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Reading at the Opera: Music and Literary Culture in
Early Nineteenth-Century Italy

By

Edward Lee Jacobson

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Music

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Mary Ann Smart, Chair

Professor James Q. Davies

Professor Ian Duncan

Professor Nicholas Mathew

Summer 2020

Abstract

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This dissertation emerged out of an archival study of Italian opera libretti published between 1800 and 1835. Many of these libretti, in contrast to their eighteenth-century counterparts, contain lengthy historical introductions, extended scenic descriptions, anthropological footnotes, and even bibliographies, all of which suggest that many operas depended on the absorption of a printed text to inflect or supplement the spectacle onstage. This dissertation thus explores how literature—and, specifically, the act of reading—shaped the composition and early reception of works by Gioachino Rossini, Vincenzo Bellini, Gaetano Donizetti, and their contemporaries. Rather than offering a straightforward comparative study between literary and musical texts, the various chapters track the often elusive ways that literature and music commingle in the consumption of opera by exploring a series of modes through which Italians engaged with their national past. In doing so, the dissertation follows recent, anthropologically inspired studies that have focused on spectatorship, embodiment, and attention. But while these chapters attempt to reconstruct the perceptive filters that educated classes would have brought to the opera, they also reject the historicist fantasy that spectator experience can ever be recovered, arguing instead that great rewards can be found in a sympathetic hearing of music as it appears to us today.

To my parents, without whose support I would never have started a dissertation

&

To J.W.A. Renssen, zonder wiens steun ik haar wellicht
nooit tot voltooiing zou hebben gebracht

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Acknowledgments

I count myself in nothing else so happy
As in a soul remembering my good friends.
Richard II, II. iii.

I have reached the end of the road. And though I am somewhat weary, the dominant feelings at this juncture are contentment and gratitude. To date, I have known no other life than that of a student, and the completion of a doctoral dissertation marks the end of many years in classrooms and libraries, seminar rooms, offices, studios, and cafés, during which I have had the privilege to be surrounded by many remarkable teachers, advisors, peers, and colleagues. Many of them I can now count as friends, and all of them have, through their patience and generosity, made some indelible impression upon me. They have given me a life filled with music and literature. They have encouraged me to persevere and challenged me to become a better version of myself. They have shared their opinions and their passions. They have taught me how to be critical of orthodoxy and how to value tradition. To all those named and unnamed below I offer my thanks. You have all shown me, in one way or another, a vision of what is good, true, and beautiful.

My dissertation adviser, Mary Ann Smart, has been the fiercest of critics and the most loyal of defenders. She has been kind when kindness was needed and firm when she knew I could do better. She has read countless drafts of chapters and conference papers. She has both risen early and kept the lamp burning at night to offer last-minute suggestions. Her judgment is unimpeachable. She is a role model both as a scholar and as a mentor. I recall our first conversation—a hurried chat about *Lucia di Lammermoor* at AMS, stolen minutes from her busy schedule. She saw something in me, I was later told, and I am so pleased that she brought me to Berkeley. In the past seven years we have had many more conversations, often about dear Gaetano. I have always left her office with a renewed sense of purpose, brimming with enthusiasm. Words are inadequate to express what I owe to her. Should I one day have students of my own, I can only hope to continue the tradition of exemplary mentorship I have inherited from her.

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this project at crucial moments, and I look forward to many more energetic discussions with him about opera.

Any success I have claimed as a graduate student is due to the solid foundation I received at the University of Notre Dame. All who have met Susan Youens will know her generosity of spirit; for those who have not, no description is sufficient. Ever since I decided I wanted to become a musicologist, her support has been unwavering. She has read drafts and offered counsel in moments of crisis. Nothing in this dissertation would have been possible without her guidance and the many lectures in which she demonstrated how a love of music could be enhanced by a love of reading. More than anyone else, she has taught me to stay true to what matters. Mary Frandsen offered her encouragement from my early days in the music department, and I count our long conversations about opera among my fondest memories of Notre Dame. She continues to be a dear friend and is a reminder that in many ways I am a Lutheran at heart. I am indebted to Peter Smith for anything I might claim to know about music theory. I am grateful for his stewardship of the undergraduate program and that he was kind enough to admit me when I wandered into his office my first semester and told him how much I wanted to study Mozart. Many other members of the Notre Dame community could be listed here, but I want to offer special thanks to Kent and Lucy Emery, Vera Profit, and Geraldine Meehan for their support at key moments during my time in South Bend.

I thank all those patient friends and colleagues who have read my work at various stages or listened attentively to conference presentations. The footnotes of this dissertation demonstrate just how much I am indebted to Emanuele Senici's work on Italian opera, and it was one of the great joys of my time as a graduate student to learn that his authority as a scholar is matched by his kindness and charity as an adviser and friend. Francesca Vella has bolstered my morale and offered insightful feedback in numerous conversations; she has also become a trusted confidante in matters both musicological and theological.

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I thank my brother, Ben, who was the first to put a copy of *To the Lighthouse* into my hands.

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I thank Saraswathi Shukla for teaching me about good art, for the conversations, the dinners, for the walks around Berkeley, Paris, and Amsterdam. Her musical and scholarly instincts are without fault, and I continue to rely on her discerning ear and eye.

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Berkeley, California. August 2020.

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Let us begin by clearing up the old confusion between the man who loves learning and the man who loves reading, and point out that there is no connexion whatever between the two. A learned man is a sedentary, concentrated, solitary enthusiast, who searches through books to discover some particular grain of truth upon which he has set his heart. If the passion for reading conquers him, his gains dwindle and vanish between his fingers. A reader, on the other hand, must check the desire for learning at the outset; if knowledge sticks to him well and good, but to go in pursuit of it, to read on a system, to become a specialist or an authority, is very apt to kill what it suits us to consider the more humane passion for pure and disinterested reading.

Virginia Woolf, "Hours in a Library"

God keep me from ever completing anything. This whole book is but a draught—nay, but the draught of a draught. Oh, Time, Strength, Cash, and Patience!

Moby Dick

Introduction

Hard task to analyse a soul.
The Prelude, Book 2

L'AUTORE A CHI LEGGE

It is unwise to begin a dissertation by throwing the cloak of doubt over its title. In the present case it is a necessity, however, for although this is a dissertation about reading, the question of who is reading, what they are reading, and what reading even means will shift from chapter to chapter, on occasion even from page to page. That the “reading” in *Reading at the Opera* escapes a precise definition has less to do with due diligence, the scholarly habit of turning the thing around and examining it from different angles and under different light, than with insecurity and skepticism, which have conspired to ensure that each chapter written for this project disavows its predecessor. Undoubtedly all dissertations bear the marks of their authors’ educations, but this introduction, rather than attempting to balance asymmetry, to make order where perhaps little exists, will offer first some record of that *Bildung*.

While there will be plenty of room in the pages that follow for doubt, about one thing there can be no hesitation whatsoever: this is a dissertation about opera. Specifically, this is a dissertation about Italian opera, composed and performed in Italy in the first three decades of the nineteenth century. Exact dates are not important, though there is not much in what follows about the eighteenth century, nor much about anything after 1835. It is a repertory, rather than the rise and fall of kingdoms or the great deeds of statesmen and revolutionaries, that mark the boundaries of this study. Opera lovers and radio broadcasters refer to this period as one of *bel canto*, a term that, however imprecise its meaning has been over the past few hundred years, now casts a nimbus of almost untouchable loveliness around the music of Gioachino Rossini, Vincenzo Bellini, and Gaetano Donizetti and that elite circle of singers able to execute some of the most demanding passages ever conceived for the human voice.

The original readers in *Reading at the Opera* were witnesses to the early performances of works by these composers and their contemporaries, the men and women, Italians, up and down a peninsula not yet a nation, who first heard *Otello* and *Armida* in Naples or *La sonnambula* and *Lucrezia Borgia* in Milan. They are cast as readers, rather than the more traditional spectators or audiences, because it was, and to a certain degree remains, one of the central propositions of this dissertation that literary texts and the act of reading them before, after, and sometimes even during performances undergirded much of early nineteenth-century operatic life. This argument is predicated on a historically grounded yet necessarily capacious understanding of “reading,” a practice which, as Rita Felski and others have recently noted, is more than just a cognitive activity, but “an embodied mode of attentiveness that involves us in acts of sensing, perceiving,

feeling, registering, and engaging.”¹ The various chapters in *Reading at the Opera* explore these modes of attentiveness, which are shaped by the enforced pacing of the theater, the nonlinear temporality of reading, and the hazy, imprecise influence of personal and national literary memory. To consider reading is to consider a yet unexplored habit of listening during performance, one predicated on the absorption of printed texts to inflect or supplement the spectacle onstage.

Dissertations often make the “yet unexplored” their business, but in the case of Italy and Italian opera it is difficult to see past the heaps of evidence that suggest any argument about sustained, concentrated engagement with literary texts has been left unexplored because it is improbable. We now know, for example, that Italian opera houses in the early nineteenth century were radically different from any concert hall today. Whatever took place onstage was barely audible above the din and clatter of the boxes, as calls were paid, meals eaten, card games won and lost. When foreigners reported on their evenings at the opera they tended to exaggerate almost everything, but still we believe the Irish novelist Lady Morgan when she tells us that in 1819 La Scala was a place where “everything was attended to but the music.”² If this seems an overstatement, one of musicology’s favorite informants, the incorrigibly garrulous Stendhal, put it differently: while the music was often heard, the libretto certainly was never read. Throughout the *Life of Rossini*, Stendhal seems to take pleasure in denouncing the “absurdities” of theatrical poetry, participating in a tradition of “libretto-bashing” that is as old as opera itself.³ His fellow audience members evidently shared his contempt: of an early run of *L’Italiana in Algeri*, he records that “not once, during all the forty performances which came after [the first night], did it occur to one single member of the audience to open that slim little volume with its gilt-paper binding,” while one *signora* allegedly went so far as to prohibit printed libretti in her box.⁴ These anecdotes make clear that whatever audiences thought of Rossini’s music, however enthusiastically they applauded celebrity prima donnas, however stimulating they found the conversation in their boxes, they were not interested in reading the affected scribblings of the librettist.

Plot, the music history textbook assures us, was unimportant, especially in the decades prior to when Verdi arrived on the scene and somehow found a way to improve on Shakespeare. An impresario, overworked and concerned with turning a profit, would assemble a stable of singers for a season, contract a composer, and then ask the local librettist, more overworked still, to forage about in the fashionable

¹ Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 176. A few recent studies that informed the premises of this dissertation include William St. Clair, *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) and Andrew Piper, *Dreaming in Books: The Making of the Bibliographic Imagination in the Romantic Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

² *Lady Morgan’s Memoirs: Autobiography, Diaries, and Correspondence*, vol. 2 (London: W.H. Allen & Co., 1863), 92–93.

³ A brief history of this tradition can be found in the introduction to Arthur Groos and Roger Parker, eds., *Reading Opera* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988).

⁴ Stendhal, *The Life of Rossini*, trans. Richard N. Coe (Oxford: Oneworld Classics, 2008), 74.

literature of the day for some dramatic situation that would display the individual talents of the singers and provide an excuse for ensembles. Faithfulness to the source was seldom possible, and in later performances singers were apt to swap one aria for another, a process that did various degrees of damage to comprehensibility. The operatic and literary work were not fixed categories in 1820s Milan.

It was once possible for musicologists' own reading habits to distort this picture, for the delayed but nevertheless clear dawn of romanticism in Italy marks the beginning of an era when opera goers enjoyed novels and plays and poems that have not greatly tarnished with age. The heroes of classical drama or sprawling medieval epic were replaced by the pirates and princesses of romantic fiction—a great deal of it imported from Great Britain—and though much has changed in two hundred years, it is still possible to read Byron or Scott or Hugo or Shakespeare (frequently recast as a romantic in his own right) with a pleasure that feels much more immediate, or at least more easily accessible, than the rewards of spending a long evening with Metastasio. Thus the proliferation of studies about opera and the novel, which have always seemed such a natural pairing to bookish music lovers, not to mention the wing of literary studies and musicology devoted to comparing and contrasting libretti with their source material.⁵ But even though the ambitions of most scholars now lie well beyond charting divergences in plot as multivolume novels are whittled down to a few evocative scenes, it is impossible to imagine any essay on opera without a healthy discussion of that source material. Whether that sends the researcher in the direction of a beloved novel, the most erudite and dusty of histories, or some trifle skimmed from the dross of popular French theater, there remains the sense of opera always coming after something else, something firm, some text that offers insight into the composer's handling of character or mood. There remains the fact that opera is a literary art and that reading, some kind of reading, is crucial to its understanding. But no sooner has the critic settled down with Byron's *Parisina* to see what it might reveal about Donizetti's opera than the cold winds of reality rush over him, and he must remember that no one in early nineteenth-century Italy read the poets as they are read today. Shakespeare and Scott existed only in mangled translations, and if the goal is to articulate something about how opera was consumed by early audiences, we should be cautious about showering upon opera poetry a level of attention that even the most discerning of spectator may never have recognized.

⁵ Ambitious claims about formal similarities shared by musical and literary works were particularly prevalent in the 1970s and 1980s. In addition to Groos and Parker's *Reading Opera*, see, as representative examples, Peter Conrad, *Romantic Opera and Literary Form* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977) or Gary Schmidgall, *Literature as Opera* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977). The methodologies of both books, pilloried in a review by Joseph Kerman, have long since ceased to exercise any influence on the field. Comparison essays, however, were not uncommon even a few decades ago—see Heather Hadlock's "On the Cusp between Past and Future: The Mezzo-Soprano Romeo of Bellini's *I Capuleti*," *Opera Quarterly* 17, no. 3 (Summer 2001): 397–422 and "'The firmness of a female hand' in *The Corsair* and *Il corsaro*," *Cambridge Opera Journal* 14, nos. 1–2 (March 2002): 47–57—and for an updated account of opera and fiction's long courtship, see Cormac Newark, *Opera in the Novel from Balzac to Proust* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

And yet so many of these little books have survived. The music archive is filled with boxes and boxes of them.⁶ If audiences did not read, did not care about the text, if they wanted only spectacle and good gossip from their evening at the theater, if scores really were mere recipes for performance, it seems reasonable to ask what anybody did with a libretto, which remains one of the researcher's most valuable sources, especially when the music is lost and contemporary reviews reveal so little. This dissertation presupposes that, when librettists addressed their work *a chi legge* (to the reader), they were not merely whispering to themselves. Ever since the first operas were performed in Italy, libretti, like all published writing, had contained some kind of introductory message to the spectator, but starting in the nineteenth century these messages started to change. Sifting through boxes, thumbing through libretto after libretto, it is hard not to notice that prefaces grow longer and historical introductions more detailed; epigraphs are added; descriptions of setting become more evocative; anthropological footnotes stud recitative and ensemble; bibliographies offer suggestions for further reading. In short, there is a growing amount of material printed only to be read, rather than enacted onstage, as many librettists invite direct engagement and comparison with the world of books outside the theater. Salvatore Cammarano's libretto for *Lucia di Lammermoor*, to cite one famous example, features extensive historical footnotes to explain the rituals enacted in seventeenth-century Scotland—how a clandestine marriage might be contracted on the heath—information that Donizetti unsurprisingly did not incorporate into his score. As with many operas in this period, the acquisition of historical information was entrusted to the reading spectator.

Insofar as there is history in this dissertation, that history tells the progress of the reading spectator. My attempt, in other words, is to understand opera's collision with literature at the start of the nineteenth century. In doing so I need to cross well-trodden territory. Many of the facts are already firmly established. For over a century, literary scholars have grappled with Italy's uncomfortable place within larger narratives of European romanticism, with teleological arguments tilted toward the Risorgimento and national unification often proving difficult to resist.⁷ Musicologists have done their bit to shape such narratives, and the operas of Rossini, Bellini, and Donizetti were once read almost exclusively as preparing the way for Verdi and all those revolutionaries chanting his choruses on the barricades.⁸

⁶ This dissertation began with a study of some of the five thousand Italian libretti that comprise the Taddei and Sicilian libretto collections held at the Jean Gray Hargrove Music Library at the University of California, Berkeley. In this digital age, however, it is growing difficult to find an Italian opera libretto that is not available online, especially thanks to the University of Bologna's online catalogue: see corago.unibo.it.

⁷ The most influential articulation of these arguments is Alberto Mario Banti, *La nazione del risorgimento* (Torino: Einaudi, 2000); see also Joseph Luzzi, *Romantic Europe and the Ghost of Italy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008). For a critique of Banti, see Axel Körner and Lucy Riall, eds., "Alberto Banti's Interpretation of Risorgimento Nationalism: A Debate," *Nations and Nationalism* 15, no. 3 (July 2009): 396–460.

⁸ There are notable exceptions to this line of argument. Roger Parker long ago showed how claims about the political resonance of Verdi's music were largely counterfeit, a product of nineteenth-

Even though many claims about what was or was not the soundtrack of the Risorgimento were overstated, and even though much of the heat has gone out of those debates, there remains a sense that music contributed—somehow—to the fevered political atmosphere of nineteenth-century Italy. The hypotheses have softened, the arguments grown far more nuanced. Lamps have been lit in unexplored corners of the archive, as newspapers, acting treatises, and other ephemera are dusted off and made to show how often unexpected moments in Italian opera—the gestures and ornaments of star singers; a composer’s novel handling of recitative—rather than thundering choruses roused audiences from their lethargy and encouraged political action.⁹

But the reading spectator, at least the spectator who practices the ancient art of humane, disinterested reading, is not necessarily an inchoate revolutionary, and while any study of this period must participate in the old debates about Italian identity—particularly during a period that many saw as a national literary and cultural crisis—the focus of this dissertation remains on opera experienced as art. The intention is not to ignore the constellation of political, social, commercial, or material forces that helped to produce these works, but rather to shine light on those aspects of the operatic experience that were more private and personal, and on balance probably far less consequential, than the fate of the nation.

