

BOOK REVIEW

Nei palchi e sulle sedie. Il teatro musicale nella società italiana dell'Ottocento

by Carlida Steffan and Luca Zoppelli, Rome, Carocci, 2023, 344 pp., €32.00 (paperback), ISBN 978-88-290-1993-9

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'At last, the great day of the opening of the San Carlo [theatre] has come ... My eyes are dazzled, my soul happy ... There is nothing in all of Europe that I dare say comes close to it, nothing that, even from afar, gives a hint of what it is like' (Stendhal, *Rome, Naples et Florence*, vol. I, Paris, Librairie ancienne Honoré Champion, 1919, p. 379). Stendhal's astonishment at seeing the Teatro San Carlo in Naples, on 12 February 1817, was not just a reaction to the mere architectural and decorative beauty of one of the oldest and most prestigious theatres in Italy. In the nineteenth century, Italian musical theatre was one of the country's highest artistic expressions. Brilliant composers such as Rossini, Donizetti, Bellini and Verdi – along with a host of 'minor' opera composers who were part of an extraordinary constellation of musicians – were the undisputed protagonists of a golden era. *Nei palchi e sulle sedie. Il teatro musicale nella società italiana dell'Ottocento* reveals the complexity of the cultural phenomenon encapsulated in the all-encompassing term melodrama, explored in nine long chapters with evocative and highly intriguing titles, preceded by a detailed introduction and a list of abbreviations.

Co-authored by Carlida Steffan and Luca Zoppelli, the book gradually leads the reader to an understanding of the kaleidoscopic world of Italian opera during the 'long century', with its many production, artistic, economic and social aspects and problems, all of which are still present on today's stages. This comprehensive investigation spans over a century, focusing on both large and small cities, histories and mythologies, *tòpoi* and clichés, philosophies and symbolisms. Based on archival documents (mainly in the Archivio Storico Ricordi, Milan) and on internal and external testimonies of the time (in particular, the reports of foreign travellers), it skilfully rereads the entire range of artistic situations that nineteenth-century Italian musical theatre was able to conceive at the highest level. Piece by piece, the rich Italian theatre system – the expression of a people endowed with a talent for singing – is unveiled through a straightforward academic analysis, accessible even to non-specialists.

The authors provide a well-documented general perspective on the subject, reviewing the findings of previous studies in the various sectors covered and adding new data and approaches. The references to existing scholarship are neatly listed in an extensive and up-to-date bibliography, followed by an index of names. While pointing out the difficulties, limitations and distortions of reading the sources, the authors also propose

stimulating avenues for future research and suggest new perspectives on cultural and anthropological history. Moving between pre- and post-Unification Italy, they reflect on the popularity of the opera, its *raison d'être* and its relationship with the other arts, its geographical distribution, the articulated practices of theatre-going, the mechanisms of social representation, how opera was enjoyed, and the expectations and reactions of audiences. The volume thus offers a reading of the opera as a social event, a means of entertainment, a ritual event, a form of civic pedagogy and education and a school of civilisation. Using a variety of examples, the authors describe a production system that was a true industry and a collective creation – the result of the work of producers and musicians, librettists and set designers, singing companies and publishers. ‘Performed and revisited in a thousand different ways’ (p. 211) within and outside the context of the theatre, opera songs pervaded every branch of society, reaching the squares and salons thanks to transcriptions for bands, musical fantasies and simpler versions, or in cafés, becoming the main topic of conversation and confrontation between operagoers. Opera performances were staged in renowned theatres, such as La Fenice in Venice, La Scala in Milan, the Carlo Felice in Genoa, the Regio in Turin and the San Carlo in Naples, or in the public and private theatres of small cities, in that ‘narrow space where one learns to observe, comment, greet and present oneself in public, a microcosm and an almost daily training ground for interpersonal exchanges’ (p. 77).

In short, *Nei palchi e sulle sedie* covers every aspect of a night at the opera: the hierarchical value of the different seasons, repertoires, seat allocation systems, subscription prices, rents and sublets, salaries and audience attention. It examines the frequency and nature of opera-going, lived ‘in the boxes and in the stalls’ (p. 5); in the opera’s dimension as a meeting place; as a miniature society; and as a ‘place to watch and be watched’ – the ‘salon of salons’ (p. 65). People went to the theatre to chat, to dine, to gamble, to do business, to flirt, but also to watch – more or less attentively – the performance on stage, which was offered to a heterogeneous audience of spectators (not just adults): from sovereigns to businessmen, from high-ranking ladies to scribes or humble servants. All of this happened at a time of revolutionary upheaval, under the watchful eye of the establishment censor, always careful to avoid any form of protest, unrest or turbulence. In this regard, the authors examine the role that opera played in the Risorgimento process and the extent to which the latter affected the choices of opera composers. What is certain is that in the second half of the nineteenth century, Italian opera – sung in Italian and performed by an Italian cast – reached every corner of the globe. Its spread was astonishing, so much so that Italian melodrama remains one of the most appreciated and loved national products in the world.

Translated by Andrea Hajek