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To Please the Public: Composers and Audiences in Nineteenth-Century Italy

The power of opera—its communicative capacity and its political and social relevance—was particularly apparent in Italy during the first half of the nineteenth century, producing a solid mixture of reality and mythology. Decoding such a civil role, with its future involvement in Risorgimento culture, requires a strong collaboration between historians and musicologists, scholars from each discipline analyzing different levels of the problems and cross-referencing them: the music and text of an opera (with its multiple contributors), the many aspects of its reception, performing spaces, the market system, and governments and their political aims.¹

Within the interaction of these two disciplines, one of the tasks more often considered within historians' competence has been to reconstruct the social and cultural reality of the public. This is anything but a simple task; it might even be an impossible mission. Sorlin described it as illusory by its very nature. For him, the public, both as a collective body and as a group of individuals performing a cultural act, is reachable only by following a line of clues, which even sophisticated quantitative research can penetrate only to a certain extent.²

Since the 1980s, historians of media have become practically obsessed with the problem of how to gain information about the public, attempting to approach the audience from many angles and many perspectives. In the case of nineteenth-century theater (particularly musical theater), the method entails highly specific

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1 Among essays that have recently invited the collaboration of musicologists and historians are William Weber, "Toward a Dialogue between Historians and Musicologists," *Musica e storia*, I (1993), 5–20; Myriam Chimènes, "Musicologie et histoire. Frontières ou *no man's land* entre deux disciplines?" *Revue de musicologie*, LXXXIV (1998), 67–78. Sorba, "Musica e nazione. Alcuni percorsi di ricerca," in *Contemporanea*, VI (2003), 393–402.

2 Pierre Sorlin, "Le mirage du public," *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine*, XXXIX (1992), 86–102.

characteristics, since the audience was locally defined and circumscribed as a united collectivity, rather than as the indistinct or fearful crowd described several decades later by Gabriel Tarde or Gustave Le Bon. Despite Sorlin's skepticism about the effectiveness of quantitative analysis, historiography has continued to collect clues about the stability and the social and gender articulation of the operatic public, as well as about the behavior and practices involved in opera going. In recent years, the growing historical literature on consumption has offered many useful ideas in this area, insisting upon the active role of consumers (the public) and on ways in which consumption helped to construct subjectivity.³

Work preceding this article analyzed the opera-going public in Italy during the nineteenth century through a maze of different sources: police files, journals of foreign travelers, administrative files of the theaters and their pricing systems, building projects and the restructuring of opera houses, and newspaper criticism. Cross-referencing this information permitted virtual photographs of various opera houses to be taken. Though still somewhat blurred, the photographs reveal a public comprised of many different classes. The rigid hierarchical layout of Italian theatrical space, socially and culturally diversified across various parts of the peninsula, cohered through a series of rules and common mechanisms that governed the modality of theater construction, management, and attendance. The principal sites for public sociability and leisure activities spread like capillaries throughout the Italian peninsula during the years before Italy's political and administrative unification.⁴

The purpose of this article is to study this elusive collectivity from the viewpoint of composers, impresarios, editors, librettists, and singers. Through their eyes the public more clearly emerges as a collective entity that provides insights into the workings of the Italian opera system. In one sense, the strong presence of the public in the minds of the contemporary theatrical producers defined

3 On the notion of crowd in the work of Tarde and Le Bon, see Susanna Barrows, *Distorting Mirrors: Views of the Crowd in Late Nineteenth-Century France* (New Haven, 1981). On the transition from the public to the crowd, involving Stéphane Mallarmé, see Pascal Durand, "Entre 'foule' et 'public': Les oscillations mallarméennes," in *Penser l'art et la culture avec les sciences sociales. En l'honneur de Pierre Bourdieu* (Paris, 2002), 105–120. John Brewer and Ann Bermingham (eds.), *The Consumption of Culture, 1600–1800: Image, Object, Text* (London, 1995); for more general reflections, Michel de Certeau, *L'invention du quotidien. Arts de faire* (Paris, 1990).

4 See Sorba, *Teatri. L'Italia del melodramma nell'età del Risorgimento* (Bologna, 2001).

the Italian opera system from the beginning as a market system, even though the major theaters usually had a near monopoly, like the court theaters during the Ancien Régime. But this new examination of the issue suggests that the producers of opera and its consumers had a reciprocal relationship. Audience expectations and values contributed to shape romantic operas, which, in turn, played an important role in social and political transformations of the period, creating an interchange between opera and society.⁵

THE ROLE OF THE AUDIENCE To understand that the audience played not only a significant role in the system of production for nineteenth-century opera but an active one need not be dependent on the semiotics of narrative texts, as formulated in the work of such scholars as Jurij Lotman and Umberto Eco. It is sufficient to consider “theatricality” (and the resulting structural triad of author/actor/spectator) as a fundamental element of operatic performance. Indeed, the image of the public as protagonist is found throughout the correspondence of composers, which abounds with references to the audience, or rather to the “Public,” as the arbiters of their work. Composers frequently expressed their full awareness that the public joined them, along with performers, impresarios, government officials, and even sovereigns, as active participants in the process of production (at the least as recipients). The correspondence of impresarios and singers, whose more direct involvement with production and execution made them closer to the audience, contains continual allusions, no less significant for their informal diction or even slang, to the “satisfaction of the Public,” to “doing something that will please the Public” or will not “abuse the indulgence of this Public,” and to the need to “warn the respectable Public about any changes” that might put it “in a bad mood.” Moreover, the administrative re-

5 This article centers only on the correspondence of Gioachino Rossini, Vincenzo Bellini, Gaetano Donizetti, and Giuseppe Verdi. For the recent attention historians have given epistolary sources, see Maria Luisa Betti and Daniela Maldini Chiarito (eds.), “*Dolce dono graditissimo.*” *La lettera privata dal Settecento al Novecento* (Milan, 2000). For composers’ correspondence, see Raffaele Monterosso, “I carteggi dei musicisti,” in Elio D’Auria (ed.), *Metodologia ecdotica dei carteggi. Atti del Convegno internazionale di studi Roma 1980* (Firenze, 1989), 151–166. For the correspondence of Donizetti, see Paolo Trovato and Fiamma Nicolodi, “L’epistolario di Donizetti tra parodia e tecnicismo,” in *idem* (eds.), *Le parole della musica* (Florence, 2000), III, 135–184; Pier Vincenzo Mengaldo, “Sullo stile dell’epistolario di Verdi,” in Fabrizio Della Seta, Roberta Montemorra Marvin, and Marco Marica (eds.), *Verdi 2001. Atti del Convegno internazionale Parma—New York—New Haven* (Florence, 2003), 25–45.