THE OPERATIC EXPERIENCE

This dissertation began like so many other recent studies by taking the operatic experience of historical audiences as its subject. Its archive, in addition to libretti themselves, was the vast trove of nineteenth-century journalism—reviews, treatises, pamphlets and polemics—the reading of which has utterly transformed our understanding of musical life. Periodicals, dozens of them, reported on the fashions of the day, charted the rise, fall, and poor health of the best singers. And, although it is a cliché of writing on early nineteenth-century Italy to lament that musical details were often sparse and opinion heavily censored, the sheer volume of writing that survives also offers glimpses into the thoughts and feelings of our opera-going ancestors. This methodology now seems so natural, its accomplishments so self-evident, that it is difficult to imagine a time when questions of reception were of little interest outside of what they might reveal about a composer’s biography. The work concept; the autonomy of the score; the author’s intentions—these specters of romantic thought have been pushed to the margins of musicology, in favor of approaches that foreground the “continuous and complex movement” and “human

century mythologizing. For a summary, see his “Verdi *politico*: a wounded cliché regrouped,” *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 17, no. 4 (July 2012): 427–36.

⁹ Gary Tomlinson’s “Italian Romanticism and Italian Opera: An Essay in Their Affinities,” *19th-Century Music* 10, no. 1 (Summer 1986): 43–60 was an early and influential effort to situate opera in the literary debates of the nineteenth century. More recent studies include Carlotta Sorba, *Il melodramma della nazione: Politica e sentimenti nell’età del Risorgimento* (Rome: Laterza, 2015); Ellen Lockhart, *Animation, Plasticity, and Music in Italy, 1770–1830* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017); and Mary Ann Smart, *Waiting for Verdi: Italian Opera and Political Opinion, 1815–1848* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018).

exchange” among composers and their works, performances and their critics, that is now understood to constitute musical culture.¹⁰ It is people who attract the most attention today, their experiences—listening practices at the opera, in the home, on the street—that rest at the center of scholarly inquiry.

It takes little ingenuity to observe this preoccupation with historical experience, for many authors profess that articulating it, understanding it, is one of the chief rewards of carrying out scholarly work. Emanuele Senici, for example, states forthrightly the ambitions of his recent study of Rossini’s operas: in addition to reconstructing “as carefully as possible the discursive conditions of listening,” his project “attempts to understand—as thoughtfully and perceptively as possible at such historical distance—the thoughts, feelings, and emotions of audiences.”¹¹ His words chime with those of Mary Ann Smart in *Waiting for Verdi*, a volume that has plenty to say about feeling, emotion, and engagement, all in an effort to “explore what opera meant to early-nineteenth-century audiences.”¹²

The history of how we came to be so invested in the response of the audience—whether that be an audience of readers, beholders, or listeners—cannot be told here, though it is easy to imagine what such a history might look like. It might start with modernism; Barthes could occupy several pages. In an account with a musicological slant, Gary Tomlinson would play a central part, especially his suggestion that we “shift the focus of musicology away from musical utterances . . . toward the people who make them.”¹³ For those who study the nineteenth century, James Johnson’s 1995 book *Listening in Paris* was formative, across the field Richard Taruskin’s injunction that we study not what music has meant but what it means has perhaps been more influential than any other single utterance.¹⁴

As a concept, the operatic experience has proven so durable because it combines what is best from the two great fashions that have shaped so much of musicological writing in the past three decades. Opera studies as it is now practiced results from the natural alliance between the New Musicology, with its attention to others and subjectivity and its resistance to treating the score as a vessel for meaning, and New Historicism, whose practitioners delight in using archival documents to draw our attention to the technological, social, and economic forces that press upon cultural events, including musical performances. Or, to trace an alternate (but not conflicting) genealogy, opera studies could be seen as arising from the anthropological and sociological impulses that value events and rituals over texts, reinforced by the conviction of the historically informed performance movement that music is more interesting when heard rather than just studied on the page. For

¹⁰ Emanuele Senici, *Music in the Present Tense: Rossini’s Italian Operas in Their Time* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019), 11.

¹¹ Senici, *Music in the Present Tense*, 20.

¹² Smart, *Waiting for Verdi*, 8.

¹³ Gary Tomlinson, “Musical Pasts and Postmodern Musicologies: A Response to Lawrence Kramer,” *Current Musicology* 53 (1993): 18–24.

¹⁴ James Johnson, *Listening in Paris: A Cultural History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Richard Taruskin, “Introduction: The History of What?” in *The Oxford History of Western Music*, vol. 1 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

to write about opera, Italian opera especially, offers ample justification to attend to performances over scores, singers over composers, the material over the immaterial, the drastic over the gnostic, sound over music—in short, everything corporeal, fleshy, and pleasurable that had long been scorned by those high-collared idealists committed to the chimera of “the music itself.”¹⁵ All orthodoxies feel inevitable to those who inherit them, and so it was inevitable that *Reading at the Opera*, too, began as an earnest effort to add yet another chapter to the history of people and performances.

But it was in making claims about what audiences might or might not have felt while reading libretti that doubts began to surface, doubts that would prove so pervasive that my own pursuit of the operatic experience had to be abandoned. Questions were asked, answers hard to come by. What is *the* operatic experience, after all? Is it possible that the thoughts and feelings, the private sorrows and private joys, of thousands of nameless spectators are accessible through newspapers, the odd treatise or two? Who are these people, so often treated as a featureless mass, and why are they worthy of so much of our attention? Why is it that experiences from two hundred years ago seem so often to accord with modern academic fashion? And even if the archives were more forthcoming with details about historical listening habits, how does one begin to reconstruct any experience with a work of art—made up as it is, as Walter Pater has it, with “impressions unstable, flickering, inconsistent, which burn and are extinguished with our consciousness of them”—in the sober prose of our age?¹⁶ The answers to these questions, the objections to the operatic experience, were formed, slowly, in the process of writing this dissertation. Here they are loosely organized around three statements, though because they are drawn from wildly diverse sources, they could as well have been grouped differently.

The operatic experience is a critical fiction, and it is destructive to the discipline. There can be no doubting the fact that ours is an age with little “basis for dialogue and

¹⁵ In recent years, the “operatic experience” has been invoked in numerous prominent surveys and studies—more, in fact, than it would be profitable to list. The collocation is relatively old—it appears throughout David Kimbell’s *Italian Opera* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991)—and Nicholas Till, in his introduction to the *Cambridge Companion to Opera Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2012), 10, takes it as axiomatic that all responsible scholars must consider “the theatrical experience of opera in performance.” It forms the basis of much of the history laid out in Carolyn Abbate and Roger Parker’s *A History of Opera* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2012) and receives prominent attention in Susan Rutherford, *Verdi, Opera, Women* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Karen Henson, *Opera Acts: Singers and Performance in the Late Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Gundula Kreuzer, *Curtain, Gong, Steam: Wagnerian Technologies of Nineteenth-Century Opera* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018); and Smart, *Waiting for Verdi*, to name only a few recent prominent studies of nineteenth-century opera. See also Carolyn Abbate, *In Search of Opera* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), especially the preface, which synthesizes and anticipates many of the concerns of over two decades of writing on opera.

¹⁶ Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* (1893) (Mineola: Dover Publications, 2005), 153.

disagreement,” as a few scholars have recently pointed out.¹⁷ The intensity with which the arguments of the past were debated—How many singers, really, did Bach have at his disposal for the Passions? Just how political was Verdi’s music?—today feels impossibly antiquated. We are as far removed from those debates, or at least so it seems flipping through letters and their responses printed at the back of old journals, as we are from a time when disagreements were settled with pistols at dawn. This change in tone may signal a refinement of manners, the advent of a gentler, more forgiving musicology, but there is also a less benevolent interpretation: when recording experience is the task at hand, there is little disagreement because there is nothing to disagree about.

This situation was predicted decades ago in English departments. The early critics of reader-response theory, as articulated by Louise Rosenblatt, David Bleich, Wolfgang Iser, and Stanley Fish, forecasted anarchy if the impressions of all readers were held to be equally legitimate.¹⁸ Such critics were following the wisdom passed down by William K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley, who in their essay on “the affective fallacy” had also warned against the unchecked relativism inevitable when subjective responses are allowed to guide interpretation. It was an argument of its time, though it is one of the great curiosities of the academic humanities that this tenet of New Criticism is flouted with abandon while “the intentional fallacy” has become sacrosanct. History is full of humorless men, or so it is easy to imagine them, protesting against impressionistic criticism (Hanslick was no fan, for example). The point is not to bemoan the loss of something pure or transcendent or autonomous, but to ask whether what we have put in its place—the affective responses of audiences—is desirable or even recoverable. Surely there is comfort in removing the possibility of ever being wrong—for who, after all, can contradict a listener when he describes how music makes him feel?—but as one scholar has recently argued, taking what happens to the reader, listener, or viewer as the basis for scholarship involves “trad[ing] meaning for security, which is a higher price than we should accept.”¹⁹ Naturally, if you are of the persuasion that meaning can only be spoken about in the past tense, if you believe that the spectator is “an engaged co-maker in the theatrical event,” then this security has come at a bargain.²⁰

Practitioners of reader-response theory offered a number of solutions to deal with this crisis of authority—they were not interested in just any reader, they insisted, but in the implied reader, the ideal reader, the informed reader, or even the superreader, all of whom would save the critic from having to take an undergraduate’s thoughts on *Coriolanus* as seriously as Hazlitt’s. But it was clear

¹⁷ Nicholas Mathew and Mary Ann Smart, “Elephants in the Music Room: The Future of Quirk Historicism,” *Representations* 132 (Fall 2015): 73.

¹⁸ For a particularly blistering critique, see Edward Regis, Jr., “Literature by the Reader: The ‘Affective’ Theory of Stanley Fish,” *College English* 38, no. 3 (November 1976): 263–80. An overview of reader-response theory can be found in Elizabeth Freund, *The Return of the Reader* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2003).

¹⁹ Todd Cronan, *Against Affective Formalism: Matisse, Bergson, Modernism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 5.

²⁰ Rutherford, *Verdi, Opera, Women*, 13.

from the beginning that there was little difference between the ideal reader and the scholar, and Fish admitted as much: “this informed reader [is] neither an abstraction, nor an actual living reader, but a hybrid—a real reader (me) who does everything in his power to make himself informed,” he says.²¹ In opera studies, too, the experience historians seek to recover is that of a fictitious spectator, one who broadly agrees with everything printed in the papers and whose mental library looks remarkably similar to that of the contemporary musicologist. And because this ideal listener cannot be wrong—he was there, after all—he has a habit of making an appearance even when sound historical reasoning makes him superfluous. “An experienced audience,” Gundula Kreuzer writes in a chapter on the history of the curtain, “might thus have gleaned from the deliberate intermediary curtain in act 2 of *Thaïs* (1894) that the title heroine was more conflicted than her previous laughter let on.”²² There is no arguing with such claims (and the next sentence describes how other curtains “let audiences savor” onstage lovemaking), even if it is unclear which audiences Kreuzer is talking about, how much experience they had, or what their imagined responses add to an otherwise compelling study of nineteenth-century theater technologies. Reception history has never quite known what to do with the great range of musical literacy, with the fact that it is so often impossible to locate a correspondence between what a writer claims to have heard and the score laying open on the desk, with the fact that no two people in an opera house could ever be said to have the same experience. Speculating about the “collective subjective reaction,” has been one solution; but as Leon Botstein has it, this is can only lead to “an embarrassingly high level of generality.”²³

To be fair, much of what worried the critics of reader-response theory does not apply to modern studies of the operatic experience, whose objectives are closer to those of historical anthropology than to traditional art criticism. The responses of listeners tell us as much about a piece of music as they do about the listeners themselves; we have all of us become, as Senici notes, “invested as much in people as in music.”²⁴ When experience is the topic at hand, however, it is tempting to believe that we know much more about these people than we actually do.

We do not have access to the experience of others, especially those in the past. It is open to debate whether neuroscientists, philosophers, or musicologists are best equipped to write about consciousness. The questions—those posed by Spinoza and Descartes, those questions of mind and body—are ancient and probably unanswerable. They involve both profound treatises cut into stiff paper and digital maps of the brain. The matter is hardly more settled today than it was in any previous century. And yet to write about the operatic experience of others—their “thoughts, feelings, and emotions”—involves making claims about the nature of consciousness, claims that

²¹ Stanley Fish, *Self-Consuming Artifacts: The Experience of Seventeenth-Century Literature* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), 407.

²² Kreuzer, *Curtain, Gong, Steam*, 98.

²³ Leon Botstein, “Music in History: The Perils of Method in Reception History,” *The Musical Quarterly* 89, no. 1 (2006): 5.

²⁴ Senici, *Music in the Present Tense*, 16.

should not be made without a great deal of caution. The philosophers talk of qualia and prefer to ask *what is it like?* How do we, in other words, explain experience—how do we describe what it is like to see red or smell the rose? In histories of music that are histories of musical performance, the questions asked often take on a similar character: what, we want to know, is it like to be a nineteenth-century spectator?

Before the question can even be posed, a crowd has assembled to mock us for daring to ask it. The issue at hand is the so-called “hard problem of consciousness.” It is not a question of ability or function, but of what remains “even when the performance of all the relevant functions is explained.”²⁵ When Thomas Nagel asked, “What is it like to be a bat?” or Frank Jackson wondered what Mary, confined to her black-and-white prison, didn’t know about the redness of tomatoes and fire hydrants, they concluded that despite a sublime accumulation of facts, despite a thoroughgoing knowledge of the physical workings of the senses, it is simply impossible to know what it feels like to be another conscious organism.²⁶ Reading about rods and cones and wavelengths is no substitute for actually seeing the rose in bloom. To write about the experience of another person—say, a sufficiently informed middle-class opera goer who now rests in an unvisited grave—assumes a certain likeness between you and the other, which, at least if these authors are to be believed, is difficult enough, even without the additional problem of historical distance.²⁷

Those who write intellectual history tell us that these things come in cycles and that agreement about whether consciousness, experience, or affect is material or immaterial is unlikely anytime soon.²⁸ There have always been those who are satisfied with physical or material explanations of the world, others who are not.²⁹ But this is not a philosophy dissertation, and happily it is not necessary to have a consensus about what experience is before contemplating what it means to recover the experiences of the past. That historical audiences had them is obvious enough, that such experiences were prompted by the performance of this or that opera in

²⁵ David Chalmers first introduced the “hard problem of consciousness” in his “Facing Up to the Problem of Consciousness,” *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 2, no. 3 (March 1995), 200–219.

²⁶ See Thomas Nagel, “What Is It Like to Be a Bat?” *Philosophical Review* 83, no. 4 (1974): 435–50 and Frank Jackson, “What Mary Didn’t Know,” *Journal of Philosophy* 83, no. 5 (1986): 291–95. For a supplement to both Nagel’s and Jackson’s arguments, see Laurence Bonjour, “What is it like to be a human (instead of a bat)?” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 50, no. 4 (October 2013): 373–85.

²⁷ For a historian’s view on the problems of sensory histories, see Mark M. Smith, “Producing Sense, Consuming Sense, Making Sense: Perils and Prospects for Sensory History,” *Journal of Social History* 40, no. 4 (Summer 2007): 841–58.

²⁸ Roger Mathew Grant, “Music Lessons on Affect and Its Objects,” *Representations* 144, no. 1 (Fall 2018): 34–60.

²⁹ Daniel Dennett is perhaps the most popular philosopher who from the beginning was unconvinced by the hard problem of consciousness. See “Facing Backwards on the Problem of Consciousness,” *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 3, no. 1 (1996): 4–6. For essays on the relationship between consciousness and music, see David Clarke and Eric Clarke, eds., *Music and Consciousness: Philosophical, Psychological, and Cultural Perspectives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), especially chapter 2, Eugene Montague, “Phenomenology and the ‘hard problem’ of consciousness and music,” 29–46.

this or that theater before or after this or that revolution equally evident. Before we can track the response of audiences, however, we must first know what they were responding to, and it is here that musicology's own version of materialism offers its assistance.³⁰

Thanks to the scrupulous research of the past fifteen years or so, we know a great deal about the material and social aspects of the operatic experience, about who was seated where, what their political allegiances might have been, whether the architecture of the hall was more conducive to watching people than performances, whether the queen was present, whether the lights were gas or electric, whether it was noisy inside the theater, whether it was noisy outside the theater, even where the toilets were located.³¹ In the wake of all this detail, it is easy to wish that newspapers were more forthcoming in their descriptions of performances, that reviewers were more explicit about what they heard and why it was applauded; but still we can know some things—a great many things, perhaps—about what was going on in a theater on any given evening. And yet it is also easy to be seduced into believing that an accumulation of materials is enough to grant us access to the consciousness of listeners, or that what they wrote down is equivalent to “how they felt.” It is something of a paradox that musicologists (and audiences) now accept that the way music sounded in the past is not recoverable but nevertheless seem to believe that feelings about music are. At what point in the past, it is tempting to ask, does speculation about how audiences experienced music begin to feel ridiculous? What were the thoughts, feelings, and emotions, say, of those who gathered upon a rock to hear Sappho sing?

Richard Taruskin effectively silenced the early music movement's claims about authenticity, showed that their desire to “consult the oracle”—the composer's intentions—or recreate the material conditions of performance using old instruments and old methods were modernist fantasies. These arguments would seem to apply equally to attempts to document historical experience, to those historians who approach the archive as oracle.³² It all begins to resemble a great scavenger hunt for the true experience, a search for one of those unambitious men who haunted the outskirts of famous gatherings, listening, observing, occasionally taking a note in a book—surely he existed; surely his diary survives; and surely he will tell us what it was really like to be there. While many scholars acknowledge that (as Bettina Varwig has put it) “the historical record is frustratingly slim with regard to actual flesh-and-blood listeners caught in the act,” that does not stop them from attempting “to recapture how music's sounding materials reverberated . . .

