that with *Semiramide*, the story of which also had classical sources in Herodotus, Diodorus Siculus and Justin.⁵⁰ This was a strictly pagan, non-Biblical vision of Babylon, which provided a vehicle for Rossini's final, innovative operatic music for Italy (Venice, 1823). Changes to serious opera that were happening in the nineteenth century came gradually, but in *Ciro in Babilonia*, Aveni and Rossini had discovered a hybrid of old and new that worked.

⁴⁸ *L'Osiride*, a spoken tragedy by Francesco Ringhieri, Padua, 1760.

⁴⁹ 'Questo fatto, ricavato dal capitolo primo al 15. del libro dell'Esodo, ha somministrato l'argomento alla presente Tragedia, che, senza offendere le tracce della sacra storia, e seguendo la condotta della conosciuta Tragedia del Sig. Ringhieri, ho creduto di rendere più interessante coll'episodio degli amori di una donzella Ebraica col figlio primogenito di Faraone, perchè costui potesse con maggior fervore impegnarsi presso il padre a trattenerlo schiavo in Egitto il popolo d'Israele.' Quoted from Angermüller, 'Grundzüge', 225.

⁵⁰ For a discussion of the ancient sources of the Semiramis legend with reference to opera, see Wendy Heller, *Emblems of Eloquence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003): 225–8.