cords of theaters contain innumerable phrases about the impresario as “responsible no less to the Public than to the government” for a successful season, as well as statements about public authorities’ need to “ensure the interests of the public and prevent any bad feelings or uneasiness.” In short, the presence of a public for whom operatic performance was conceived and realized seems to have been much more evident to contemporaries than to modern-day observers.⁶

By the end of the century, Verdi—despite himself—would add even critics, by then a recognized institution in theatrical life, to this system, but his view of the relationship between a composer and his audience remained unchanged. In a letter of March 1879 to Opprandino Arrivabene expressing his nationalistic concerns, he wrote, “All of us, Composers, Critics, Public, have done everything possible to renounce our national music.” A few years later, ever more pessimistic about the viability of the system, he complained, “Composers and the Public don’t know what they want. Singers with impossible demands. A Government that does not give subventions,” holding each of them, in some way, responsible for the crisis. The decline of the system, as he remarked elsewhere, is also the decline of the public, “which no longer has the courage to applaud or to boo, frankly, loyally.” The theatricality intrinsic to opera—its constant assumption of, and dependence upon, the presence of engaged spectators—strengthens and colors the bond between opera and society.⁷

Acknowledging the hardly marginal presence of this collective subject in the overall picture must avoid facile anachronism: The audience in nineteenth-century Italy remains a “plural” subject with a geographically and temporally localized character. Various “publics” (this time with a small “p”) existed, requiring their own adjectives. Stendhal, who was mindful, while traveling

6 For an important contribution to semiotic studies of opera librettos, see Mario Lavagetto, *Quei più modesti romanzi. Il libretto nel melodramma di Verdi* (Milan, 1979). On the relationship between the impresario and the public, see John Rosselli, *The Opera Industry in Italy from Cimarosa to Verdi* (Cambridge, 1984), 152–163. Rossini (ed. Bruno Cagli and Sergio Ragni), *Lettere e documenti* (Pesaro, 1992), I, 191.

7 Annibale Alberti (ed.), *Verdi intimo. Carteggio di Giuseppe Verdi con il conte Opprandino Arrivabene [1861–1886]* (Verona, 1931), 227, 300, 188. On the theatricality of Verdi’s operas, see Gabriele Baldini (ed. Fedele D’Amico), *Abitare la battaglia. La storia di Giuseppe Verdi* (Milan, 1970); Della Seta, “Verdi: la tradizione italiana e l’esperienza europea,” *Musica/realità*, XXXII (1990), 135–158; *idem*, “‘Abitare la battaglia’ thirty years after,” *Studi verdiani*, XV (2000–2001), 15–28.

throughout the peninsula, that every Italian city had its own theater and its own public, always spoke about the Milanese, Florentine, or Neapolitan public. The most thoughtful Italian social histories of recent years have demonstrated that the theater-going publics in pre-unification Italy evinced the same variety of social textures and local perspectives as the cities themselves, however hard it may be to fathom. It is as problematical to speak in the singular about an Italian theater public as of an Italian nobility, bourgeoisie, or lower class.⁸

Little in the correspondence of musicians pertains to the character, socioeconomic position, or gender of the public. It is evident, besides, that this public already constitutes a community that represents a collective spectator, not a society that would “become” a public. The brief references to boxes filled with fine ladies—as many as four or five in each for the most keenly anticipated *premières*—to the presence of foreigners from nearby cities, or to the expectations of subscribers—the preeminent public but also a perpetually dissatisfied group—confirm a close identification between the public and the city, a particular characteristic of theaters run by a society or by the city in this period. If a production failed to please the public, as did the second version of *Maometto II*, which Rossini presented in 1823 Venice, “the entire public in general and the City [was] thoroughly disgusted by the poor results of the performance,” and “the defection from and the universal disparagement in which the grand La Fenice theater [found] itself [that] year form[ed] the constant topic of conversation, criticism, and general observation in shops, associations, and private gatherings.”⁹

This expanded involvement of the citizenry might also manifest itself concerning successful performances, finding echoes

8 For an overview of recent Italian social history of the nineteenth century, see Adrian Lyttelton, “The Middle Classes in Liberal Italy,” in John A. Davis and Paul Ginsborg (eds.), *Society and Politics in the Age of the Risorgimento: Essays in Honour of Denis Mack Smith* (New York, 1991); Raffaele Romanelli, “Political Debate, Social History and the Italian *Borghesia*: Changing Perspectives in Historical Research,” *Journal of Modern History*, LXIII (1991), 717–739.

9 On the theater as the most representative edifice of the early-nineteenth-century Italian city, see Sorba, “Espaces urbaines et théâtres-monuments dans l’Italie romantique,” in William Bodecker and Patrice Veit (eds.), *Concerts, lieux et espaces musicaux en Europe, 1700–1920. Approche architecturale, culturelle et sociale* (Berlin, 2006, forthcoming); on the identification between the auditorium and the citizenry, *idem*, *Teatri*, 139–145. Letter from Commissario Petropoli to the Chief of Police De Kubeck, January 2, 1823, in Rossini, *Lettere e documenti*, 104–105.

throughout the city. Many decades later, the critic Filippo D'Arcais would remark in the *Opinione*, discussing the astonishing success of *I Lituani* in Milan, that "everywhere this morning everyone talked about the same thing, Ponchielli's opera. In the streets, in caf  s, in homes the subject was only one," providing once again the picture of a noteworthy collective involvement. To this "public discourse" about the theater, not only inside but also outside the opera house, composers and impresarios sometimes paid special attention. Donizetti once urged a correspondent from Messina to promote two young singers by presenting them "in the caf  s, in the piazzas, in the homes, in the hovels, etc. etc."¹⁰