³⁰ For a general overview of musicology's newfound materialism, see Holly Watkins and Melina Esse, “Down with Disembodiment; or, Musicology and the Material Turn,” *Women and Music: A Journal of Gender and Culture* 19 (2015): 160–68.

³¹ Michael Burden, “Pots, privies and WCs; crapping at the opera in London before 1830,” *Cambridge Opera Journal* 23, nos. 1–2 (March–July 2011): 27–50.

³² Taruskin borrowed “consulting the oracle” from Wimsatt and Beardsley's essay on “the intentional fallacy.” See “The Pastness of the Present and the Presence of the Past” in *Text and Act: Essays on Music and Performance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 90–154.

through hearts, guts, and limbs, as well as spirits and souls.”³³ It goes without saying—indeed, it is seldom said—that these hearts, guts, limbs, spirits, and souls are all ideal, informed, or implied. At its worst, the historically informed performance movement can resemble a Renaissance fair, but so too can musicology.³⁴

Academic prose is a poor vehicle for capturing aesthetic experience. The gap between what we can know and what we would like to know leaves room for speculation, and it is in this gap that so much musicological business is transacted. Midway through his recent study of Rossini’s operas and the experiences of those who first heard them, Emanuele Senici sets out to explain why audiences found this music so pleasurable. A consideration of pleasure furnishes the opportunity to reiterate the book’s central thesis, that Rossini’s music owed so much of its popularity to repetition, “its newest and most striking stylistic trait.”³⁵ Repetition led to familiarity, familiarity to pleasure, which in turn led to more repetition. An oracle from the nineteenth century confirms this to be the case: “This fact,” the reviewer writes, “can be interpreted in Rossini’s favor by saying that the difficult thing is to choose beauty, but that, once you have chosen it, you can repeat it indefinitely without fear of tiring [the audience’s] patience.”³⁶

This is not a world where things are as they seem, and Senici suggests that something unsettling lurks behind the ancient truth that beauty can be a source of pleasure. Within the course of a few lines we learn that “the singularly repetitive patterns on which Rossini’s ensembles rely . . . point to an understanding of the functions and meanings of repetition in Rossini’s operas as the kind of posttraumatic compulsion to repeat first conceptualized by Freud.” The operas, Senici continues, “stated over and over again the historical trauma of the postrevolutionary and Napoleonic years and the compulsion to repeat in which Italians found themselves trapped.”³⁷ The apparent pleasure, in short, is deceptive: “this repetition brings pleasure because it gives the illusion of mastery over . . . a

³³ Varwig adroitly pushes the authenticity debate to the side in her “Heartfelt Musicking: The Physiology of a Bach Cantata,” *Representations* 143, no. 1 (Summer 2018): 36–62. The article concludes with a note that “of course, from a twenty-first-century perspective, any attempt to recover music’s earlier assumed potential for psychosomatic transformation necessarily runs up against the scholar’s own experiential bodily reality,” an admission that all who play in the world of sensory recuperation must hope is not taken too seriously by any reader.

³⁴ A call for papers for a conference on “The Salon and the Senses in the Long Eighteenth Century” to be held in April 2020 insisted that “more than other institutions of the age, salons offered their *habitués* opportunities to engage with a wide range of social, cultural, artistic, literary, and verbal practices. A multidisciplinary approach requires that we—like salon hostesses and guests before us—open our minds across modern intellectual boundaries and reanimate the embodied practices of the institution. We seek to understand the multi-sensory nature of the salon: its sights, sounds, tastes, and smells; its conversations, texts, and subtexts.” It does not say whether participants were encouraged to read their papers in costume.

³⁵ Senici, *Music in the Present Tense*, 215.

³⁶ Quoted in Senici, *Music in the Present Tense*, 224.

³⁷ Senici, *Music in the Present Tense*, 225.

traumatic reality.”³⁸ Senici’s argument loses much of its persuasive luster when summarized out of context like this, but I hope that this juxtaposition of a nineteenth-century critic with a Freudian theory of trauma and compulsion makes clear the discord that can arise between what audiences profess to have felt and the scholar’s refusal to take them at their word. The task, it would seem, is not so much to recover the operatic experience as to interpret it, which is why the experiences of the past so often seem to resemble the preoccupations of the present.

To take an example from the chapters that follow, one of *Reading at the Opera’s* most persuasive historical witnesses is Carlo Varese, a historical novelist (which in the 1820s and 1830s meant a hapless imitator of Walter Scott) and a keen, though untaught, student of music. In 1832 Varese appended a lengthy essay to one of his novels entitled “On Rossini and Walter Scott,” in which he aimed to prove that listening to Rossini was the phenomenological equivalent of reading a Scott novel.³⁹ References to passages in operas or novels—*The Barber of Seville* and *Kenilworth* were particular favorites—said to achieve their effects through identical means tumble by one after another, and he offers an extended analysis of how Scott’s literary descriptions have much in common with Rossini’s orchestration. These are curious assertions, and they exemplify one of the chief obstacles in writing about music and literature in the early nineteenth century. Words will always fail us if we try to recover the experiences of a reader and listener such as Varese, who turned with pleasure to the opening pages of *Ivanhoe* and heard Rossini’s harmonies ringing in his ears. Metaphor, especially literary metaphor, is no longer a viable mode of analysis, so we are forced to use what tools we have.

It is commonplace to observe that music and language were seen as fundamentally incompatible in much of the nineteenth century, which allowed for so much literary and highly personal writing on music to flourish.⁴⁰ “Our experience of musical works is,” as Carolyn Abbate notes, “conditioned by verbal codes, by literary explanations, so that any attempt to separate writing about music from *music itself* is futile.”⁴¹ Varese’s essay is but one literary explanation of many, and though his methods are recognizable, they are not much use to us unless they can be distilled into some purer emotion. Refined emotions are, after all, easier to control than the messy world of aesthesis, which is perhaps why so much writing on musical experience resembles something from the eighteenth-century *Affektenlehre*, as feelings are sifted and sorted and repackaged into discrete parcels. Audiences were

³⁸ Senici, *Music in the Present Tense*, 227. For another study of musical pleasure, one with markedly different conclusions, see Edmund Goehring’s chapter in his *Coming to Terms with Our Musical Past: An Essay on Mozart and Modernist Aesthetics* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2018), 114–34.

³⁹ The *dissertazione* “Di Rossini e di Walter Scott messi a confronto come genii di indole identica” appeared as a preamble to Varese’s novel *Preziosa di Sanluri* (Milan: Stella e Figli, 1832), v–lxiii. For more on Varese, see chapter 3.

⁴⁰ See Johnson, *Listening in Paris*, especially chapter 16, “The Musical Experience of Romanticism,” 270–80.

⁴¹ Abbate, *Unsung Voices: Opera and Musical Narrative in the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 18.

sometimes bored, sometimes interested. They were occasionally surprised. They felt joy and excitement; there was sadness and tears. They savored the onstage lovemaking. But Varese was not a product of the eighteenth century, nor of our own. He was a romantic, his experience as idiosyncratic as anyone else's, and when he heard *The Barber of Seville* he did not feel just one emotion, did not even succumb to the illusion of mastery over the nation's trauma, but rather imagined Queen Elizabeth and her glittering train arriving at Kenilworth Castle.

It seems unlikely that the interior life of any listener to Rossini, Bellini, or Donizetti resembled a picture gallery of static emotional states. The age of Freud gifted us not only a useful theory of trauma but also a whole new kind of prose. That generation of novelists, believing the old forms were ill equipped to deal with the nonlinear movements of the mind, wrote some very difficult books, as we can easily imagine any book written about our own thoughts, feelings, and emotions—unstable, flickering, and inconsistent—must be as well. But however much a writer such as, say, Virginia Woolf, influenced so much by Pater's discrimination and analysis of impressions, bent the rules of syntax in order to capture experience in the present, she firmly rejected that anything of the sort could be possible for the past.⁴² It would be difficult enough to record an operatic experience today—how dinner was satisfying or unsatisfying, how the heat of the hall encourages drowsiness, how it is necessary to squint at the program in the dark, how the mind drifts from the valiant efforts of the singers onstage to the work that must be done tomorrow, how seats in the stalls were unaffordable and thus here, in the back, the rustling cellophane of a neighbor's cherry-flavored lozenge is far more present than anything happening down below—without making claims about what the experience was like two hundred years ago.⁴³

Modern, academic prose is good for many things. It is a language of fact and a language of theory. It is a language of argument, of concepts and abstractions. It can unpack, interrogate, and call out prejudice. But it cannot be called poetic, a few exceptions aside, which is why there is always a poor correspondence between what it is able to say about experience and what sensitive people must themselves feel. The occasional flight of lyricism might slip past the editor, but it gives offense when flanked by so much utilitarian speech. The peer-reviewed journal is not the place for self-indulgence. Such writing doesn't belong. It isn't science. But then neither is the rose or the nightingale, the moon rising, or the experience of listening to Bellini's "Qui la voce sua soave."

⁴² Pater's influence is felt in this typical statement from *A Room of One's Own*: "One must strain off what was personal and accidental in all these impressions and so reach the pure fluid, the essential oil of truth" (Orlando: Harcourt, Inc., 1989), 25. On the recovery of the past, she writes that "no living writer, try though he may, can bring the past back again, because no living writer can bring back the ordinary day." See "The Captain's Death Bed" in *The Captain's Death Bed and other Essays* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1950), 37–47.

⁴³ One particularly moving effort to capture the aesthetic experience is T.J. Clark, *The Sight of Death: An Experiment in Art Writing* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006). That Clark fills over three hundred pages describing his personal interaction with two paintings could be taken as a warning to those who wish to summarize the collective responses of an entire audience.

READING AT THE OPERA

These objections have been raised here only in their most basic form, and many readers will remain unconvinced. A few pages at the start of a dissertation on Italian opera are not enough to counter Collingwood's account of re-enactment and the work of many scholars who imagine that empathy with the people of the past is not only possible, but fundamental to historical understanding. The historiographical methods I have been critiquing are born of efforts to understand the people of the past and how their legacies shape, for better or for worse, how we respond to music today. One way to correct histories of music that had become parades of autonomous works and the bearded geniuses who wrote them was to recognize the labor of singers and performers, of audiences, reviewers, and other tastemakers, without whom there would be no score and no favorite recordings of Beethoven's sonatas and string quartets. Nevertheless, I will argue in this dissertation that it is *we*—music lovers and music scholars alive at this moment—who are responding to music, and that we do not need the permission of the archive to write about, or even enjoy, this music in the present.⁴⁴ We do not need to mask our own experiences with the implied experiences of historical audiences.

This argument was inchoate at the time I began this project, and therefore there is much in *Reading at the Opera* that purports to be a history of how changes in literary taste and modes of literary perception were brought to bear on both the production and, yes, the experience of Italian opera in the first few decades of the nineteenth century. As the dissertation progressed, so my dissatisfaction with any claims about past experience grew. Rather than construct a historical chronology, the chapters that follow appear in the order that they were written. My own progress is ultimately more compelling than a historical narrative loosely tethered to this or that treaty, congress, revolution, or even the premiere of this or that masterwork. There are, to be sure, historical and theoretical arguments aplenty—many of them having to do with opera's role in the debates about romanticism and classicism in Italy—but the tone is often essayistic: as explorations of the messy, seemingly ineffable ways that music and literature commingle in any operatic experience, these chapters flee from the schematic application of any one methodology or any one thesis.

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Chapter One (“Donizetti's Historicism”) revolves around three operas that Donizetti composed in short succession in 1833, all of which take as their subject the bloodstained history of Renaissance Ferrara's ruling Este family. Though he never recognized his *Parisina*, *Torquato Tasso*, and *Lucrezia Borgia* as a trilogy, they are now, much like his essays on various English monarchs, considered representative of his historicism and, by extension, the historicism of the post-Napoleonic period as a whole. Early reviewers, however, were unimpressed by the history presented in these operas, above all in *Parisina* and *Lucrezia Borgia*, both of

⁴⁴ This sentiment comes from writers such as Elizabeth Prettejohn, who contends that “a work of art belongs to the past as soon as it has been made . . . but its beauty is in the present moment of the observer's judgement.” See her *Beauty & Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 202.

which are awash with the musical local color that nowadays is believed to be characteristic of operatic realism. By contrast, *Torquato Tasso*, with its dramatization of literary history, its scenes of onstage reading, its libretto crammed with historicizing gestures meant only for a reader—and a particularly informed reader at that—escaped critical censure, suggesting that at least in the 1833 successful representations of history depended on an engaged, reading spectator. In positing this informed listener, the chapter thus presents the most straightforward argument for reading at (that is, during) the opera and devotes several pages to piecing together such a listener’s mental library. It also considers how the debates surrounding historicist operas largely mirrored the debates surrounding the historical novel in Italy, as critics were often suspicious of any work that failed to differentiate clearly between fiction and invention.

Chapter Two (“After Metastasio”) begins where all discussions of early nineteenth-century Italian literature must: with Madame de Staël’s controversial 1816 article on translations, which triggered the now infamous debates between Italian romanticists and classicists, between those who balked at her arguments for ignoring Italy’s already rich literary history and those who passionately took up her charge. Yet although Staël’s censure included the “so-called words” of Italian opera—the overexposure to which she believed had atrophied the intellect of the nation—the debates that followed largely ignored opera’s relationship to Italian literature, and musicologists have been left to speculate how such literary discourse may have influenced the development of the *primo ottocento* libretto. This chapter locates opera’s place in these debates through the classical and ostensibly conservative poetry of Metastasio, which underwent a surprising revival in the early nineteenth century. Not only were his libretti set by a new generation of composers in the 1820s after a roughly twenty-year trough, but new editions of his complete works were published year after year in almost every major Italian city. When foreigners such as Staël and A. W. Schlegel attacked Italian letters, Italians could cite the poetry of Metastasio, prized for its aesthetic value as much in the nineteenth century as in the century of monarchal absolutism it originally celebrated. This chapter concludes by considering the unique problems presented by this aesthetic—which commentators at the time recognized as disinterested beauty—for writing histories of Italian opera as histories of Italian politics.

Chapter Three (“Describing Rossini”) considers the increasingly lengthy (and geographically specific) scenic descriptions by many librettists, which form a notable contrast to the often sparse and generalized settings of their *settecento* counterparts and parallel many contemporary commentators’ invocation of “musical description” and other literary analogies in their writings. It was not only Carlo Varese but also Stendhal who explored the structural affinities between the novels of Walter Scott and the operas of Rossini, suggesting that hearing richly orchestrated music was akin to reading literary description. The chapter casts Scott not merely as a purveyor of myth and romance, the inspiration behind a handful of dramatic situations, but rather as one whose immense popularity recalibrated the expectations for any long work of imaginative fiction, an author who taught generations of admirers both how to read and how to listen. A consideration of

description also invites a return to the old debates about music and narrative, but rather than attempting to answer a question that is fundamentally unanswerable—whether music can ever be said to be “about” anything—rather than attempting to say what music describes, this chapter argues for a reevaluation of the way music is described today, especially by those invested in recovering historical experience.

Chapter Four (“Bellini’s Idyllic Endings”) begins with the claim, made both in 1831 and in our own time, that Bellini’s *La sonnambula* is a pastoral opera. That the pastoral mode—the world of shepherds and nymphs and endless leisure; the world of Virgil, of Tasso, of Mozart’s comedies; the world of eighteenth-century aristocrats supping on milk and ripe fruits while their people went hungry—should have appealed to readers and audiences so long after the revolution is confusing enough, though not nearly as confusing as the way the term “pastoral” seems at once both musical and literary and is able to attach itself to everything from madrigal to oratorio to symphony across four hundred years. The chapter explores the various meanings of pastoral specific to the early nineteenth century and argues that its currency in music analysis today—as a topic, as a mode, as a way of dignifying, of making monumental, all that shuns motivic development or harmonic ingenuity in German music—is of little use when attention falls on the music of Italian opera. It concludes with an extended analysis of Bellini’s handling of cadences both in *La sonnambula* and his other operas, insisting that it is here, in Italian composers’ repeated affirmation of the conventions of tonality, that the pleasures promised by the pastoral can be enjoyed today as much as they were two hundred years ago.

Each in their own way, the first three chapters express some dissatisfaction with the archive, or at least with the archive’s ability to tell us how people felt when they went to the opera. Only with the last chapter has the search for historical experience been abandoned completely, the result being that *La sonnambula* is treated as a work belonging more to us than to audiences in nineteenth-century Italy. But who is this *us*? This dissertation is addressed to readers and listeners today, to anyone who has come to love early nineteenth-century music and literature jointly, whose mind rings with both snatches of poetry and Bellini’s melodies. It is also dedicated to the long line of distinguished scholars who have written so persuasively and eloquently about how music and literature might be brought together.

1. Donizetti's Historicism

Quintus: Intellego te, frater, alias in historia leges observandas putare, alias in poemate.

Marcus: Quippe, quom in illa *omnia* ad veritatem, Quinte, referantur, in hoc ad delectationem pleraque.¹

Cicero, *De legibus*

Donizetti and historicism are a natural pairing. He has made us privy to the whisperings of the Tudor court and led us to cold cells to pray with noble queens in their final hours. He has accompanied us across the heath to hear Scottish maidens tell family legends beside haunted wells—in Venice we have attended a fatal masked ball hosted by the pope's daughter. Oaths have been sworn, conspiracies uncovered, cities razed. This enthusiasm among Donizetti and his contemporaries is a commonplace of the music history textbook, and we need only glance at performance records to see the shift from the classically oriented decades straddling 1800 to the historicism that dominated the 1820s, '30s, and beyond. Changes in taste are seldom swift and absolute—as will be discussed in Chapter 2, Metastasio's influence lingered well into the nineteenth century—and it would be some years yet before the heroes of antiquity were banished completely from the stage. Still, two centuries of performance tradition have taught us to hear Donizetti's musical language as best uttered by a woman dressed in the pearly gown of a courtier rather than the burnished breastplate of Achilles.