Although these letters are not rife with dazzling images of theatergoers in nineteenth-century Italy, they do have a great deal to say about the tastes, behaviors, and expectations of these publics—what semilogists would call their "horizon of expectations." While preparing to mount Donizetti's *Pia de' Tolomei* in 1836, the impresario Alessandro Lanari knew full well that because "in Venice [the public] want[ed] rich clothes," productions there had to give appropriate weight to the costume designs. To justify the elimination of a piece in the composer's *Marin Faliero* to shorten the opera, Lanari also insisted, "Florentines do not like to go home late."¹¹

Composers frequently spoke about, or addressed themselves to, a particular public of citizens. Bellini was satisfied that his *Norma* had "amazed the people of Bergamo," as well as "all the foreigners in the theater: from Brescia, Verona, and Milan," thus testifying to the breadth of the audience. Donizetti was enraged with the public of Mantua, which had been critical toward his *Lucia di Lammermoor*, but he was also aware, as he wrote in another letter, that not all operas are made for every theater. For various

¹⁰ Filippo D'Arcais, "I Lituani a Milano," in *L'Opinione*, 11 March 1874, cited in Alberti (ed.), *Verdi intimo*, 167; Donizetti to Luigi Spadaro Del Bosch, December 3, 1837, in Guido Zavadini, *Donizetti. Vita, musiche, epistolario* (Bergamo, 1948), 462. The peculiarity of the Italian system lay in the superimposition of the local and national dimensions in theaters. The multiplication of theaters during the first half of the nineteenth century reflected the rivalries among cities in their local characteristics. Yet the musical culture that developed in theaters soon acquired a national profile and organization (reflected in the circuit of impresarios).

¹¹ Richard Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantic of Historical Time* (New York, 2004); letters from Lanari to Donizetti, August 19 and May 19, 1836, in Jeremy Commons, "Una corrispondenza tra Alessandro Lanari e Donizetti (45 lettere inedite)," *Studi donizettiani*, III (1978), 37, 23.

reasons, Verdi had a difficult relationship with the Neapolitan public throughout his career, accusing it in 1855 of always being “fussy any time you present it with something different” and being incapable of accepting “equally a Queen or a peasant, a virtuous woman or a whore.”¹²

These examples demonstrate how composers measured themselves against a specific public, not a generic one, to gain an understanding of its particular qualities and even its affinity with other publics. “The Venetians will appreciate it as much as the Milanese, for the heart is the same everywhere,” wrote Donizetti in French, identifying passion and sentiment as the principal elements shared by the two publics at that moment. Sometimes a local citizen would manifest all of his “municipal patriotism,” of which Stendhal provided memorable images, greeting with resonant jeers the opera of a young but already established composer who had refused the libretto of a local poet. As most composers learned, offending the sensibilities of the public was unwise.¹³

FACE TO FACE WITH THE PUBLIC The relationship between composers and their publics (or at least parts of them) was neither distant nor virtual but direct and personal, particularly at the moment of the premiere, though also during the variegated history of later stagings. It can be divided into various phases, the first of which generally began even before the opera was presented to the public, when the composer informed his interlocutor about what he was preparing, and any changes that he anticipated. Donizetti frequently warned the public in advance about the status of his projects, especially about possible problems in staging and interpretation, to avoid its wrath and meet its expectations. Even Rossini, who was less attentive to his audience, before a performance of *L'Italiana in Algeri* at the Théâtre Italien in Paris asked his associate, Carlo Severini, “to place in the entrance of the theater this eve-

12 Letter to Felice Romani, August 24, 1832, in Luisa Cambi (ed.), *Vincenzo Bellini. Epistolario* (Verona, 1943), 319; letter of January 29, 1838, to Count Ottavio Tasca and May 20, 1845, to Tommaso Persico from Donizetti, in Zavadini, *Donizetti. Vita, musiche, epistolari*, 464, 811; letter from Verdi to Cesare De Sanctis, February 17, 1855, in Alessandro Luzio, *Carteggi verdiani* (Rome, 1935), I, 29–30.

13 Letter to Giuseppina Appiani, January 22, 1844, in Zavadini, *Donizetti. Vita, musiche, epistolari*, 719. The opera jeered was *Zaira*, written by Bellini for the inauguration of the theater of Parma, but badly received by the local audience.

ning an announcement that Mme. Schiasetti begs the indulgence of the public because she is having vocal problems.”¹⁴

In the nineteenth century, before conductors arrived on the scene, composers were contractually required to participate in a certain number of rehearsals and to attend their premieres and several performances, prepared to receive the public’s reactions; nor was their presence in the theater a marginal aspect of the *mise en scène*. Journalistic reports about performances regularly commented in detail about the encounters between composers and publics, which were sometimes spirited and humorous. Audiences called composers on stage at the end of performances to indicate their appreciation; once in a while, they might even call out established composers during performances.

A composer’s absence from a theater without a reasonable explanation could cause an audience significant displeasure, almost to the extent of a personal affront. As Donizetti tellingly affirmed about making an appearance in Naples, “Since they wanted to boo me even at the Teatro del Fondo when I wrote and presented a new cabaletta for *L’elisir d’amore*, since I didn’t think it was necessary to appear in the theater for such a small matter, I don’t want now to provoke the parterre, which has so often protected and encouraged me.” Although the public could view an absence as a lack of courtesy, or even of conviction, Verdi contemplated one in 1883, when he objected to attending the rehearsals and first performance of the revised *Don Carlos* in Milan because he had no desire “to do the usual pirouettes and to show my handsome snout.” In the end, however, he complied.¹⁵

The public made its feelings known to composers not just through boos or cheers but also through formal petitions. In 1824, the administration of the Paris Opéra turned to Ferdinando Paër to formulate a precise request to Rossini: “The public strongly asks that the music played by the stage band in *La donna del lago* be suppressed, and the newspapers have been faithful interpreters of this general desire.”¹⁶

14 Letter to Carlo Severini, April 20, 1826, in Rossini, *Lettere e documenti*, II, 512.

15 Letter to Teodoro Ghezzi, February 21, 1844, in Zavadini, *Donizetti. Vita, musiche, epistolari*, 729; letter to Giulio Ricordi, December 13, 1883, in Franca Cella, *Madina Ricordi, and Marisa Di Gregorio Casati* (eds.), *Carteggio Verdi-Ricordi, 1882–1885* (Parma, 1994), 169.