As a group these historicist operas can be unwieldy—so many conventional plots, so much middling music—and thus surveys of nineteenth-century opera and studies of Donizetti in particular have tended to deal in generalizations. What stylistically unites *Anna Bolena* with *Maria Stuarda*, *Marino Faliero* with *Maria di Rohan*, we are told, is their shared dramatization of the past, which prompted Donizetti to reach for a series of compositional effects now commonly known as *couleur locale* to lend his operas an air of geographic and temporal remoteness.²

¹ Quintus: I see you think, brother, that there are certain laws to be observed in history and another kind of laws in poetry. / Marcus: Yes, Quintus, for in history *everything* is related to truth, whereas in poetry most is related to pleasure.

² On historicism and *couleur locale* in French grand opéra, see Anselm Gerhard, *The Urbanization of Opera*, trans. Mary Whittall (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), especially 72–75 and 162–69, as well as the collection of essays on the topic found in *Die Couleur locale in der Oper des 19. Jahrhunderts*, ed. Heinz Becker (Regensburg: Bosse, 1976). Several writers have commented on Donizetti's use of *couleur locale*, specifically, though its historically low aesthetic value—like any other compositional effect that too closely approaches direct imitation—has led some scholars to seek alternative explanations for its appearance in these operas. See, for example, Franca Cella, “Donizetti novellatore” in *L'Opera teatrale di Gaetano Donizetti: atti del Convegno internazionale di Studio* (Bergamo: Comune di Bergamo, 1993), 219–27 and Francesco Izzo, “Suoni festivi: struttura e drammaturgia di un topos donizettiano” in Livio Aragona and Federico Fornoni,

Donizetti seems to invite us to seek patterns across multiple works, and that urge is especially strong when we confront his output in 1833. Only a few months separate the premieres of *Parisina*, *Torquato Tasso*, and *Lucrezia Borgia*, three operas with a remarkable number of affinities of subject matter and musical style: all three are set in early modern Ferrara, and all three portray the blood-soaked histories of various personalities associated with the ruling Este family. Niccolò III (1383–1441) beheaded his wife Parisina Malatesta after she had an affair with her bastard stepson Ugo. His grandson, Alfonso I (1476–1534), was married to Lucrezia Borgia, noted serial poisoner. In turn their grandson, Alfonso II (1533–97), became Torquato Tasso’s patron during the 1570s, those productive years that gifted posterity with the *Aminta* and *Gerusalemme liberata*. Given this chronology, those who have attempted to impose order upon Donizetti’s vast catalogue have treated this series of musical portraits as, if not quite a trilogy on the level of the Tudor operas, at least evidence of the composer’s strong historicist sensibility.³

The Ferrara operas have noteworthy differences to be sure. All premiered in different cities (*Parisina* in Florence, *Torquato Tasso* in Rome, *Lucrezia Borgia* in Milan) after appreciably different gestation periods. Delays from librettist Felice Romani forced Donizetti to compose *Parisina* and *Lucrezia Borgia* quickly and under no small amount of stress, while *Torquato Tasso* was produced under more amicable terms in collaboration with Jacopo Ferretti.⁴ Romani based his libretti on the work of two of romanticism’s high priests—Lord Byron and Victor Hugo—while Ferretti drew from over two hundred years of writing on the life of Tasso. Stylistic idiosyncrasies also distinguish each work, from *Torquato Tasso*’s heroic baritone (unusual in 1833) to *Lucrezia Borgia*’s large cast of secondary characters that includes the trousered Maffio Orsini. Nevertheless, whether intended or not, the consistency in subject matter is striking and would seem to offer a rich archive documenting how early nineteenth-century Italians related to their national past.

And yet, if we turn to these operas’ contemporary critical reception, we find a markedly different attitude toward their historicist pretensions. Newspapers in Florence were filled with denunciations of Romani’s libretto for *Parisina*, a work stuffed with characters whose actions were—allegedly—as offensively counterfactual as they were profligate. In Milan, *Lucrezia Borgia* was met with similar hostility, as few critics were willing to praise an opera born of Hugo’s vulgar

eds., *Il teatro di Donizetti: atti dei convegni delle celebrazioni 1797/1997–1848/1998. III: Voglio amore, e amore violento* (Bergamo: Fondazione Donizetti, 2006), 195–209.

³ For a recent example, see Paolo Fabbri, “Donizetti storiografo di Casa d’Este” in “Annali Online Lettere – Ferrara,” vol. 1 (2012), 212–19, DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.15160/1826-803X/289>. See also Luigi Baldacci, “Donizetti e la storia” in *Atti del primo Convegno Internazionale di Studi Donizettiani* (Bergamo: Azienda Autonoma di Turismo, 1983), 5–27. Recently, Mary Ann Smart has approached the Tudor operas as commentaries on monarchy during the final years of absolutism; see her chapter 3, “Elizabeth I, Mary Stuart, and the Limits of Allegory,” in *Waiting for Verdi* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018), 60–101.

⁴ For an overview of Donizetti’s relationship with these librettists, see William Ashbrook, “Donizetti and Romani,” *Italica* 64, no. 4 (Winter, 1987): 606–31 and Franca Cella, “Ferretti e Donizetti” in Annalisa Bini and Franco Onorati, eds., *Jacopo Ferretti e la cultura del suo tempo: atti del convegno di studi* (Milan: Skira, 1999): 165–90.

(that is, French) romanticism. It would only be later, thanks to the influence of Abramo Basevi and Giuseppe Mazzini, that *Lucrezia Borgia* would receive widespread praise—praise for its attention to setting, its distinctive atmosphere, its realism, its advancements in characterization, its experimentation with form and convention, stylistic features that not only are said to have impressed a young composition student in Milan named Giuseppe Verdi but also suggest Donizetti's sensitivity to the historical and geographical particularities of his libretti.⁵ In contrast to *Lucrezia Borgia* and *Parisina*, the local color in *Torquato Tasso* is decidedly muted; indeed, though it may have its own unique advancements in style—an extended mad scene for baritone—leafing through the score reveals few, if any, moments of local color at all. Reviewers seem not to have noticed, however, for they were happy to praise *Torquato Tasso* for its treatment of history.

Rather than presenting us with a coherent vision of Donizetti's historicism, then, the 1833 works and their reception raise several questions about what constituted proper (or even recognizable) historical representation on the operatic stage. This chapter considers these questions, beginning with the denial of *Parisina's* and *Lucrezia Borgia's* historicism found in the theatrical press. Recovering the priorities of contemporary critics invites us to speculate on their understanding of early nineteenth-century historicism more generally and how opera related to contemporary genres such as the historical novel, a genre that in Italy and elsewhere sustained heavy criticism for its free blending of invention and reality. Yet this repudiation of Donizetti's historicism can only be a starting point, for the critics have little to say about the role of music plays relative to other historical and pseudohistorical signals at play in an opera. Viewing the three operas in relation to one another reveals that in order to understand Donizetti's historicism, we must seek out an alternative to garish flashes of *couleur locale*. Rather than trafficking in the bells, chorales, and counterpoint that so often define musical historicism, a work such as *Torquato Tasso* instead makes demands on the spectator as reader. It is with *Torquato Tasso* that a bibliographic historicist register emerges, where desire for historical accuracy surpasses the desire for historical atmosphere.

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When Byron visited Ferrara in 1817 he found the streets of the city derelict, depopulated, “wide and grass-grown,” on the whole rather uninspiring. The cause of the city's decay was—if we believe his account in *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*—the result of a curse meted out upon the “antique brood of Este” for their unjust imprisonment of Torquato Tasso. To Byron, Alfonso II was more benighted tyrant than benevolent patron, the resplendent pageantry of the Este court masking an imperious, capricious philistinism. The Duke of Ferrara failed to recognize Tasso's

⁵ A detailed study of Lucrezia Borgia's dramaturgy can be found in Ellen Taller, *Gaetano Donizetti—Moment und Prozess: Studien zur musikalischen Dramaturgie* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2005). See chapter 5, “Lucrezia Borgia—Konflikt dramaturgie als formale Bestimmung,” 147–82. On Basevi and Mazzini's praise of *Lucrezia Borgia*, see Gary Tomlinson, “Opera and Drame: Hugo, Donizetti, and Verdi” (1988) and “Italian Romanticism and Italian Opera: An Essay in Their Affinities” (1986), both of which are reproduced in *Music and Historical Critique* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007).

creative eminence, and his punishment was that his city should fall to ruin, his bloodline pass into oblivion, while the name of the poet whom he bade rot in the hospital of Santa Anna would achieve “glory without end.”

The causes of Tasso’s imprisonment had inspired scholar and poet alike since the sixteenth century, and the reasons for his decline were still contested when Ferretti and Donizetti staged their *Torquato Tasso* in 1833. Byron’s vision, popular thought it was, had little direct influence on the opera, however. In his preface to the libretto Ferretti may have tossed Byron into a long list of contemporary writers who treated the life of Tasso, but the Tasso of these few stanzas of *Childe Harold* and the “Lament of Tasso” owes far more to flights of the imagination triggered by the atmosphere of a medieval city than to any semblance of historical truth. Yet it is a vision that takes us to the heart of Donizetti’s historicism in 1833, for critics and librettists consistently engaged in a discourse about the role that invention should play in the depiction of historical persons.

Heard a few centuries on, Donizetti’s music betrays some effort to capture the historical atmosphere summoned by the poets. Monastic chants perfume the musical worlds of both *Parisina* and *Lucrezia Borgia*, bathing each opera in the mists of those cold, unsympathetic regimes that prevailed in the distant past. The use of an offstage *banda* in *Lucrezia Borgia*’s prologue effectively marks the soundscape of Venice as distinct from Ferrara, while in *Parisina* Donizetti depicts rowers on the Pò through ebullient folk idioms. Adorno would cite the “fissures” in the compositional surface of Beethoven’s late works—those moments when tradition intrudes into the stylistic texture of the present—as evidence of his historicism, and these moments, these analogous cracks or incongruences in Donizetti, seem also to proffer glimpses of something outside of themselves.⁶

Parisina d’Este, chronologically the first of Donizetti’s “trilogy,” premiered on March 17, 1833 for Alessandro Lanari’s company in Florence. The score and singers were, on the whole, warmly received, but no one had much to say about any local or historical color, despite the chants and a prelude marked by conspicuously tenebrous horns. The libretto was a different matter. Here there was much to fault, with the writer for the Florentine *Giornale di commercio e d’industria* noting that

In his *Avvertimento Romani* offers sufficient knowledge whence came the idea to make his libretto for *Parisina*, and confesses that without really bothering to investigate the records of that Lady, he thought he was entitled to invent what he believed necessary for his drama.⁷

This allusion to Romani’s preface deserves attention, if only because the reviewer reproduces the librettist’s own claims about the role of poetic invention.

⁶ Adorno, “Late Style in Beethoven” in *Essays on Music*, trans. Susan Gillespie (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 564–68.

⁷ “Il Romani nel suo *Avvertimento* fornisce bastante conoscenza donde gli venne in pensiero di far il suo libretto della *Parisina*, e confessa che senza tante brighe di investigare le cronache di quella Donna, si credé in diritto d’inventare ciò che credeva necessario al suo Dramma.” *Giornale di Commercio e d’Industria* (March 29, 1833): 1–2.

In the *avvertimento*, Romani indeed soft-pedaled any pretensions to authenticity by casting his libretto as a purely literary adaptation. “The subject,” he wrote,

is taken from a poem by Lord Byron; it has no more historical foundation than a few words of Gibbon. Perhaps there is some record of the Este family, in which Parisina and the Prince, under whose reign this tragedy occurred, will be discussed more clearly. I have not found it, and I believed it right to invent what I believed necessary to my drama. . .⁸

The “few words of Gibbon” refers to the *Antiquities of the House of Brunswick*, an unfinished genealogical study of the continental ancestry of the British royal family.⁹ Gibbon’s foray into the Italian lineage furnished the anecdote about Niccolò III and Parisina, which Byron cited in the preface to his own poem, a preface reproduced verbatim in the first Italian translation in 1821.

But invoking a historian as illustrious as Gibbon hardly convinced the writer for *Il commercio*, who was not amused by the librettist’s loose treatment of history. The tone of the rest of the review is biting, even sarcastic at times. The critic sought to dismantle the strange and immoral behavior of each character he had seen onstage at the Teatro della Pergola. Blame fell primarily on the unhappy heroine, Parisina, and on various members of the Este court who failed to respect “the inviolability of matrimony” (“la inviolabilità delle Nozze”). The reviewer also singled out various diegetic misdemeanors such as the chorus’s improbable and inappropriate knowledge of the Duke’s private life. He concluded with an unconvincing note of sympathy for the librettist: Romani may have “asked for indulgence because he made his book from fragments,” but if he was going to invent he could have done so “much better and with less disgrace to the Court of Ferrara.”¹⁰ While the chatter of the press was not uniformly so censorious, other reviewers of *Parisina* equally struggled to overlook the morally unpalatable relationship between Niccolò (renamed Azzo in Byron’s poem and the opera) and his wife. The Bolognese journal *Teatri, Arti e Letteratura* deemed the subject “immoral and disgusting,” while the *Gazzetta di Firenze* found it all “more horrible than terrible . . . a combination of doom and perversity not redeemed by a few examples of attractive virtue.” Inaccuracy might be tolerated, but inaccuracy coupled with impropriety was unforgiveable.

⁸ “Il soggetto è tolto da un Poemetto di lord Byron; nè fondamento istorico ha desso, che poche parole del Gibbon. Forse esisterà qualche cronaca della famiglia Estense, in cui sarà parlato più chiaramente e di Parisina, e del Principe sotto il cui regno avvenne la Tragedia. Io non l’ho rinvenuta, e mi sono creduto in diritto d’inventare ciò ch’ io credeva necessario al mio Dramma...”

⁹ David Womersley, *Gibbon and the ‘Watchmen of the Holy City’: The Historian and His Reputation, 1776–1815* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002). See chapter 5, “Gibbon’s Unfinished History,” 175–206.

¹⁰ “In somma, lo ripeteremo con dolore, che in tutto il Dramma non abbiám letto una Sentenza dignitosa e chiara di soda morale: che anzi vi ravvisammo quasi protetto il vizio. Il Poeta richiese indulgenza perché fece il suo libro alla spezzata, né ebbe modo di rivederlo, e correggerlo. Noi gli abbiám compassione, ma appunto perché inventò, poteva inventare assai meglio, e con minore onta della Corte di Ferrara.”

That critics impugned the history of Romani's libretto possibly relates to that fact that, contrary to whatever Romani might have written in his preface, there was some record of the Este family in which Parisina's affairs were discussed more clearly than in Byron's embroidery of Gibbon. Enter Pompeo Litta, the Milanese nobleman, opera enthusiast, and historian who since 1814 had been researching notable Italian houses and disseminating his findings in a series of colorful publications known as the *Famiglie celebri italiane*. Litta's chronicle of the Este family had been published in Milan in 1832, and had Romani consulted its eleventh genealogical table he would have found a slightly different account of Parisina's fortunes.

Litta's entry is brief (and indebted to Antonio Frizzi's 1791 *Memorie per la storia di Ferrara*). It glosses over the particulars of how Ugo and his stepmother became clandestine bedfellows. After simply noting how Parisina's initial "hatred turned to indifference, afterwards to sympathy, and finally to love," Litta suggests that a vindictive maid alerted Niccolò to the relationship between his wife and his illegitimate son. In order to corroborate the allegation, the cuckolded Marquis cut a small hole in the floor of an upper room, through which he was able to surveil their liaisons unobserved. As punishment for their iniquity, Ugo and Parisina were imprisoned and shortly afterward relieved of their heads. Romani's distillation of Byron diverges from these "facts" principally in the opera's dramatic apex in Act II, during which—in a scene that savors strongly of *Othello*—the jealous marquis steals into Parisina's chambers and conveniently overhears her whispering the name of her lover while sleeping. Nor is Donizetti's Parisina decapitated for her infidelity at the end of the opera; she merely collapses after being confronted with Ugo's corpse.

We cannot know whether or not the critic for *Il commercio* was familiar with Litta's work, nor indeed any other account of Parisina's life. Fortunately, it is not necessary to know the details of what the reviewer had read to know that he was reading. That most reviewers took Romani's preface as their starting point—in considering both *Parisina* and *Lucrezia Borgia*—suggests that they engaged sincerely with such paratextual material as part of the operatic experience. What mattered for *Il commercio*'s critic was Romani's admission that he had not consulted any reliable information on Parisina; without some kind of bibliographic underpinning, Donizetti's opera could be dismissed as ahistorical.¹¹ We can presume that this awareness of the tension between history and invention was shared by audience members, and especially those who happened to read the preface to the libretto, which acted as a bulwark against criticism and offered a space for authors to clarify their intentions.

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From the first decades of the nineteenth century, Italian opera libretti accrued an increasing number of such ancillary texts intended to supplement the action on stage. These texts were hardly limited to generic platitudes dispensed by librettists

¹¹ Admittedly the source material may not even have mattered: if one deems Parisina's story unfit for the stage because of its immorality, the obscene particulars furnished by Litta are hardly an improvement on Byron.