16 Letter of the Opera Administration to Ferdinando Paër, September 21, 1824, in Rossini, *Lettere e documenti*, II, 275. The requested suppression concerned a military march that Rossini

In the case of Verdi, this direct relationship mutated into a strict control over productions during the 1870s. When faced with a profound crisis in post-Unification theaters, Verdi intervened on an organizational front. As he wrote to Arrivabene in August 1872, “I tried to improve some of our theaters and to give them appropriate operas, and where for many years they produced fiasco after fiasco, the crowds came running and earnings were high. . . . You know that I went to Milan and Parma myself, not to Padua, where however I sent the same choristers from Parma, the same scenographer, stage manager, props, and costumes as in Parma. . . . I did the same thing for *La forza del destino* in Brescia. . . . Now I will take on Naples, where things are somewhat more difficult. In Naples, as in Rome, because they have had Palestrina, Scarlatti, and Pergolesi they think they know more than the others.”¹⁷

The strong personal involvement of composers with publics characterizes this phase; thanks to the Romantic aesthetic, the great composers became stars on an international level. Theatricality remained fundamental to the opera system, but the transition to a system of repertory opera was under way, though not yet established in any final form. Moreover, in Italy, the opera became the quintessential “social art” (as Schlegel had prophesized in *Course of Dramatic Literature*), amplified by the failure of prose theater to emerge fully and the relative absence of other venues for sociability (salons, social clubs, and associations) apart from the opera house.¹⁸

“EFFETTI” AND REACTIONS An excerpt from the *Giornale del Regno delle Due Sicilie*, in April 1816, illustrates the significance of

introduced to be played by a stage band and not by the orchestra, with a strange effect of dissonance that the public disliked.

17 Letter to Arrivabene, 29 August 1872, in Alberti (ed.), *Verdi intimo*, 148–149.

18 Analyses of composers and their careers by historical sociologists—along the lines of Norbert Elias (ed. Michael Schröter), *Mozart: zur Soziologie eines Genies* (Frankfurt am Main, 1991)—include Tia De Nora, *Beethoven and the Construction of Genius: Musical Politics in Vienna* (Berkeley, 1995); Jim Samson, “The Great Composer,” in *idem* (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Nineteenth-Century Music* (New York, 2001), 259–284. For a bibliography on sociability in early nineteenth-century Italy, see Marco Meriggi, *Milano borghese. Circoli ed élites nell'Ottocento* (Venice, 1992); Maria Teresa Mori, *Salotti. La sociabilità delle élites nell'Italia dell'Ottocento* (Rome, 2000). August Wilhelm von Schlegel, *Vorlesungen über dramatische Kunst und Literatur* (Heidelberg, 1809).

the opera public: “Called out on the stage many times during the course of the evening, she showed on each appearance how deeply she was moved at that moment. . . . We like to recall this anecdote because we consider it to be less glorious for the actress [Isabella Colbran] than for a public that is certainly the supreme judge of the truly beautiful in music.” The heart of the matter is that the public was the true and unique judge of a composition’s success. Even before Verdi’s many remarks on the subject, this affirmation—a fundamental tenet of Romantic aesthetics—was practically a commonplace of contemporary opinion, not just for composers and singers but also for critics. This principle induced composers constantly and attentively to monitor the public and its reactions, within a system that seemed to orient itself ever more in the direction of the audience.

A good example is Bellini’s reaction to the fiasco at the opening night of *Norma*, putatively expressed in a letter to Florimo (which must be taken with a grain of salt since no autograph exists), in which he calmly professed his unchanged faith in the indisputable judgment of the public. Although the Milanese public seemed to him severe and impetuous in its reaction to his opera, Bellini repressed every impulse to view himself as a victim: “Enough!!! In operas the public is the supreme judge! To the sentence pronounced against me I hope to make an appeal, and if the public changes its mind, I will have won my case.”¹⁹

Donizetti, for his part, alternated between acknowledgments of the public’s role as arbiter and more aggressive recriminations regarding its fickleness and lack of comprehension. But he continued to engage in a personal competition with other stars of the moment, in European and Italian theaters, about the quantity of applause received. Throughout his correspondence, a preoccupation with the judgment, as well as the mood and disposition, of the public, intersects with a constant readiness to take account of public reaction by modifying, cutting, and revising his operas.²⁰

Verdi’s orientation is congruent with that of his predecessors, seeming to reflect contemporary opinion, but he expressed it in a more complex way, according to his own pragmatic aesthetic. Verdi noted three elements that demonstrated an opera’s success—

19 Letter to Florimo, December 26, 1831, in Bellini, *Epistolario*, 291.

20 “There they boo the others, while here I receive applause,” Donizetti wrote to his father, on February 13, 1830 (Zavadini, *Donizetti. Vita, musiche, epistolari*, 272).

public opinion, box-office receipts, and number of repeat performances. Before him, even Bellini returned many times to the theme of the box office, not because he had a personal fixation about earnings but simply because he was participating in a recurrent theatrical discourse: "If the box office, as it is said, is the real thermometer of pleasure, my opera had an enormous success," he wrote after the first performances of *Beatrice di Tenda*, which was initially contested by the public but rebounded to fill La Fenice, as well as the impresario's pockets. On another occasion, Bellini would affirm that "an absolutely full theater is the real sign of an opera's reception," rather than the applause that it receives. For Bellini, box-office receipts corresponded to an opera's ability to attract the public night after night; as such, they were the principal indicator of a work's success. In similar fashion, Donizetti immediately gave full details of his triumphs to his correspondents, at least his most intimate ones, including their total box-office receipts, which in his colorful language he called "denari a bizzeffe" (gobs of money).²¹

Composers, and nearly everyone else, described public reactions—especially extreme ones—with a standard theatrical terminology that seems analogous in its uniformity, strangely enough, to that used to describe performances or musical forms. Spectacles that failed to please were *fiasco*—the worst cases being *fiaschissimo* (big fiascos), which is the term that Donizetti employed for his *Maria Padilla* in Venice. Donizetti, who was a lover of linguistic deformation, referred to great successes ironically as *fiasco coi fiocchi* (first-rate fiascos). Less frequently, disasters earned the *disgusto* (disgust) of the public or its *noja* (boredom); these terms were popular but never canonized. Positive reactions generated *furore* (enthusiasm), if not its colorful superlatives *furorone* (as Bellini described the reception of *I puritani*) or *furorissimo* (Donizetti on *Marino Faliero*).²²

Sometimes ordinary language seemed inadequate to the dimension of an opera's success. As one journalist suggested, "since it is insufficient to say that it has generated *furore*, you have to invent other words like earthquake or perhaps cataclysm." None-

21 See the pages dedicated to the public in Rinaldi, *Verdi critico*, 384–394; letter to Filippo Santocanale of March 25, 1833, and to his uncle, December 28, 1831, in Bellini, *Epistolario*, 346, 292.

22 "Fiasco coi fiocchi" is how Donizetti refers to his *Maria di Rohan* in a letter to Antonio Vassalli, June 6, 1843, in Zavadini, *Donizetti. Vita, musiche, epistolari*, 667.

theless, a set of predefined terms tended to reflect the immediate reactions of an audience; this publicly sanctioned technical jargon maintained its strong influence throughout the long period between Rossini and Verdi. Nothing like this linguistic homogeneity emerged elsewhere on a national scale within the fragmentary and divided culture of pre-Unification Italy. The national operatic system was an exception in this respect; a unified theatrical Italy preceded a unified political one. Arguably, this language of opera achieved an international scope. As a case in point, Franz Liszt, no Italian, once commented, “[Carolina Ungher] will certainly excite *entusiasmo, furore, fanatismo*.”²³

Within this theatrical lexicon, cases of unusual success merited the singular term, *fanatismo*. Tommaseo’s dictionary, which curiously says nothing about the word’s theatrical use, defined it as “a fantastic, religious igniting of the soul and the mind.” Thus, the tenor Nicola Tacchinardi, singing in Rossini’s *Tancredi* in Vienna, wrote to an acquaintance that the production “excited *fanatismo*.” In a letter to Rossini, he wrote, “I heard about the *fanatismo* your Oratorio excited,” referring to the first Neapolitan production of *Mosè in Egitto* in 1818. The impresario Lanari expressed himself similarly when writing an excited letter to Donizetti about the great success of the first Italian staging of *Marino Faliero* (“*Furore! Fanatismo! Entusiasmo!* Your *Marino Faliero* was judged to be your masterpiece”). Bellini tended to employ a greater variety of terms to characterize public reactions, displaying a romantic passion that affords more precision to that sense of fanaticism. Thus, audiences in Bergamo greeted his *Norma* with stupefaction, shivers, and weeping, and the Parisian audience for *La sonnambula* was beset with agitation, magic, tears, tremors of joy, and clamor from beginning to end.²⁴

23 The statement about “earthquake” and “cataclysm” comes from a false report about Bellini’s *Zaira* (written for the inauguration of the Teatro Regio of Parma), published in a Milanese newspaper, *L’eco*, 20 May 1829 (Bellini, *Epistolario*, 215). For the continuity in theatrical terminology, see Nicolodi and Trovato, “L’epistolario di Donizetti.” Unlike opera, Italy’s editorial market still operated on a local scale, both in production and consumption, partly because of protective taxes. Compare Maria Iolanda Palazzolo, *I tre occhi dell’editore. Saggi di storia dell’editoria* (Rome, 1990), with statements by such contemporaries as Carlo Tenca, Gianpietro Vieusseux, and Giuseppe Pomba, in *idem* (ed.), *Scritti sul commercio librario in Italia* (Rome, 1986). Liszt cited in Guillaume Cottrau, *Lettres d’un mélomane* (Naples, 1855), XXX.

24 *Fanatismo*, together with *superstizione*, is the 3,844th lemma in Niccolò Tommaseo, *Nuovo dizionario dei sinonimi della lingua italiana* (Milan, 1858), 702: “Superstition desires or fears what is beyond truth; fanaticism loves or hates what is beyond measure. In the first there

The term *effetto* (effect) is key to understanding of the relationship between composers and the public. Beginning with *Norma*, which “from night to night [grew] in effect,” through *I puritani*, which had an “unexpected effect,” and so on through countless references, Bellini used the term to represent the precise moment of communication with the public that a composer worked so hard to construct; without it, failure was certain. As the *Gazzetta teatrale di Venezia* reported about *Beatrice di Tenda* in March 1833, “[the opera] did not produce any effect on the public”; the much-awaited opera was judged a fiasco.

Bellini’s attention to the effect of an opera (even if he used the term less frequently than Donizetti) was not limited to an assessment of an opera’s general impact; he also responded to judgments about individual elements. Donizetti, however, was particularly keen to remedy a lack of effect by modifying or improving individual passages. After the fiasco of *Caterina Cornaro*, for example, Donizetti wrote, “The *stretta* of the *Introduzione* doesn’t please? I’ll redo it. Give me as soon as possible an exact account of the pieces that were badly received, as well of those that were least suitable to [Fanny] Goldberg [the original *Caterina*]. . . . I’ll see if I can recast things. . . . Tell me, too, where there is a lack of effect, where it is short or long, where there are reminiscences, what are the defects of the libretto, etc.”²⁵

Throughout his entire career, Verdi maintained his attention to, and inquisitive concern about, how the public received his work, as well as about the size of his audience. In 1899, he wrote, “I believe that when the public does not come running to a new production, it is already a failure.” Nor did Verdi undervalue the purse—“the prosaic purse,” as he called it—which to him seemed impervious to external circumstances. “I do not pay attention to applause but to crowded theaters,” he wrote after the success of *La forza del destino* in Milan, and his interest in the size of the audi-

is error, in the second passion.” This reference to passion as characteristic of fanaticism seems particularly suitable to its operatic form. Rossini, *Lettere e documenti*, I, 192 (letter of Tacchinardi to an unknown recipient, December 18, 1816; *fanatismo* probably signified an unconditional admiration for the singer), 262 (letter of Pietro and Girolama Cartoni to Rossini, March 17, 1818); letter from Lanari, May 19, 1836, in Commons, “Una corrispondenza tra Alessandro Lanari e Donizetti,” 22.