“*a chi legge*” in anticipation of criticism, though obsequious gestures toward the generosity of the reader—who was implored to pardon a litany of literary and dramatic infelicities to which librettists might confess—are indeed commonplace. Overwork, the unforgiving constraints of time and the theatre, and the inherent impossibility of adaptation: these were the excuses offered to readers for shoddy libretto-making. Comparing the language of different librettists reveals that such paratextual posturing was neither disinterested nor merely mechanical, since librettists often had recourse to different strategies to manage the tension between, on the one hand, some conception of historical truth and, on the other hand, the blatantly fictitious nature of their source material or their own claims to poetic invention.¹² The language used to negotiate this tension largely standardized near the end of the 1810s, and by the early 1820s almost all libretti printed for La Scala contained a preface, which, after providing the compulsory synopsis and historical background, concluded with some variation of “this is the history on which the present drama is based” and a proviso that whatever deviates from history is simply the invention of the author for the expediency of the drama.¹³

Romani followed this model frequently, as seen in his preface to Donizetti’s *Anna Bolena*, which ends with this perfunctory defense:

The author of the *melodramma* has accepted this belief [that Henry harbored doubts about Anne’s guilt] as better fitted to a work to be performed in the theater, so the effect is forgiven if it in some part diverged from history.¹⁴

This statement is representative of Romani’s attitude toward history in his opera libretti, which, if not exactly cavalier, at least betrays little interest in accuracy or fidelity. In his preface to *Lucrezia Borgia*, Romani similarly elided questions of historical truth to underscore instead the difficulty of adapting the work of Hugo, specifically of rendering the grotesquely contrasted ruthlessness and maternalism of the title character and of translating the play’s prose into verse. Unfortunately for Romani, his efforts for Donizetti’s third historical offering in 1833 were met once again by an unsympathetic press. The *Corriere delle dame* observed that “the excuses in his *avvertimento* could not be regarded as sufficient to tolerate [the libretto’s] deficiencies.”¹⁵

Critics, then, clearly read their libretti while drafting their reviews—one early writer on *Torquato Tasso* admitted as much—and the negative responses to

¹² The Neapolitan Giovanni Schimidt called on Horace to authorize his freedom with the historical record: “Pictoribus, atque poetis / Quidlibet audendi semper fuit aequa potestas” (“Painters and poets / have equal license in regard to everything”). See his preface to *L’apoteosi d’Ercole* (Naples: Flautina, 1819), 3.

¹³ The examples are numerous and often fairly similar to Francesco Maria Berio’s note at the end of the synopsis for *Ricciardo e Zoraide*: “. . . tutto il resto è dell’invenzione del poeta per dare più rapidità ed interesse all’azione, e farne con più naturalezza succedere la necessaria catastrofe.” *Ricciardo e Zoraide* (Naples: Flautina, 1818), 4.

¹⁴ “L’autore del Melodramma si è appigliato a cotesta credenza, come più acconcia ad un lavoro da rappresentarsi in Teatro, per questo riflesso gli sia perdonato se in alcune parte si discostò dall’istoria.” *Anna Bolena* (Milan: Fontana, 1830), 6.

¹⁵ *Corriere delle dame* 72 (December 30, 1833): 570.

Donizetti's Ferrarese operas consistently hinge on comparing the "real" historical personages that lay behind each work with their onstage representation.¹⁶ Before railing against Romani and Hugo (the latter being the "coryphaeus of vulgar romanticism"), the correspondent for the *Gazzetta privilegiata di Milano* invoked the "well known" defects of the historical Lucrezia Borgia.¹⁷ This acknowledgement is far less mundane than it may appear at first glance, anticipating as it does a move familiar to anyone who has read the liner notes for a recording of such a historicist opera.¹⁸ Even apologists for early nineteenth-century Italian opera cannot help but note that these works are poor accounts of history *wie es eigentlich gewesen*, the gap between the historical record and a libretto often producing a range of (humorous) inaccuracies: whatever the libretto for *I puritani* may say, there are no mountain ranges in southwest England.¹⁹ Yet as the nod to Ranke's axiom implies, this belief—that a direct comparison between the plot of an opera and historical "truth" is at all relevant to the operatic experience—has a history of its own.

The disparity between representations of historical personages (operatic and non-) and the discursively constructed ideal of their historical selfhood has been explored in some detail by Stephen Bann. In comparing a mid-nineteenth-century caricature of Joan of Arc to previous "straight" historical accounts of her life, Bann notes that the parodistic use of her image suggests "a faithful indication of a generalized historical-mindedness that . . . [involved] the acceptance of new and richly replete models for what could count as historical representation."²⁰ Unlike Lucrezia Borgia, whose malevolence had long enjoyed a certain notoriety, Parisina Malatesta's story is but a footnote in Italian history. That the writer for *Il commercio* believed Romani guilty of professional negligence for his depiction of her betrays a trust in the accuracy of the limited historical reports about her life that were circulating at the time and, to some degree, a belief that these reports should be

¹⁶ The critic of *Torquato Tasso* noted that "the book [was thought] quite beautiful, and in this I concur because I have it in front of me and I like it very much" ("libro assai bello, ed in questo concorro ancor'io perché l'ho sotto gli occhi e mi piace moltissimo"). *Il censore universale dei teatri*, *Milan* 82 (October 12, 1833): 328.

¹⁷ The epithet—"corifeo del romanticismo sguajato"—was penned by Gian-Jacopo Pezzi in the *Gazzetta privilegiata di Milano* (December 28, 1833). See Annalisa Bini and Jeremy Commons, eds., *Le prime rappresentazioni delle opere di Donizetti nella stampa coeva* (Rome: Accademia nazionale di Santa Cecilia, 1997), 376. He went on to note that "Il soggetto è quella Lucrezia Borgia, di cui son note le colpe e le vicende, e che il romanziere francese ci aveva dipinta con cupi colori."

¹⁸ Any number of examples could be cited here, not the least the nearly unimpeachable authority of William Ashbrook, whose liner notes to Beverly Sills's Tudor recordings include a summary of the differences between the "real" Anne Boleyn, Mary Stuart, and Elizabeth I and their operatic counterparts. Similarly has Jeremy Commons, on the first page of his lengthy notes for Opera Rara's recording of *Caterina Cornaro*, argued that we should "start with a word about Caterina Cornaro the historical figure, for she is of considerable fascination in her own right, and her true history is rather different from that which we are shown in the opera—more complex, and perhaps even more interesting."

¹⁹ *I puritani*'s mountains are discussed in Emanuele Senici, *Landscape and Gender in Italian Opera* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 1–20.

²⁰ Stephen Bann, *Romanticism and the Rise of History* (New York: Twayne, 1995), 52.

used to judge the success of dramatic representation. But if this gap between the “real” Parisina and her operatic instantiations suggests a “generalized historical-mindedness,” a faith in a particular model of historical accuracy, then sketching a picture of Donizetti’s historicism demands—as all essays on early nineteenth-century historicism demand—grappling with the origins of that historical-mindedness, of the often cited historical consciousness on display across all artistic spheres, from the conspicuously propagandistic historical paintings commissioned by Napoleon, to Schiller’s plays and Scott’s novels.

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The critical consensus points to the French Revolution, to the feelings of temporal estrangement experienced after the fall of the *ancien régime* and the redrawing of national borders during the pan-Continental wars that followed. Before 1789, so the story goes, historians believed in the simplicity of historical truth, in history comprising merely a series of successive presents, that today is no different than an infinite tally of yesterdays and that human life has always been more or less the same. The mood after the Revolution, purportedly, was characterized by “the upheaval of everything that exists,” in the words of Goethe.²¹ The French Revolution is said to have sundered the perceived linear relationship between past, present, and future. Historians, alienated from their predecessors, could no longer rely on memory or an oral or written tradition, and thus historical science became a study of the past with an acute consciousness of its temporal location. This “break in continuity,” as Reinhart Koselleck puts it, “appeared to uncouple a past whose growing foreignness could be illuminated and recovered only by means of historical investigation.”²² Similarly, Georg Lukács attributed the new (and distinctively modern) historical consciousness to the expanded vistas of mass experience and popular consciousness thrust upon the masses by the Revolution and Napoleonic wars.²³ Such comments are part of a long tradition that has located a shift in historical orientation at the end of the eighteenth century, an orientation often articulated in the language of postlapsarian despondency. In 1795 Schiller had longed for a past irrecoverable, hoping that “our culture, by means of reason and freedom, should lead us back to nature.”²⁴ His attitude is commensurate with the more recent commentary by Peter Fritzsche, who has stressed the “deep rupture in remembered experience” that accompanied the Revolution, a period when “progress” became an *idée fixe* in the minds of the melancholic many affected by the

²¹ Goethe wrote in his *Annals of 1793* that “It will be set to the credit of an active, productive mind, of a truly patriotic man intent upon furthering literature at home, if he is frightened by the upheaval of everything that exists, while not the slightest premonition of something better, or only of something else, which is to result from it finds voice in him.” Quoted in Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 446.

²² Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time* (1979), trans. Keith Tribe (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 139.

²³ Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel* (1937), trans. Hannah and Stanley Mitchell (London: Merlin Press, 1962).

²⁴ Schiller, *Naive and Sentimental Poetry*, trans. Julius Elias (New York: Ungar, 1966), 85.

dislocation of war and revolution.²⁵ Agency can be a moving target in these discussions, for it is difficult to articulate who or what, exactly, precipitated Bann's famous "desire for history" in an age when history simply "became a substratum to almost every type of cultural activity."²⁶

To write about how this desire for history may have affected a composer such as Donizetti is no easy task, the sea of literature on this period being so vast that any selection of authors who have given their attention to that elusive time—"around 1800"—will necessarily feel incomplete. While invoking a term as capacious as "historicism" may necessitate certain generic gestures toward canonical writers and statesmen—or even toward particular media histories, toward the proliferation of print, toward the expansion of markets and the circulation of commodities, toward industrialization, toward new frontiers of experience glimpsed in colonial encounters—on the whole the links between the socioeconomic or sociopolitical reverberations of the Revolution and, say, *Parisina* are either too obvious, too familiar to warrant repetition or too tenuous to be meaningful. Of course, the fact that operatic stages from Paris to Naples shone with the pomp of Medieval and Renaissance courts relates to post-Napoleonic historical consciousness, but it is difficult to isolate which authors' voices may disclose some truth about Donizetti, which sources will prevent us from merely hearing historicist operas as the sounding board of their age.

Nor is the immensity of this literature the only obstacle. In confronting the boundless roster of canonicity—to the aforementioned Goethe and Schiller, Koselleck and Lukács, we easily could (and perhaps dutifully should) add the *Geistesgeschichte* encompassing Herder, Kant, and Hegel; Carlyle and Macaulay; Michelet, Nietzsche, or Collingwood—a digression into more general theories of historicism pulls the discussion of Donizetti well north of the Alps. Both the landmark histories of the early nineteenth century and more recent metahistorical reflections are predominantly in English, French, or German. Leveraging the discourse orbiting London, Paris, or Vienna may not necessarily help to decipher the motives of pettifogging critics reading their prefaces in Florence and Milan. Bann, like many other Anglo-American writers of metahistories such as Hayden White, has little to say about the work of Italian historians, about how Carlo Botta, Lazzarotti Papi, Cesare Balbo, or Carlo Troya might compare to, say, the competing paradigms of Leopold von Ranke or Prosper de Barante.

Italy's absence from these surveys should not surprise us, for even Benedetto Croce—whose *Storia della storiografia italiana nel secolo decimonono* (1914–15) was written largely in response to the paucity of Italian writers in previous studies of historiography—candidly acknowledged Italian writers' indebtedness to foreign historians whose work poured over the Alps in the first decades of the nineteenth

²⁵ Peter Fritzsche, *Stranded in the Present: Modern Time and the Melancholy of History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 16.

²⁶ Bann, *Romanticism and the Rise of History*, 7.

century.²⁷ Croce opens his study with Gino Capponi's 1819 lament about the lack of any satisfactory Italian history writing to date compared to the advances made in England and Germany.²⁸ But while the 1820s and 1830s witnessed a proliferation of new archives and the wide circulation and publication of historical documents, many Italian histories were still primarily regional, their reach consequently narrow.

It would be a mistake to dive too hastily into the great Italian histories of the century, into the work of Botta or Troya, even the great Vico from the previous age, and therefore to conflate professional history writing (Italian or otherwise) with historicist works of art such as paintings, novels, or operas, which operated under a markedly different set of rules. According to one Italian critic, the fact that the domains of history and fiction had drifted so far apart contributed to the impoverished state of much early nineteenth-century Italian literature. Novelists, in order to delight, invent too freely, too fantastically and therefore, he insisted, either confuse or disgust their readers with rank improbabilities. Conversely historians, in the pursuit of truth, too often dispense with literary eloquence and therefore bore readers far more than instruct them. "Perhaps one day," he hoped, "our beautiful language will boast novels with more of the verisimilitude of history and histories with more of the delights of novels!"²⁹

We should direct our attention, then, not toward history but toward the historical novel, that upstart genre whose blending of fact and fiction, whose proliferation of detailed descriptions of costume and crusade mingled with hearsay and melodrama, caused so many to treat it with distrust. Generic confusion was inevitable when authors arrayed novels with all the accoutrements of the professional historian such as footnotes, prefaces, and other paratexts. As sundry literary scholars have observed, such (pseudo)historical scaffolding lent the historical novel a patina of authenticity and modeled reading for factual content in ways that expanded the boundaries of literature to include much of the terrain previously reserved for historiography.³⁰ Göran Blix, for one, has called this an era of "hybrid poetic cocktails" that blended "high and low, abstract and concrete, rhetoric and reality."³¹ Critics of the historical novel—both in Italy and elsewhere—viewed these gestures with suspicion and prophesied the dangers of failing to differentiate clearly between invention and historical truth. Carlo Varese ended his essay on the affinities between Walter Scott and Rossini—which will be discussed at length in Chapter 3—by putting the historical novel on trial in a sort of literary

²⁷ Benedetto Croce, *Storia della storiografia italiana* (Bari: Gius. Laterza e figli, 1947), 1–20. Carlo Troya, for example, positioned his work as part of a larger European enthusiasm when, in an 1829 letter to his mother, he wrote, "Voi non potete credere quanto in Italia ed in Francia ed in Germania sieno venute in onore queste meditazioni storiche: l'argomento del mio libro sarà dunque un argomento di moda."

²⁸ Croce, *Storia della storiografia italiana*, 2.

²⁹ See the article "Sui romanzi" in *Teatri, Art e Letteratura* 18 (August 5, 1824): 152.

³⁰ A recent overview of these arguments can be found in Anne H. Stevens, "Learning to Read the Past in the Early Historical Novel" in Nicolas Parsons and Kate Mitchell, eds., *Reading Historical Fiction* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 19–32.

³¹ Blix, *From Paris to Pompeii: French Romanticism and the Cultural Politics of Archaeology* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 40.

inquisition. The charges levied against the novel are familiar here, with historical fiction standing accused of corrupting women and children, who, lacking the discerning intellect of educated men, are more likely to believe the fantastical inventions of literature.³²

Given that Romani forthrightly repudiated claims to authenticity in *Parisina* and *Lucrezia Borgia*, eschewed the characteristic gestures of the historian, charges that an opera libretto might similarly confuse or morally corrupt an audience may appear decidedly overblown on the part of Florentine critics. Not all librettists sought to extricate themselves from these debates by denying their claim to historical truth, however. Operatic paratexts were not simply tallies of librettists' excuses or obsequious dedications, for many libretti featured overtly historicist material including source bibliographies, extended descriptions of foreign geographies, anthropological footnotes, literary quotations and epigrams, and extended historical introductions, all of which invited readers—for such material, never sounding from the stage, could only have been read—to invest the action onstage with an aura of historical authenticity. One could take Bartolomeo Merelli's libretto for Mayr's *Alfredo il Grande* (1818) as paradigmatic of the early nineteenth-century historicist libretto, prefaced as it is by extensive "notizie storiche" that include footnoted citations of various authors including Albrecht von Haller and David Hume, whose *History of England* was in the process of being published in Italian translation. Anthropological footnotes within the drama proper offer explanations of Nordic mythology, Ossian, and general features of bardic poetry, notes that Andrea Leone Tottola may have emulated in his own depiction of Alfred the Great for Donizetti (which features similar citations). Such historical trifles are scattered throughout early nineteenth-century libretti, here defining a neologism, there debating the location of a Roman city long buried beneath the sands.³³

Jacopo Ferretti—Donizetti's other poet in 1833—ranks among the bolder defenders of historical truth. His 1824 libretto for *Gli amici di Siracusa* contains a bibliography of classical histories, while his 1830 *L'eroina di Messico* cites Antonio de Solís's *History of the Conquest of Mexico* to underpin the opera's dramatization of a relationship between Hernando Cortes and a Mexican woman. For a subject as contested as the life of Torquato Tasso, Ferretti similarly had little choice but to engage with contemporary historical debates. He opened his lengthy preface by acknowledging that

The biography of the Italian Virgil is wrapped in a fog so arcane that it largely resembles the form of a novel. Goldoni, Goethe, Duval, Tosini, and not long ago Professor Rosini put on stage the story of that venerable prisoner now making use

³² See Varese, "Di Rossini e di Walter Scott messi a confronto come genii di indole identica" in his *Preziosa di Sanluri* (Milan: Stella e Figli, 1832).

³³ Francesco Morlacchi's *Boadicea* is set in Camaloduno (Lat. Camulodunum). Its location was disputed, and the librettist, Giovanni Battista Bordese, included a footnote to acknowledge that "several authors believe it to be near the present-day city of Colchester in Essex, and others assume it is actually near Maldon, in the same county" ("Diversi autori credono che fosse ove è oggi Colchester nella Contea di Essex, ed altri suppongono che sia l'attuale Maldon, nella stessa Contea"). See *Boadicea* (Naples: Flautina, 1818), 4.

of historical monuments, of the traditions that were found most favorable to color their design, and of the recent unexpected discovery of unpublished writings by the unfortunate [Tasso], which for so long had been ignored, or neglected, or buried to scholarship. It grieves me not to have been able to consult a scenic work of note on this issue, about which disinterested judges have spoken to me with the greatest praise.³⁴

Ferretti then presented an extensive list of contested points about Tasso's life depicted in his *melodramma*, after which he concluded that "everything is historical" ("è tutto Storico").³⁵ Within the text of the opera itself, Ferretti also included several quotations from Tasso, printed in italics so as to be easily recognizable by his readers. Who better to authenticate details from Tasso's life than Tasso himself?