25 Letter to Teodoro Ghezzi, February 1 (?), 1844, in Zavadini, *Donizetti. Vita, musiche, epistolari*, 726.

ences as performances mounted ran through his correspondence. Verdi's considerable operatic achievement sprang from the direct and immediate relationship with the audience that the early nineteenth-century system of production had reinforced and consolidated. In fact, he showed a decided lack of tolerance for anything that might stand between him and the public. "I would like the public to judge from on high, not from the miserable point of view of journalists, musicians, or piano players, but from its own impressions! . . . Do you understand? Impressions, impressions, and nothing else!" *Impressioni* was the expression that eventually replaced *effetto*. Later Verdi explained to Franco Faccio, "Applause is one thing, impressions something else, and it is impressions that fill the theater."²⁶

Verdi's continual search for *effetto* became a broad perspective that involved not only the choice of a subject and the composition of the music but also dramaturgical construction and the *mise-en-scène*—all in the service of attaining an *illusione* (illusion), a term that he was among the first to use. To achieve it, he did not hesitate to try something unprecedented, for instance, the "phantasmagoria" proposed to him by Alessandro Sanquirico for *Macbeth*, which he accepted with enthusiasm and conveyed to Lanari: "You know what the phantasmagoria is and it is unnecessary for me to describe it to you. For Heaven's sake, if the thing works well, as Sanquirico described it to me, it will be amazing and many people will flock to the theater for that reason alone." He was also eager to find a new way to stage the appearance of the murdered Banco during *Macbeth's* banquet scene, since, as he wrote to Léon Escudier in January 1865, all of the productions of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* that he had seen had Banco entering from a wing in a manner that "does not produce any *illusione*, [and] does not inspire terror." The audience "[did] not know whether he [was] a ghost or a man."²⁷

26 Rinaldi, *Verdi critico*, 385; letter to Cesare De Sanctis, April 17, 1872, in Luzio, *Carteggi verdiani*, I, 150; letter to Franco Faccio, written early in 1879, in Raffaele De Rensis, *Franco Faccio e Verdi. Carteggi e documenti inediti* (Milan, 1934), 183.

27 Verdi's ideas about writing for the stage are apparent even early in his career. To Guglielmo Brenna, secretary of the Teatro La Fenice, he wrote on November 15, 1843, "No matter how little experience I might have, I nonetheless go to the theater all year and am very attentive: I have seen for myself that many compositions would not have failed had there been a better distribution of scenes, better calculated effects, clearer musical forms" (Marcello Conati, *La bottega della musica. Verdi e La Fenice* [Milan, 1983], 102–103). Letter to Lanari, Jan-

Although musicologists have studied these elements, leaving little for historians to add, they provide a helpful perspective on composers' position in a marketplace that developed much earlier for opera in Italy than it did for other forms of cultural production, and to which composers adapted themselves without much resistance. In spite of his complaints against the excessive industrialization of opera late in his career, Verdi did not criticize opera's market per se but the commercial apparatus that surrounded it and threatened the privileged relationship between the composer and his public. When "publicity" ruled the market, it could overshadow the direct impressions of the audience. "Nowadays what an apparatus for an opera!? Journalists, artists, choristers, conductors, musicians, etc. etc., each of them has to bring his own stone to the edifice of publicity, creating in this way a miserable little frame that adds nothing to the merits of an opera."²⁸

During that watershed when Verdi's productions took place, the direct, palpable relationship between composers and their publics began to change. About the first version of *Simon Boccanegra*, the critic Filippo Filippi, a sharp observer of Verdi's dramaturgy, argued in the *Gazzetta musicale di Milano* of 1857 that nothing could withstand the public "and its imposing and almost brutal force" except time, "an inexorable judge that destroys all passing aberrations, the caprices of this Hydra with a thousand heads." But it is by no means clear that Verdi would have approved.²⁹

uary 21, 1847, in Gaetano Cesari and Luzio (eds.), *I copialettere di Giuseppe Verdi* (Milan, 1913), 447, 453. Verdi attributed great importance not only to *Macbeth's* scenography but also to its costumes, taking an integrated approach to the *mise-en-scène* and to its effect on the public. For a portrait of Verdi as a "uomo di teatro" (man of the stage), see Ildebrando Pizzetti, "Giuseppe Verdi maestro di teatro," in *Verdi: Bollettino quadrimestrale dell'Istituto di studi verdiani*, I (1960), 751–766.

²⁸ Verdi's perception of the composer's place in the market is evident in a letter to Tito Ricordi of February 4, 1859: "We poor gypsies, charlatans, or what you will, we are compelled to sell our thoughts, our dreams for gold, and the public for three *lire* buys the right to boo or applaud. It is our destiny to resign ourselves" (Cesare and Luzio [eds.], *I copialettere*, 557). Letter to Filippo Filippi, December 8, 1871, in *ibid.*, 273. Even Donizetti had harsh words for critics, as in a letter to Andrea Donizetti, February 13, 1830: "Meanwhile my music is heard throughout society, all the singers insert it into other operas, even right now in *Corradino* [Rossini's *Matilde di Shabran*], and in the same cities and in the same theater; and yet they [the critics] say a fiasco . . . All right . . . I laugh it off . . . Let them say; it is enough that they let us do" (Zavadini, *Donizetti. Vita, musiche, epistolari*, 272).

²⁹ See the *Gazzetta musicale di Milano*, 15 March 1857.