Critics may have pounced on Romani's historical negligence, but Ferretti's bibliographic precision was greeted with applause.³⁶ The writer for the Roman *Rivista teatrale* extolled the libretto's "sustained and ever increasing interest," an interest undoubtedly attributable to its clarity and basis in "historical truths."³⁷ Another commentator began his review by commending Ferretti for his pluck in intervening in a yet unsettled historical debate:

Audacious argument, and one of no small importance, because many talented people have already distinguished themselves with it, and because erudite quarrels are still burning concerning the mysterious reason for the imprisonment of Torquato.³⁸

Ferretti's libretto for *Torquato Tasso* and its reception are thus set into stark relief by the unfavorable responses to Romani, and because their respective historicist posturing could not be more different, it raises the question of whether the line

³⁴ "La biografia dell'Italiano Virgilio è sparsa di alcune nebbie così arcane, che in gran parte assimigliar la fanno ad un romanzo. Goldoni, Goethe, Duval, Tosini, e non ha guari il Professor Rosini posero in scena le vicende di quel venerando prigioniero ora avvalendosi de' monumenti storici, ora delle tradizioni che più favorevoli rinvennero a colorire il loro disegno, ora delle recenti inattese scoperte d' inediti scritti usciti di mano a quello sventurato, e per lunga stagione o ignorati, o negletti, o a bello studio sepolti. Duolmi non aver potuto consultare un lavoro scenico del Nota su questo tema, di cui non sospetti giudici mi hanno favellato con somma lode." *Torquato Tasso* (Rome: Puccinelli, 1833), 3.

³⁵ That Ferretti rejected the idea of invention, eschewed anything that whiffed of the Seine, is hardly surprising; his vision for the Italian opera libretto—detailed partially in his *Alcune pagine della mia vita* (drafted for the Roman Accademia Tiberina in 1835)—encouraged Italian librettists to reject the moral excesses of the French brand of Romanticism and instead to blend elements of post-Metastasian classical melodrama with the events and settings of a particularly medieval cast. For a reproduction and commentary on Ferretti's autobiography, see Francesco Paolo Russo, "[Ferretti's] *Alcune pagine della mia vita delle vicende della poesia melodrammatica in Roma*" in *Recercare* 8 (1996), 157–76; 178–94.

³⁶ In addition to his warm reception in the press, Ferretti unusually received several curtain calls of his own at the premiere.

³⁷ *Rivista teatrale* (October 15, 1833): 7.

³⁸ "Ardito argomento, e di peso non lieve, perché molti e valenti già trattandolo vi si erano distinti, e perché ardono ancora erudite quistioni sul misteriosi motivo della prigionia di Torquato." *Notizie del Giorno* 37 (September 12, 1833): 4.

separating a historicist work of art from a pale imitation is the same line that separates a footnote from the main body of the text. To understand Donizetti's historicism, then, perhaps involves taking seriously the historicist gestures made by libretti. It involves speculating on how reading footnotes and prefaces—the patterns of engagement with historicist works of art instilled by the reading of historical novels—may have shaped the consumption of opera.

*

The conventions of reading historical fiction are intimately tied to its reception, which, as we have already seen, hinged on negotiating between history and invention. The problems this created for the reader were discussed by Italy's greatest exponent of the historical novel in some detail. In his essay *Del romanzo storico*—began shortly after the publication of *I promessi sposi*—Alessandro Manzoni identified two strains of criticism that plagued the historical novel in Italy around 1830. On the one hand, he observed, too often “fact is not clearly distinguished from invention,” which troublingly inhibits the work from providing “a faithful representation of history.” On the other hand, in some novels “the author does plainly distinguish factual truth from invention” and thereby obliterates the “unity that is the vital condition of this or any other work of art.”³⁹ Manzoni had particularly harsh words for the kind of historicizing gestures that frequently appeared both in novels and opera libretti. “For if,” he writes,

while enjoying the apparent poetic invention, the reader were approached and told, “You know, that is an actual fact, taken from a specific document,” the poor man would be brought down with a thud from the poetic skies onto the field of history.⁴⁰

Manzoni's response to the genre's detractors was unsettlingly sardonic: “How to answer these critics? To tell the truth, they are probably right.” Importantly, however, he averred that neither faction had much to offer when it came to the phenomenology of reading historical fiction; for actual readers, he insisted, are undoubtedly aware before they pick up a book that the narrative will contain “things that occurred and things that have been invented, two different objects of two different, fully contrary, sorts of beliefs.”⁴¹ Writing on Scott's novels, Andrew Lincoln has similarly observed how the “incorporation of ‘history’ into the novel involves the assimilation of heterogeneous materials that continually flow into each other but evoke alternative kinds of reading.”⁴² Manzoni assumes his readers are mature enough to cope with these alternative kinds of reading, trusting in their attention and discrimination with a generosity seldom afforded readers by skeptics of historical fiction. It is easy to imagine, then, that footnotes and prefaces within operatic contexts, rather than being merely superficial gestures toward some kind of historical authenticity, made similar demands on spectators, announcing the

³⁹ Alessandro Manzoni, *Del romanzo storico*, trans. Sandra Bermann (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984), 63–65.

⁴⁰ Manzoni, *On the Historical Novel*, 70.

⁴¹ Manzoni, *On the Historical Novel*, 70.

⁴² Andrew Lincoln, *Walter Scott and Modernity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 18.

complicated, inherently flawed poetics of historico-dramatic representation and asking for the reader's attentive patience to decipher the competing "poetic" and "historical" registers.

That would be the ideal, at least, though Manzoni doubted that these registers could successfully commingle in a novel, as he revealed in *I promessi sposi*, a work that conspicuously rends the writing of history from the act of narration. Some chapters, such as those that chronicle the circumstances that led to the plague arriving in Italy, could easily be extracted as independent historical essays in which, unsurprisingly, Manzoni-cum-historian makes his sources explicit and confesses that "to tell the truth, our object in relating this story is not only to set the stage for our characters, but also to give an adequate picture—to the best of our ability and within the limits of our space—of a period in our country's history which, although famous enough in a general way, is very little known in detail."⁴³ Manzoni was unique among historical novelists for his separation of history and narrative, whereas in historical opera the separation was reified in the form: questions of accuracy were confined to the prefaces, the stage action and music of the operas themselves could embellish on the historical record without constraint.

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Donizetti's historicism in 1833—or at least his librettists' historicism—then appears to fall into two categories. The Ferrarese operas may all share similar subject material, confine themselves to a brief period of Italy's long history, and portray the same city, the same family, the same castle, the same dungeons that enchanted Byron, but if a librettist failed to buttress his poem with historical truths then he faced a hostile press. Invention, even if done innocently for the expediency of the drama, was the greatest crime of the historical novel, and Ferretti, acknowledging the contemporary debate, successfully averted such criticism.

Whatever Milanese critics may have written about *Lucrezia Borgia*, Victor Hugo was hardly unmindful of these debates and throughout his work assiduously accounted for the discrepancies between invention and reality. In his influential 1827 *Preface to Cromwell*, for example, he insisted on

the impassable limit [that] separates reality according to art from reality according to nature. It is careless to confuse them as some ill-informed partisans of *romanticism* do. Truth in art cannot possibly be, as several writers have claimed, *absolute* reality.

This passage precedes the famous appeal for local color, which, rather than merely gilding the surface, should instead find itself "in the very heart of the work, whence

⁴³ *The Betrothed*, trans. Bruce Penman (London: Penguin Books, 1972), 564. It is worth noting that not all of those in Donizetti's circle found Manzoni's work compelling. While many in Italy saw in Manzoni a national literary figure on par with Scott, Romani dismissed any comparison between the two authors in a biting review of *I promessi sposi* for *La vespa* in 1827. Romani was particularly displeased that Manzoni had set his novel during the Spanish occupation of Milan, which was, according to him, an embarrassing period in Italian history that should remain buried in the past. And unlike Scott, whose protagonists were usually at least middling aristocrats, Manzoni, to Romani's ire, placed two peasants at the center of his work.

it spreads itself, naturally, evenly, and, so to speak, into every corner of the drama, as the sap ascends from the root to the tree's topmost leaf." In a similar vein he wrote to his editor, shortly before the publication of *Notre-Dame de Paris*, to inform him that "the book has no historical claim. Moreover this is not what matters in the book. If it has merit, it is to be a work of imagination, whimsy and fancy,"⁴⁴ According to Hugo, popular fables were as useful to the poet as actual history; what frustrated critics about his *Lucrece Borgia* was not that it necessarily deviated from history (particularly the dubious reports about incest), but rather that in his efforts to create dramatically convincing characters he violated the rules of the theater by uniting the tragic and the grotesque.⁴⁵

Hugo's vision is distinctively French, following as it does the work of Prosper de Barante, whose 1824 *Histoire des Ducs de Bourgogne* had foregrounded the use of narrative and actively suppressed the critical intervention (or "discourse" as Roland Barthes once had it) of the historian.⁴⁶ Barante's conspicuously literary understanding of history stemmed from a belief in the "impartiality of the imagination" and relied on the historian's ability to conjure elaborate scenographic representations of the past that would engage a readers' recollections of a more recent historical period.⁴⁷ It was after all Quintilian, Barante reminds us, who noted that "the purpose of writing is to narrate and not to prove" ("scribitur ad narrandum, non ad probandum").⁴⁸

If we believe Hugo and Barante and momentarily accept that invention and historical color are of greater consequence than intimacy with matters of fact, then we can only reiterate the praise that posterity has heaped upon the work of Donizetti and Romani. Such praise is all the easier to give considering that early critics of *Parisina*, *Torquato Tasso*, and *Lucrezia Borgia* offered, like many early nineteenth-century Italian opera critics, few details about how music might participate in these historicist projects. The score for *Lucrezia Borgia* positively bleeds local color, from its evocative prelude to its rollicking depiction of Venetian debauchery. The principal tenor, Gennaro, reveals his biography in the prologue to a lilting folk song recalling his sun-kissed Neapolitan youth ("Di pescatore ignobile"), while Donizetti robes the nefarious Duke with a courtly dance topos to highlight his duplicity in the first act trio ("Della Duchessa ai prieghi"). Anticipating *Rigoletto*, choruses of scuttling conspirators define the twilit Ferrara scenes, while Romani revived a Renaissance poetic form with the *ballata* in Act II. Any number from this partial list might be taken as representative of Hugolian realism—Friedrich Lippmann hears such moments, such "lurid melodies"

⁴⁴ See Mariangela Miotti, "La Lucrece Borgia di Victor Hugo" in Michele Bordin and Paolo Trovato, eds., *Lucrezia Borgia: Storia e mito* (Florence: Olschki, 2006), 255–68. Miotti incorrectly identifies this quote as appearing in the preface to *Notre Dame de Paris*.

⁴⁵ Miotti, "La Lucrece Borgia di Victor Hugo."

⁴⁶ Roland Barthes, "The discourse of history" (1967), trans. Stephen Bann in E.S. Schaffer, ed., *Comparative Criticism: A Yearbook* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 3–20.

⁴⁷ Bann, *Romanticism and the Rise of History*, 18–22.

⁴⁸ Barante's use of Quintilian as the epigraph for his history is discussed in Bann, *Romanticism and the Rise of History*, 21.

(“reißerische Melodien”), as a kind of verismo *avant la lettre*, a hallmark of Donizetti’s style—but the most striking instance occurs late in the second act, when offstage bells and ominous chants interrupt the reveling of Lucrezia Borgia’s enemies to portend their collective poisoning.⁴⁹

Donizetti here crams all the hallmarks of the musical gothic into the space of a few bars, and through some subtle harmonic maneuvering also manages to elevate the moment above mere kitsch. When the single toll of the bell suspends Orsini’s effervescent *brindisi* (“Il segreto per esser felice”), the offstage voice follows with a syllabic declamation of the prophetic maxim, “the joy of the profane is as fleeting as smoke” (“la gioja de’ profani è un fumo passagier”). What should be sinister, however, is deceptively warmed by a feint to the flat submediant over a chorale-like accompaniment: it seems even Lucrezia Borgia’s henchmen are capable of putting on a mask. But the peal of the bell continues, and soon the serene A-flat slips into the C minor sonority that will shroud the ensuing carnage (see Example 1.1).

Donizetti exploits a similar effect in the final scene of *Parisina*, when distant voices intone the requiem prayers for the heroine’s recently murdered lover. The atmosphere is once again laden with unmistakably gothic resonances, from the solemn horn chorale that introduces many an imprisoned *bel canto* noblewoman, to the funeral march that disrupts the heroine’s pellucid invocation of heaven (“Ciel, sei tu che in tal momento”). It is worth noting that the chorus in this opera, as well as in analogous moments in *Lucrezia Borgia*, is often the most explicit conveyor of local color. All the characters of a medieval tapestry are unfurled in the score, from these hooded monks accompanying Parisina in her chambers to the ladies and knights, crested and plumed, that drift on and off stage to comment on courtly intrigue. Each opera militates against these effects sounding as unmoored conventions by tethering many scenes to local geography. Both libretti feature characters conspicuously remarking on their location, the river Pò serving as a synecdoche for Renaissance Ferrara. The *stretta* of Parisina’s first-act finale, for example, is launched by a chorus of rowers on the Pò who disrupt the introspective quartet with their rustic drones and jaunty diatonic melody to announce the impending festivities.⁵⁰

In the face of the kaleidoscope of effects described above, it is hard not to be drawn into the world of Donizetti’s elaborate costume dramas, whose historicizing soundtracks were originally amplified by the other “systems” at play in any opera production. Even though one critic described Henriette Méric-Lalande’s original costume for Lucrezia Borgia as a “true caricature,” a “patchwork of incongruences,” and a “bastard child of the ancient Italian and French,” we know that nineteenth-century sets and costumes also contributed significantly to the construction of historical worlds behind the proscenium, with some libretti even insisting that sets

⁴⁹ See Friedrich Lippmann, “Donizetti und Bellini: Ein Beitrag zur Interpretation von Donizettis Stil,” *Studi musicali* 4 (1975): 193–243.

⁵⁰ Similarly, the masked revelers in Lucrezia Borgia’s Venetian prologue wonder if they “shall ever find such pleasure by the Pò” (“tali avrem mai, tali delizie in riva al Pò”).

Largo.
VOCE. di dentro.

Ten.
Bas.
La

Largo.

Tocca di Campana.
fp

gio - ja de' pro - fa - ni è un fu - mo pas - sag - gier.
gio - ja de' pro - fa - ni è un fu - mo pas - sag - gier.

fp

Example 1.1: Donizetti, *Lucrezia Borgia*, from Act II, no. 8 Pezzo concertato

were modeled on real-life locales.⁵¹ Anton Reicha agreed with this integrated approach to *couleur locale* and even warned in his 1835 *Art du compositeur dramatique* against the musical imitation of national styles, the depiction of local customs, religion, habits, and clothing being rather “the work of the poet, the set-designer, the actors, and the costume-designer.”⁵²

⁵¹ See again Pezzi’s review in the *Gazzetta Privilegiata di Milano* (December 28, 1833): “Quanto ai vestimenti, essi offerivano un bastardume fra l’antico italiano ed il francese; sopra tutto le vesti della Lalande erano una vera caricatura e raffazzonate con tanta incongruenza, che speriamo veder cessare in appresso.” A footnote to a Neapolitan production of Sampieri’s *Valmiro e Zaida* asserts that the set “è simile al vero edifizio esistente in Ispagna” (Naples: Flautina, 1821), 7. Such scenographic realism was particularly important at the Paris Opéra, where set designers often conducted careful research; for an overview of historical realism at the Opéra, see Simon Williams, “The spectacle of the past in grand opera” in David Charlton, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Grand Opera* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 58–75.

⁵² Anton Reicha, *Art du compositeur dramatique*, trans. Carl Czerny as *Der Kunst der dramatischen Composition* (Vienna: Diabelli, 1835), 274.

Yet anyone who has read the opening pages of Georg Lukács's *The Historical Novel* knows that not all historicist signals are created equal, even (or perhaps especially) those moments of ostentatious color, flashes of exoticism, sudden bursts of sublime, fully-diminished gothic horror that leap from the pages of so many *ottocento* scores. However they might strike the reader or spectator, such moments are only superficially historical, claimed Lukács, who was skeptical about conflating the gothic conventions that dominated the late eighteenth century with the markedly different techniques for portraying the past in the nineteenth-century historical novel exemplified by Scott. Lukács clearly articulated this distinction by noting that

What is lacking in the so-called historical novel before Sir Walter Scott is precisely the specifically historical, that is, derivation of the individuality of characters from the historical peculiarity of their age. . . . The contemporary world is portrayed with unusual plasticity and truth-to-life, but is accepted naïvely as something given: whence and how it has developed have not yet become problems for the writer.⁵³

History in the novel prior to Walter Scott is mere cardboard scenery, Lukács argued, an exotic pageant of ruined castles à la Otranto and Udolpho. Novelists may have selected the past as their setting, but there was no effort to show that people's behavior two centuries ago differed from their contemporaries. Scott's achievement, then, was his use of blank or "mediocre" heroes—from Edward Waverley to Frank Osbaldistone to Wilfred of Ivanhoe—who focalize for the reader the clash of collective forces as their characters are formed from without by the historical events in which they participate only reluctantly.