WHAT THE PUBLIC WANTS “The fate of theatrical performances is always bizarre.” So wrote Donizetti to Simone Mayr in 1829. Composers’ judgments about the behavior of the public wavered, obviously conditioned not only by the favor, or lack thereof, accorded them but also by their capacity to react to public judgments. Everyone knew that the public could be fickle, but Donizetti, who claimed to have “swallowed booing in front of thousands of people, and on many occasions,” wrote with a certain fatalism about the public’s indecipherability: “Who knows whether this summer they will see the *Proscritto* [*L’esule di Roma*] with the same singers, and who now boos will then applaud . . . who knows!” The public was certainly acquiring the reputation—as Angelo Petracchi, manager of the royal theaters in Milan, wrote to Rossini in 1817—of becoming “more difficult every day.” As its pretensions grew greater, it became ever more difficult to satisfy. Nevertheless, even if some of the letters analyzed herein show disappointment about the public’s prejudice or—worse still—ignorance, more frequent are observations about its capacity to discern imperfections in performance. In Verdi’s words, “A bad sign when the public is accused of not having understood.”³⁰

Composers were fully cognizant of the theater’s machinery and its role as the most social of all the arts, as Schlegel had portrayed it in *Course of Dramatic Literature*, which deeply influenced the Italian debate about Romanticism in general, and about musical theater’s trends in particular. In accord with Romantic criticism, they exerted much effort to meet the expectations and understand the tastes of the audience, thus opening an interesting window on artistic taste during this period for scholars.³¹

From the time of Rossini through that of Verdi, composers showed strong agreement about what the public wanted, even if the significance that they attached to the public’s desires, and their

30 Zavadini, *Donizetti. Vita, musiche, epistolari*, 268 (letter to Simone Mayr, July 24, 1829, about *Elisabetta al castello di Kenilworth*, warmly applauded at the dress rehearsal but not at the premiere); 270 (letter to Antonio Dolci, January 22, 1844); 257 (letter to Mayr, February 2, 1828); letter from Petracchi to Rossini, February 5, 1817, in Rossini, *Lettere e documenti*, I, 195. On November 7, 1878, Verdi wrote to Achille Torelli, “The day of judgment will come and an author will relish, supremely relish, being able to say: *Imbeciles, you were wrong!*” (Cesare and Luzio [eds.], *I copialettere*, 512). Letter to Vincenzo Torelli, July 25, 1869, in Luzio, *Carteggi verdiani*, IV, 231.

31 On the importance of Schlegel’s *Course*, translated into Italian in 1817, see Daniela Goldin, “Alla ricerca di una identità nazionale: traduzioni e teatro italiano tra Schlegel e Rusconi,” in Mariasilvia Tatti (ed.), *Italia e Italie. Immagini tra Rivoluzione e Restaurazione* (Rome, 1999).

responses to it, were not always the same. A common theme is the preference for short texts; the public's tolerance for boredom was extremely low. The request for brevity usually passed along a lengthy chain of intermediaries, from those responsible for the theaters to the impresarios, to composers, and finally arriving at librettists. Carlo Brentano, responsible for the Teatro alla Scala of Milan in 1812, assured his superior, Luigi Vaccari, that he did not want "to bore the public excessively with a performance that would become endless." In his critical evaluation of a subject presented to him, Donizetti wrote with precision, "These days with eight numbers you can amuse a public, with ten you bore it." When he asked Felice Romani to prepare a libretto for him in London, his only recommendation was, "If you write me a libretto in two short acts, the thing would be divine. In London after the theater they visit with friends, and they also come late to the theater. So, let your motto be *little but good*."³²

Donizetti's advice reverberates with new opportunities for public sociability and a gradual transformation of leisure activity in the nineteenth-century city. *Beau monde* Londoners had a plurality of possible places to pass an evening, whereas Italians—who had fewer public spaces available—wanted an evening in the theater to include a plurality of entertainments, among which a ballet might feature prominently. As Lanari wrote to Donizetti about *Marino Faliero*, "The aria of Israele was cut because in this season, with the ballet, we would have finished half an hour past midnight or even at 1:00 AM." Brevity pertained both to the absolute length of the performance and its efficacy and dramatic immediacy. From the time of Bellini, a dramaturgical structure that needed to move "in crescendo" developed, galvanizing the emotions of the public and culminating in the finale.³³

Another frequent request from the public, reflecting a long tradition of the Italian system, was for musical "novelty," which can reflect either an appreciation of originality or a propensity for immediate and transitory consumption. The Roman audience "shows particular enthusiasm for modern music," wrote Luigi

32 Rossini, *Lettere e documenti*, I, 38; Zavadini, *Donizetti. Vita, musiche, epistolari*, 397 (letter to Napoleone Petrucci, January 14, 1836); 564 (letter to Romani, December 4, 1841).

33 The transformation of leisure activity was not completed until the end of the century. Stephen Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space, 1880–1918* (New York, 1983). Letter to Donizetti, May 19, 1836, in Commons, "Una corrispondenza tra Alessandro Lanari e Donizetti," 23.

Zamboni, a Rossini singer, and cares little for “an old-fashioned style.” The meaning of “novelty” may vary in different contexts, but the public regularly protested when Bellini or Donizetti used a piece in more than one opera, a fairly common practice at the time. This public demand goes to the heart of a fundamental problem that Verdi addressed in response to those who hoped for a consolidated system of permanent theaters in Italy: “Our public,” he wrote, “is too restless and would never be satisfied with a *prima donna* as in Germany, who costs eighteen or twenty *Fiorini* a year.” A fixed cast would not have met the expectations of the turbulent Italian public, which constantly wanted new arias and new singers.³⁴

What composers primarily sought, however, was neither brevity nor novelty, but subjects that would appeal to public taste: “theatrical subjects,” as Donizetti wrote; plots that are “neither horrible nor terrible,” as he told Romani, “lest the public not be tempted to see them”; subjects full of passion that will make the public “weep, shudder, die through singing,” as Bellini wrote in a famous and oft-quoted letter. The reaction of the poet Giacomo Leopardi, who considered himself immune to theatrical illusion, to *La donna del lago*, testifies to Rossini’s success in that regard: “I could cry, too, if the gift of tears had not been suspended in me.” But the task of choosing a subject and realizing it as an opera was long and complex.³⁵