When in 1937 Lukács praised Scott as the inventor of the "classical form" of the historical novel, he was writing against a critical tradition that had dismissed the Wizard of the North as a disreputable national myth maker who tartanized the Highlands and indiscriminately plundered the past in the service of romance. It is this version of Scott that has long been assumed to have influenced the *ottocento* libretto, at least according to David Kimbell, who insists that Scott "provided Italian opera with some kind of model for dramatic themes in which were blended history...and bizarre and terrible happenings, which attacked the nerves and emotions of the spectator as much as they spoke to the mind."⁵⁴ If only a handful of operas in Donizetti's long list of historical works—running from *Zoraida di Granata* to *Caterina Cornaro*—were based on Scott's work directly, they nonetheless exploit the "tragic and sanguinary love-triangle in a pseudo-historical setting" to which readers had grown accustomed by repeated exposure to historical fiction.⁵⁵ Adrian Lyttelton recognizes a similar disregard for the uniqueness of Scott's achievement by early nineteenth-century Italians, noting that many ostensibly historicist works, while they may carry some political valence, may strive to capture the particularities of ancient habit and dress, in fact simply accorded with public

⁵³ Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, 19.

⁵⁴ David Kimbell, *Italian Opera* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 408.

⁵⁵ Kimbell, *Italian Opera*, 409.

taste. Libretti needed to entertain as well as instruct, and “this meant adhering to the new romantic conventions of plot and situation which could be as constraining in their own way as the old classical formulas.”⁵⁶

Lukács’s argument—that in the specifically historical character of its work one generation (or even one author) might supplant the capricious freedom of an earlier one—was hardly original, existing, at least according to Vico, already at the time of Thucydides, whose rigorous historicism revised the Homeric myth-making of Herodotus.⁵⁷ Its application to early nineteenth-century Italian opera—and even music more generally—raises an important question: though many of Donizetti’s operas do trade in gothic conventions, what differentiates a *specifically* historical operatic gesture—that is, one that either produces or clearly demonstrates an awareness of the distinctiveness of a historical age—from merely a naive appropriation of the past?⁵⁸

Equipped with an understanding of early nineteenth-century attitudes toward history and invention in opera, it would be easy to run through a list of dramatic scenarios to parse which ones might count as specifically historical, might lay claim to Manzoni’s “poetic” or “historical” registers. It might also be possible to decide which scenes align with competing historiographical camps, which ones may or may not have pleased critics. The addition of music, however, makes the decoding of Donizetti’s historicism considerably more difficult. To mention just two of the many obstacles to any broad theory of operatic historicism, operas on historical topics did not necessarily animate their subject matter with local—or historical—color in the score; and the archaicism of a chorale melody can send decidedly different messages about history depending on whether it features in an opera, a symphony, or a string quartet. The “Ein’ feste Burg” of *Les Huguenots* is hardly the same “Ein’ feste Burg” of the “Reformation” symphony, and when comparing techniques of musico-historical consciousness across national and generic lines, it is wise to heed Alexander Rehding’s injunction against “stylistic taxonomies” that obscure how such effects were originally used.⁵⁹ What might sound as historical or monumental at the Gewandhaus would not necessarily have the same effect at La Scala.⁶⁰

Even if the discussion of musical historicism were limited to one national school of composition, one composer, or even one opera, it likely to come apart when we

⁵⁶ Adrian Lyttelton, “Creating a National Past: History, Myth and Image in the Risorgimento” in Albert Ascoli and Krystyna von Henneberg, eds., *Making and Remaking Italy: The Cultivation of National Identity around the Risorgimento* (London: Bloomsbury, 2001), 27–74.

⁵⁷ See the third edition of the *New Science* (1744), trans. David Marsh (London: Penguin Books, 2001), 6

⁵⁸ Roger Parker and Carolyn Abbate, for example, hear nothing specifically historical about *Parisina*; for them the use of the Middle Ages is “standard-issue.”

⁵⁹ Alexander Rehding, *Music and Monumentality: Commemoration and Wonderment in Nineteenth-Century Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 9.

⁶⁰ Francesca Vella makes this argument for notions of Italian operatic “monumentality,” noting the decidedly “anti-monumental” character of works such as Cimarosa’s *Il matrimonio segreto* while advocating an “historically imbued understanding” of the topic. See her “Verdi’s Don Carlo as Monument,” *Cambridge Opera Journal* 25, no. 1 (March 2013): 93.

consider the importance afforded to the *specifically* historical, for historicism is often understood as presaging other nineteenth-century artistic and sociopolitical movements. New conceptions of historical time are not only naturally twinned with the post-Revolutionary thrust toward modernity—which, according to many commentators, found expression in the teleological vitality of Beethoven’s heroic style—but also with nationalist movements that popularized folk mythology and other tales of the glorious past to mobilize and unite otherwise disparate and often linguistically estranged peoples.⁶¹ Much has been made, for example, of Alberto Mario Banti’s notion of a Risorgimento canon that for years was priming its readers for the barricades.⁶² According to Banti, the proliferation of historical works in the early nineteenth century—especially those trafficking in “fatti reali” as opposed to “invenzioni simboliche”—was a critical part of this canon and thus prefigured the awakening of the nation.⁶³ But if *couleur locale* is the most recognizable form of historical consciousness, can these fissures in Donizetti’s scores similarly carry the burden of prefiguring a national consciousness? Consider, for example, the *banda* that plays during the *tempo di mezzo* of Parisina’s entrance aria to announce a jousting tournament soon to begin in Ferrara (see Example 1.2). On the surface this passage has all the hallmarks of local color: diegetic music depicting the pageantry of historical ritual tied to a specific place. Yet it is hard to imagine that this indistinctive fairground music oscillating between tonic and dominant could have awakened a dormant national spirit.⁶⁴

This is a straw man, to be sure, and recent work on Beethoven’s political music has taught us that even though traditional (that is, late nineteenth-century German) aesthetic standards may find little merit in such music, that does not render it incapable of carrying a political valence.⁶⁵ Nevertheless, to praise *couleur locale* as an exceptional, experimental technique prefiguring musical realism ignores the fact that almost all of Donizetti’s operas contain such effects. At its premiere, *Rosmonda d’Inghilterra*, the opera that follows *Lucrezia Borgia* in Donizetti’s catalogue, was considered dramaturgically and musically weak by reviewers. Even while praising one moment, William Ashbrook agrees with these historical listeners and observes that this is an opera in which “the overall impression is ultimately that of the working out of predictable formulas rather than of true distinction.”⁶⁶ Yet, even in

⁶¹ Prominent discussions of Beethoven’s historicism can be found in Reinhold Brinkmann, “In the Time of the *Eroica*” in Scott Burnham and Michael P. Steinberg, eds., *Beethoven and His World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); Scott Burnham, *Beethoven Hero* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); and Stephen Rumph, *Beethoven After Napoleon* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

⁶² See the discussion of Banti in Axel Körner and Lucy Riall, eds., “Alberto Banti’s Interpretation of Risorgimento Nationalism: A Debate,” *Nations and Nationalism* 15, no. 3 (July 2009): 396–460.

⁶³ See *La nazione del risorgimento* (Turin: Einaudi, 2000), 7.

⁶⁴ A summary of the arguments for—and the evidence against—hearing Verdi’s music as political can be found in Mary Ann Smart, “Magical Thinking: Reason and Emotion in some recent literature on Verdi and politics,” *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 17, no. 4 (2012): 437–47.

⁶⁵ Nicholas Mathew, *Political Beethoven* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

⁶⁶ William Ashbrook, *Donizetti and His Operas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 357.

Al - le gio - stre e tor -

Al - le gio - stre e tor -

(Banda)

p

Banda e Orch.

nei che pe - pa - ra e - sul - tan - te è de - vo - ta Fer - ra - ra,

nei che pe - pa - ra e - sul - tan - te è de - vo - ta Fer - ra - ra,

Example 1.2: Donizetti, *Parisina*, from Act I, no. 3 Cavatina Parisina

this opera evidently encumbered by convention, Donizetti uses buckets of local color in the opening chorus, with its muted horns resounding across the grounds of Woodstock Castle. Perhaps such effects do not signal a unique, specifically historical register, and furthermore if these effects were not in *Rosmonda*, there is no reason to assume that historical consciousness in music should depend on explicitly evoking the past at all. Scott's recommendation in the dedicatory epistle to *Ivanhoe*—that “the subject assumed should be, as it were, translated in the manners, as well as the language, of the age we live in”—pressures us to expand our understanding of the musical past in Italian opera to moments other than the ostentatiously colorful.

*

Although the somber, extended horn obbligato that opens Act III of *Torquato Tasso* effectively portrays the poet's lonely cell with touches of the same gothic character found in *Parisina*, on the whole the opera contains far less of anything that might be described as *couleur locale* than the other operas of 1833. One explanation may lie in genre: because *Tasso* is an *opera semiseria*, the chorus is often drawn into the comic orbit of the blustering bass that is a necessary feature of this already old-

fashioned genre, forcing Donizetti to trade more evocative, atmospheric gestures for *buffo* patter. Yet *Torquato Tasso* was the only Ferrarese opera that earned anything resembling critical praise for its depiction of the past, the historicizing of the libretto proving far more persuasive than local color.⁶⁷

The story of *Torquato Tasso*'s evidently successful historicism begins with its source material. As Ferretti stated in his preface, the professional authority undergirding his libretto was Giovanni Rosini, literary savant and since 1804 professor of rhetoric at the University of Pisa; his 1832 *commedia storica* dramatizing the imprisonment of Tasso provided not only the model for Ferretti's libretto, but also for the historicist signaling of his introduction. In his *Torquato Tasso*, Rosini supplied the historicizing paratexts customary—if not by convention compulsory—in early nineteenth-century fiction and drama. But in addition to his historical *avvertimento* and footnotes, Rosini also, unusually, published a one-hundred-page companion essay expounding on “the loves of Torquato Tasso and the causes of his imprisonment.”⁶⁸ To understand Rosini's motivations in this essay involves retracing the long history of biographical writings on Tasso and understanding the contested points of his life that remained unsettled in 1833.

It begins with Giambatista Manso's *Vita di Torquato Tasso*—first published in 1619—which, considering that the author knew Tasso personally, was long considered the only biography necessary. Manso was the first to spread the rumor that Tasso was in love with Alfonso II's sister, Eleonora d'Este (a love that Tasso felt compelled to conceal), though he also suggested that Tasso may have sheltered similar feelings for two other Eleonoras: la contessa Sanvitale (Scandiano) and one of the handmaidens of Eleonora d'Este, who, as coincidence would have it, also happened to be named Eleonora. The basic sketch of Tasso's final years follows from the discussion of his loves, as Manso assumed that it was the agonies of an unrequited and forbidden attachment that precipitated much of the poet's wildly unpredictable behavior and eventually landed him in Santa Anna. Although Manso did not have any evidence for the relationship(s) other than general hearsay, he insisted that references to Leonora could be found in Tasso's poetry (and he provided several pages of examples). But while such references do exist—Tasso did dedicate several poems to Leonora d'Este when he was working in Ferrara—these poems would not be challenged as proof of their affair for another century and a half.

When Goldoni published his *Torquato Tasso* in 1757 (a play that, given its numerous reprints in the early nineteenth century, was reasonably well known in 1833), he dramatized the events leading to Tasso's madness and imprisonment more or less as they had been presented by Manso. In his preface, Goldoni guarded against incredulous readers who might doubt the existence of *three* Leonoras by

⁶⁷ On Gothic conventions in early nineteenth-century Italian opera and Donizetti's at times apparent indifference to them, see Melina Esse, “Donizetti's Gothic Resurrections,” *19th-Century Music* 33, no. 2 (Fall 2009): 81–109.

⁶⁸ Giovanni Rosini, *Saggio sugli amori di Torquato Tasso e sulle cause della sua prigionia* (Pisa: Niccolò Capurro, 1832).

citing entries in recent biographical dictionaries. He did not mention Manso by name, however, perhaps because Manso's biography had been last printed in the 1670s and would not resurface in new editions until the explosion of interest in Tasso in the nineteenth century led to its republication in 1825, 1830, and 1832. Goldoni was also wary about including comedic elements in his depiction of Tasso (such as a few scenes that lampoon his hypochondria), but in language that anticipates Hugo he argued that mixing of high and low is necessary for the truthful depiction of historical characters.

Goldoni insisted that Tasso be shown in the process of artistic creation, and he exploited a plot device that would later find its way into Ferretti's libretto: the play opens with Tasso scribbling lines of poetry that betray his love for Leonora, the discovery of which will drive the rest of the drama (and be the source of some confusion, especially considering the number of Leonoras wandering the court at Ferrara). Crucial to understanding the historicizing gestures of Donizetti's opera is determining which poem, exactly, Tasso is depicted as writing. Goldoni claimed that he himself cast about in Tasso's works to find one addressed to Leonora and eventually settled on the madrigal that begins "Cantava, in riva al fiume / Tirsi d'Eleonora / E rispondean le selve e l'onde—onora." Perhaps Goldoni did find this poem himself, though it is quite the coincidence that it was just this poem that Manso had cited to prove Tasso's infatuation with Leonora.

In his *Storia della letteratura italiana* of 1772 (reprinted in 1812, 1824, and 1833), Girolamo Tiraboschi was the first to question the use of Tasso's poetry to fill the gaps in his biography and argued instead for the use of contemporary documentary evidence that he had found in the ducal archives at Ferrara. Tiraboschi had little patience for speculation and at times even expressed annoyance that anyone would entertain questions unanswerable by hard historical evidence. According to Tiraboschi it was melancholy, not unrequited love, that prompted the duke to place Tasso in Santa Anna.

Pierantonia Serassi's extraordinarily detailed *La vita di Torquato Tasso* (1785/90) expanded on Tiraboschi's work, beginning with an outright attack on the rumor mongers who had dominated previous discussion of the poet's life. While Manso's biography may have much to recommend it, Serassi insisted that it was filled with many exaggerations and falsehoods and lamented that so many people had blindly followed his work in the past. Serassi saw Manso's work as especially unfortunate because Manso—considering his personal relationship with Tasso—more than anyone else had had the opportunity to tell the truth. The burden of historical truth therefore fell upon Serassi, who drew upon letters and unpublished writings he unearthed in the archives of Modena, Ferrara, and Bergamo, as well as private and public libraries in Rome. He explicitly attacked Manso's and Goldoni's use of poetry in their discussion of Tasso's relationships, though he also adopted a sycophantic tone in his praise for the Este family: how could anyone tarnish the reputation of a paragon of virtue such as Eleonora d'Este?

Among the works discussed in his preface, Ferretti does not list Serassi's biography as a source of inspiration for his libretto. Nor does he cite Giovanni Zuccala's *Della vita di Torquato Tasso* (1819), which, while praising Serassi's work,

also found his scope too wide (encompassing as it did a considerable amount of sixteenth-century history) and restricted itself to the life of the poet. With Zuccala arrives a firm denial that there were three Eleonoras at the Este court; this was, the author insisted, merely an invention of Manso and Goldoni. Zuccala also expanded on Serassi's thesis that Tasso actually had directed much of his amorous poetry to Lucrezia, the Duchess of Urbino, whose company he had enjoyed in Pisa before returning to Ferrara for the tumultuous events that led to his imprisonment.

By 1820, then, it was widely acknowledged that Tasso was not in love with Eleonora d'Este. When Manso's biography was finally reprinted in the 1825, it was admired more for its craftsmanship than for its historical content, and its editors explicitly stated that no one had yet surpassed Serassi's biography.⁶⁹ Tasso may have been imprisoned because of some slanderous outburst directed at the duke, but this outburst had little to do with Tasso's relationship with his sister. This account appears in English sources as well, though neither Donizetti nor Ferretti would have read John Black's magisterial *Life of Torquato Tasso* from 1810, in which Black regrettably rejects the storied love between Tasso and the Eleonoras. "It appears to me," writes Black, "that a tradition so early and so universal as that of the loves of Torquato and Leonora could not have existed without some foundation; and a certain satisfaction is felt at beholding the mind destroying the barriers which rank has erected, and the cold indifference of grandeur melting away before the united beams of genius and of love."

Given that by the nineteenth century historians and biographers had moved away from relying on Tasso's poetry to substantiate details of his life, Salvatore Betti's 1827 article "Due poesie di Torquato Tasso" reads as rather outdated. Betti claimed to have discovered two new poems authored by Tasso in the possession of Count Mariano Alberti, which had been authenticated by the prefect of the Vatican library, Angelo Mai. He insisted that for centuries everyone had known about Tasso's infatuation with the two Eleonoras, that from 1567 he could think of nothing but Eleonora d'Este, except when he fell in love with Eleonora Scandiano in 1576. And while Betti did acknowledge Serassi's attempt to disprove this relationship by using hitherto unpublished letters, he countered these arguments with his own newly discovered unpublished poetry, the first of which was a *quartina* written on a small paper torn in the middle: "Quando sarà che d'Eleonora mia / Possa goderne in libertade amore / Ah pietoso il destin tanto mi dia / Addio cetra, addio lauri."

Betti addressed his article to Giovanni Rosini, whose "Saggio sugli amori di Torquato Tasso" and his own dramatization of Tasso's imprisonment—the direct source for Ferretti's libretto—followed several anthologies of Tasso's writings that he had already edited. Rosini's play and Ferretti's libretto rely on the plot outline familiar from Goldoni. Tasso is seen at the start of the drama composing a poem dedicated to an Eleonora; a rival member at court steals the poetry; the scrap of paper is used as incriminating evidence against Tasso; Tasso's outburst leads to his imprisonment and the opportunity for a fine mad scene. Given that Serassi and

⁶⁹ See B. Gamba's editorial note in Manso's *Vita di Torquato Tasso* (Venice: Alvisopoli, 1825).

Zuccala had already cast doubt upon the assumed addressee of the madrigal used by Goldoni and Manso, Rosini (and subsequently Ferretti) could not use it in their dramas. Instead, they relied on this new discovery by Betti, and it is precisely around this new historical evidence—“Quando sarà che d’Eleonora mia”—that Donzetti’s opera revolves.⁷⁰

In his preface, Rosini did not mince words when it came to the importance of this discovery: to disagree with Betti and other scholars about the love affair would simply betray a crass ignorance (“un’ ignoranza crassa”). Rosini hoped to present Tasso without any embellishments, relying on what he called the poet’s simple historical truth (“nell semplice sua verità storica”); the richly contrasted facets of Tasso’s character would obviate the need to turn toward invention.⁷¹ Additionally, his view of the Ferrarese court is not refracted, in his words, through stained glass (“vetri colorati”), but rather is seen as it really was, in accordance with many testimonies and the findings of the historian. Small wonder that early reviewers commented on the opera’s position toward history, especially when the events in the opera contradict the widely accepted work of Serassi.