The quality of vocal execution remained a priority to audiences. Composers were well aware of the public’s desire to hear excellent singers, often constructing an opera painstakingly around a precise cast. An inadequate cast, as Donizetti wrote about a performance of *Lucrezia Borgia* in Vienna, can cause a disaster: “Voices can destroy operas; the public hears ruination everywhere. . . . The management is tricked, because the public won’t attend. And finally the audience is tricked and, its hopes deluded, it stays home.”³⁶

34 Letter from Zamboni to Elisabetta Gafforini, November 28/December 1, 1815, in Rossini, *Lettere e documenti*, I, 114. A similar desire for novelty is evident in Barbaja’s letter to Giovan Battista Vecchione of February 27, 1822 (*ibid.*, I, 580). Letter to Arrivabene, February 5, 1876, in Alberti (ed.), *Verdi intimo*, 185.

35 Letter of Leopardi to his brother, February 5, 1823, in Rossini, *Lettere e documenti*, II, 115. For the process of choosing and then elaborating subjects, see Della Seta, “Il librettista,” in Lorenzo Bianconi and Giorgio Pestelli (eds.), *Storia dell’opera italiana* (Turin, 1987), IV, 233–291; Sorba, *Teatri*, 179–190.

36 Letter to Gaetano Melzi, June 29, 1845, in Zavadini, *Donizetti. Vita, musiche, epistolari*, 816.

Whenever the public felt “betrayed” by a particular production, composers often held impresarios responsible: “A weak revenge against Merelli for his mockery of the Viennese audience is that of seeing, and constantly, the auditorium empty,” wrote Donizetti, charging the impresario with having imposed on opera goers bad, “ventriloquist voices.” The theme of the “public betrayed” appears frequently in the correspondence of both Donizetti and Rossini, implicating not only impresarios but also governments, or theater administrators who staged operas without the original scores and librettos. In a letter to Giovanni Ricordi, for example, Donizetti wrote, “There is no single public so betrayed as the Roman one. It goes innocently to the theater, hoping to be amused, to hear good music, well performed, and it doesn’t know that behind the *rideau* there is a very fierce censorship, an orchestra more than defective because it lacks many instruments, and a performance deprived of many effects because there are no women. Add to this some cuts made by the conductor, some passage not suitable for this one or that . . . and you will easily see the result.” To these commonplace indignities add the frequent cases in which scores and librettos were not original, because copyright legislation pertaining to opera was lacking. Thus, as both Rossini and Donizetti underlined in their letters, was the public betrayed by performances of a false *Zelmira*, a false *Marino*, or a false *Belisario*.³⁷

According to the composers, all of these practices, from the commerce in false scores to the cost cutting of impresarios, compromised the relationship between composers and the public. Once again, Verdi was in the front lines in the battle for copyright. Furthermore, he closely supervised both the choice of the cast and the *mise-en-scène* for his new operas, intent on maintaining, and announcing, the importance of composers’ direct and continuous involvement, which he understood to be a vital characteristic of the Italian system. In a polemical letter to Camille Du Locle about the influence of critics and the exigencies of opera production on

37 Letter to Giovanni Ricordi, February 19, 1843, in Zavadini, *Donizetti, Vita, musiche, epistolari*, 659. In 1822, the directors of the Teatro La Fenice wrote to the local police that Rossini’s opera *Zelmira*, which was about to be performed in their theater, was at that very moment being performed elsewhere in an adulterated version (Rossini, *Lettere e documenti*, II: 30–31). The letters of Donizetti are filled with complaints about the falsification of his operas. A Neapolitan copyist, Gennaro Fabbriatore, for example, regularly sold false Donizetti scores. See the composer’s letter to Ricordi of October 17, 1835, in Zavadini, *Donizetti, Vita, musiche, epistolari*, 386, and many others from the same period.

French musical life, he wrote, “[In Italy] we let the public decide.”³⁸

The relevance of opera to issues in Risorgimento Italy is evident in the continuous interchange between production and consumption, musical composition and social reality. In their choice of subject or in their treatment of opera’s dramatic moments, composers during the 1840s showed particular sensitivity to the expectations and taste of the public, an essential point of reference in Romantic dramaturgy. The public was accustomed to direct interaction with the spectacle and with the cast, ready to intervene by modifying the words of the text or by commenting on the performance. The physical theater that emerged during the nineteenth century was unquestionably the principal site for the sentimental education of Italians. All of these elements, working together, contributed to opera’s political impact during the middle decades of the century. Verdi’s operas, in particular, occupy a special place in this scenario.³⁹

The relationship between the stage and the real world was a mutual exchange. The action of melodrama sometimes transferred its energy to the public, and sometimes the heroic transfiguration of real life into opera inverted to become a heroic melodramaticization of the real. In the convulsive days of the 1848 revolution, many of the trappings of political demonstration came from suggestions, allusions, and even gadgets that originated in the scripts of melodramas, such as the “*Ermani* hat” typically worn by patriots. During the Italian Risorgimento, political behavior and language borrowed extensively from opera. When we analyze the relationship between Italian opera and politics in the Italian case, then, we have to consider not only the extent to which Risorgimento-era patriotic themes entered into operatic plots and stagings but also how musical melodrama infiltrated the events of the Risorgimento.⁴⁰

38 Letter to Camille Du Locle, December 7, 1869, in Cesare and Luzio (eds.), *I copialettere*, 221.

39 For the “active” participation of the public, see Sorba, “Il Risorgimento in musica. L’opera lirica nei teatri del 1848,” in Alberto Mario Banti and Roberto Bizzocchi (eds.), *Immagini della nazione nell’Italia del Risorgimento* (Rome, 2002), 133–156.

40 This relationship between opera and politics has been developed in Sorba, “Il 1848 e la melodrammatizzazione della politica,” in Banti and Paul Ginsborg (eds.), *Storia d’Italia. Annali. Il Risorgimento* (Torino 2006, forthcoming).