Yet for all the inflated rhetoric of Rosini and Betti’s work, for all that they claimed to have rewritten an important chapter in Italian history, their “discoveries” had little effect on the public debate; outside of his friend’s work in Pisa, Betti’s argument generated little interest across the peninsula. A condensed version of his article (including the poems) appeared in the *Biblioteca italiana* in 1828, but the poems themselves did not appear anywhere else again until 1831 when Rosini included them in a new edition of Tasso’s collected works. In 1832, one C. E. Muzzarelli reviewed (for the *Giornale arcadico*, no less) a series of four paintings by Filippo Agricola, in which the Roman painter depicted the greatest writers of Italian literature (Dante, Petrarch, Ariosto, and Tasso). Eleonora d’Este was depicted alongside Tasso, and Muzzarelli, with special praise for Betti and Rosini’s *saggio*, commented that few today know the truth about Tasso’s loves.

From Donizetti’s letters we know that he had read both sides of this debate with great enthusiasm, that he was familiar with the writings of Zuccala and Serassi as well as more recent work by Rosini.⁷² Judging by his preface (and the libretto

⁷⁰ While I have focused on arguments about Tasso’s relationships with the Eleonoras here, a number of prominent authors of the period published material on other aspects of Tasso’s career and reputation. Giacomo Leopardi’s “Dialogo di Torquato Tasso e del suo genio familiare,” for example, emphasizes the general weariness of existence characteristic of the *Operette morali*, and Goethe’s *Torquato Tasso* is more a meditation on poetic genius than a historical account. The poet also played an important role in the literary debates following Madame de Staël’s 1816 polemic, with writers for *Il Conciliatore* such as Ludovico di Breme and Giuseppe Nicolini citing Tasso as evidence of Italian romanticism predating anything in England or Germany.

⁷¹ Giovanni Rosini, *Torquato Tasso* (Pisa: Niccolò Capurro, 1832), v.

⁷² Donizetti wrote to Mayr on 27 May 1833 that “Da molti anni desiderava sopra sì gran poeta far qualche cosa, ed avrei voluto un Rubini per protagonista... Indovini cosa scrivo? Il Tasso. Lessi Goethe, Rosini, Goldoni, Duval, Serassi, Zuccalà e le ultime cose del Missirini; e da tanti e da tante cose alle quali aggiungo ora quelle del Sig. Colleoni ne formo un piano e da quello un’Opera.” This letter, along with the compositional genesis of the opera, is discussed in Ashbrook, *Donizetti and His Operas*, 344.

more generally), Ferretti was convinced by the evidence presented by Betti and Rosini, delighting in the frisson of historical discovery. The composer and librettist's commitment to what might be called a "bibliographic historicist register" pervades the opera, which conspicuously dramatizes the role that reading, texts, and documented truths play in forming historical consciousness. From the epigrams from Tasso's *canzone* that adorn the first pages to the chorus's insistence in the final scene that only the poet's verses will save him from the "oblivion of the years," everything announces a historicist project markedly different from the invention and color splashed across Romani's libretti. The stage directions for several scenes stipulate tables overspread with literary appurtenances: books, writing instruments, sheaves of paper, all in various states of disarray. *Torquato Tasso* not only features a scene in which the eponymous poet reads to Eleonora d'Este from the *Gerusalemme liberata*, but also at one point has the entire *dramatis personae* reflect on its place in written history. "History will write me down as a victim of love"; "My soul is innocence itself; time will prove it so"; "My name will carry on through centuries, untouched by oblivion"—these are just a few of the declarations made in the act one quintet that betray the actors' acute sense of history's temporality.⁷³

So tightly woven are literature and history in *Torquato Tasso* that it can be difficult to prise one from the other. As already noted, a consistent signifier of this historicism is Ferretti's insistence that Tasso speak using his own words, printed in italics so as to be easily recognizable by his readers.⁷⁴ This typographic innovation poses a challenge to the composer, for what might textual, or bibliographically aware, music sound like? What options are available for Donizetti to participate in a historicist venture fueled by old texts, rather than coloristic effects?

The libretto's most flamboyant markers of historicism—these direct quotations from Tasso's poetry—are set to comparatively understated music, treated as recitative or arioso, usually preceding the big lyric numbers. The longest poetic quotation appears at the beginning of Act III, which finds Tasso imprisoned—unjustly, we are meant to believe—and reciting an unusual pastiche of his writings. The voice laid bare, lyricism is confined to the orchestra in this excerpt, the expressive obbligato horn writing prompted by the pathetic situation of Tasso's incarceration. Fabrizio della Seta has suggested that this progression of style signals an evolution of the title character: early in the opera the poetic quotations show Tasso in the process of creation, composing the incriminating verses; but by the end of the opera his citations of his own work show us a man who "meditates on

⁷³ Several similar declarations are made across Goethe's representation of Tasso, a work that Nicholas Boyle reads as "a work of detached and conscious artistry" and a "grand meditation on the art of poetry" rather than an overtly historical drama. See *Goethe: The Poet and the Age* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), vol. 1, especially 606–27.

⁷⁴ "Talvolta mi è riuscito far parlare Torquato con versi tolti qua e là dal suo bellissimo, e forse non abbastanza ammirato Canzoniere, e li fo stampare in carattere corsivo . . ." See again Ferretti, *Torquato Tasso*.

his destiny and therefore speaks to himself.”⁷⁵ For the listener, however, it would be impossible to differentiate the quotations from Tasso’s poetry from any other utterance in recitative or arioso style. In other words, these bits and scraps culled from Tasso’s vast output are only recognizable because of their distinctive setting within the printed libretto; Donizetti’s music imposes no sense of a “narrating voice” at these moments.

One could counter this claim by insisting that, assuming a widespread familiarity with Tasso’s verses, many in the theater may have recalled the quotations as they heard them pronounced from the stage. Goldoni, writing in the preface to his *Torquato Tasso*, insisted that even peasants had *Gerusalemme liberata* on their lips. Yet by Ferretti’s own admission many of the extracts highlighted in his libretto were decidedly sub-canonical—he called them “beautiful, though perhaps not sufficiently admired”—and Donizetti’s heterogeneous setting of the quotations means that many of them clock by undistinguished in *secco* recitative (see Example 1.3; the quotations in this excerpt are underlined). Further, the most important excerpt—“Quando sarà che Eleonora mia”—would not have been familiar to anyone before 1827 and even then only known to those acquainted with the particulars of this historical debate.

For its lack of local color, *Torquato Tasso* may be an outlier in Donizetti’s catalogue, because its approach to historicism is so different from that employed by Verdi, implicitly the model for thinking about and listening to this repertoire. Or, perhaps the rare depiction of an author displaces traditional methods of historicism, so that capturing Tasso’s state of creative contemplation overshadowed the sanguinary tendencies of his patron’s family. Nevertheless, the overt dramatization of reading in the opera draws attention to the often invisible historicizing work of the libretto. Noteworthy in *Torquato Tasso* are not only moments of quotation, but also moments that dramatize this process of reading silently. Physical volumes of poetry are spotlighted several times, as at Eleonora’s entrance in Act I, when a virtuosic clarinet obbligato punctuated by strings presents melodic material heard nowhere else in the opera to depict her rhapsodic transports while reading *Gerusalemme liberata*. Printed books—like historicizing paratexts—are a phantom presence here, and we might consider other moments of *ottocento* opera that depend on such silent historicist gestures. The first-act duet of *Lucia di Lammermoor*, for example, features a curiously detailed anthropological footnote to explain the exotic Scottish ritual behind Lucy and Edgar’s exchange of vows, a detail that Donizetti unsurprisingly did not incorporate into his score. A question of textual or bibliographically aware music may be moot, then, so long as composers entrusted the acquisition of historical detail to the reading spectator.

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While *Torquato Tasso* may be similar to other historicist libretti that coopted the posturing of the historical novel, its historicism runs deeper than the depiction of

⁷⁵ Fabrizio della Seta, “Der Dichter spricht. . .’ La voce del poeta nel Torquato Tasso di Donizetti” in Antonio Rosato e Silvia Tatti, eds., *Scrittori in musica: i classici italiani nel melodramma tra seicento e novecento* (Rome: Bulzoni, 2016), 207–38.

TASSO
Recit.

Not - te che sten-di in - tor - no il fos-co man-to in ques-to o- scu-ro Cie-lo mentr' io di ve-ro a

mo-re av-vam - po e ge-lo e tu pie-to-sa Lu-na, che tem-pri co' bei rag-gi il mu - to or

ro-re all' om-bra del-la not-te u - mi-da e bru-na, a pian-ger ven-go o -

- ve m'in-vi-ta a - mo-re; ma l'au-ra so-la e il ven-to ri-spon-de mor-mo - ran-do al mio la-men-to.

Example 1.3: Donizetti, *Torquato Tasso*, from Act III, no. 10 Aria Torquato

an author in the moment of creativity or the presence of a few lines of poetry that needed to have been read to be identified as such. Rather, it dramatizes a particular moment in an historical debate and amplifies an argument about Tasso's life that was becoming increasingly untenable in the nineteenth century. Donizetti, following Ferretti (who was himself following Rosini), rejected *couleur locale* for this project, and the sum of all these bibliographic registers, these claims to authenticity,

perhaps earns *Torquato Tasso* a place among the *specifically* historical works of the early nineteenth century.

And yet if anything is clear from this discussion of Donizetti's historicism, it is that the definition of historicism changes depending on which authority is consulted. Critics may have been unappreciative of Romani's inventions, inattentive to Donizetti's use of *couleur locale*, suspicious of any aesthetic system that approached Hugo's romanticism, and fearful that the power of onstage immorality to corrupt might be magnified by affording it the dignity of historical subject matter. But in their vivid evocation of the past, *Parisina* and *Lucrezia Borgia* nevertheless retain the power to spark the historical imagination, while posterity has largely forgotten *Torquato Tasso*, however seriously it presents itself as a historical document. Historicism in art, it is clear, involved making a choice between atmosphere and accuracy. In opera, both are theoretically possible, even if today we are less interested in reading at the opera than were spectators in 1833. But whomever we believe, we know that historicism is not and was never a passive register: the Ferrarese operas invite the reading spectator to participate in the drama, to consider carefully the onslaught of historical signaling and invention, all the while foregrounding those links between music, literature, and our relationship to the past.

2. After Metastasio

All tongues speak of him, and the bleared sights
Are spectacl'd to see him.

Coriolanus, II. i.

We cannot imagine Metastasio's heroes, however polished their shields and speech, marching far beyond the border of 1800. Theirs is a world of southern warmth, of glittering sea and bleached earth, stark cuts of stone against eternally cloudless skies. Transported to the first decades of the nineteenth century and the routine environs of romanticism, how comic they would appear. The armies of Alexander the Great, accompanied by the trumpets and drums of baroque absolutism, stagger across the Scottish heath, disperse, and sink into some bog, their armor rusted by the mist and damp. How out of place the bejeweled Cleofide seems imprisoned in some Renaissance *palazzo*; she is far too cunning, too beguiling ever to warble a mad scene in despair.

That Pietro Trapassi (*detto* Metastasio), unrivalled master of the *seria* libretto, became "a problem both dramaturgically and aesthetically" in the first decades of the nineteenth century has long been recognized as one of the defining characteristics of the era.¹ A survey of the literature on this period dealing with why and how Metastasio became such a problem leads to two related yet distinct realms of scholarship, one attentive to the narrative of musical progress, the other to a stubbornly elusive literary movement. Seeing as the whole history of opera is nothing but a series of conventions and reforms—or so it has been said—scholars have raked over the beginning of the nineteenth century to chronicle this particular moment of rupture. For musicologists, once the scented, coiffured popinjays of Versailles had been led to the guillotine, the expulsion of Metastasians from the opera house was inevitable. The days of the castrato were in their "twilight," as one author puts it, and the tide of reforms that had led, thanks to Apostolo Zeno and Metastasio, to the rigid separation of recitative and aria was finally to give way to new musico-dramatic structures.² All the shibboleths of the nineteenth century can be found here in their infancy, with an opera such as Mozart's *La clemenza di Tito* typifying the aesthetic shifts of the age: whereas in 1791 Metastasio would have been unquestionably acknowledged as the author of the "work," Mozart (and other composers) would soon supplant the librettist as the principal creator of an operatic "text."³

But the second, and perhaps more important, narrative to be told about the early nineteenth century is far more difficult to pin down, as it concerns the troubled

¹ Emanuele Senici, "Adapted to the Modern Stage': *La clemenza di Tito* in London," *Cambridge Opera Journal* 7, no. 1 (March 1995): 1–22.

² James Q. Davies, "Veluti in speculum': The twilight of the castrato," *Cambridge Opera Journal* 17, no. 3 (November 2005): 271–301.

³ Senici, "Adapted to the Modern Stage."

business of defining Italian romanticism. Countless books, reams of essays have been written on this topic, and yet it continues to elude us. “Did it exist at all?” is the perennial question, asked, rebuffed, refuted, and complicated by Italianists. The facts are easily established, their significance, especially to music history, less so. In 1816 a Swiss authoress peers over the Alps, condemns Italian literature as insular and slavishly adherent to the most pedantic rules of antiquity, and soon a brief but bitter war is conducted in print between the classicists and the romanticists. In the ensuing decades, perhaps her advice is heeded, for translations of northern authors begin to spread across the peninsula. Although the participants in these debates seldom mention music, a glance at the titles of works composed in the 1810s and 1820s is enough to confirm that opera duly followed. It can be expedient, therefore, to attribute this change to the usual suspects—Byron, Scott, and Schiller, those international romantics whose work translated much better than, say, Wordsworth or Shelley—and note that soon even Italians developed an appetite for the gothic and the revolutionary. Looking again upon Metastasio’s heroes, how bitter they must have been to public taste fed on a diet of Byron and his imitators.

Librettists, when they encountered Metastasio’s poetry, expressed bewilderment at verses whose cold nobility seemed so far removed from the world of popular novels. “What do you want me to do with these words?” Luigi Romanelli asked in a mock address to the Cesarean poet,

Here there is no furor or despair, nor sorrowful or threatening choruses in the distance (*coups de théâtre*), phantoms, madness, witches, conspiracies, atrocious crimes, vituperations, scaffolds, and similar things. Here there is no shadow that suddenly (though without necessity, and inappropriately) appears and surprises the onlookers; here there is no woman, persecuted and frantic, who wanders in the London boroughs dying of hunger and thirst; here there is no pyre (it doesn’t matter if you cannot see it) wither a Roman proconsul lets himself be dragged by a furious priestess to be burned alive with her; here there is no volcanic explosion; here there is no one who rushes from a very high cliff; here you do not even kill a fly: what do you want me to do with these words?⁴

Why dwell on Metastasio, then, given that conditions both socio-politically and aesthetically were hostile to him? Let us leave him to the eighteenth century, the land of rococo and Arcadian make-believe, where he belongs.

⁴ “Deh! per pietà esclamerebbe il Maestro, che vuoi tu ch’ io faccia sopra queste parole? Qui non vi sono furori, disperazioni, lamentevoli o minacciosi Cori in distanza (colpi di scena), fantasmi, follie, streghe, congiure, misfatti atroci, vituperj, patiboli, e cose simili. Qui non v’è un’Ombra, che all’improvvisa (sebben senza necessità, e impropriamente) comparisca e sorprenda gli Astanti; qui non v’è una donna perseguitata e frenetica, che si aggiri per le contrade di Londra presso a morir di fame e di sete; quo non v’è un rogo (pazienza se non si vede), dove un Proconsole Romano si lasci strascinare da un furibonda Sacerdotessa per esservi abbruciato con lei; qui non v’è una esplosione vulcanica; qui non v’è chi si precipiti da un’altissima rupe; qui non si ammazza neppure una mosca; che vuoi tu ch’io faccio sopra queste parole?” See the *avvertimento* to the previously unpublished *Gusmano* in *Melodrammi del professore Luigi Romanelli*, vol. 8 (Milan: Pirola, 1833). Quoted in Agostino Ziino, “‘Ritorna vincitor’: proposte per una ricerca sulla fortuna di Metastasio nell’ottocento,” in Francesco Paolo Russo, ed., *Metastasio nell’Ottocento* (Rome: Aracne, 2003), 5.

And yet he persists. Curiously, despite the multitude of forces that should have ensured his obsolescence, the 1820s witnessed a spate of new settings of Metastasio's libretti after a roughly twenty-year pause. In 1819 Giacomo Meyerbeer's *Semiramide riconosciuta* appeared in Turin to a libretto whose last setting had been by Salieri in 1782. *Didone abbandonata*, the first of Metastasio's great successes, was revived by Saverio Mercadante in 1823, having previously been heard with music by Paisiello in 1794.⁵ Giovanni Pacini's *Temistocle* (1823) and *Alessandro nelle Indie* (1824) were both noteworthy successes that likewise had not been heard since the end of the eighteenth century. The texts for this Metastasio resurgence were only possible thanks to the work of intermediaries, librettists who edited, cut, and often rewrote large sections of the original works in order to adapt them to the "modern" musical language of the nineteenth century. In this respect, the *ottocento* Metastasio revival differs from the adaptations of the late *settecento*, which, although they often heavily reduced the number of scenes in a Metastasian text, still exploited the dramatic opposition between recitative and aria so essential to eighteenth-century dramaturgy.

In an effort to explain how this revival was possible, this chapter considers the fortunes of Metastasio in the early nineteenth century. For as much as Metastasio epitomized all that was dramaturgically problematic about the previous century—conservative in its celebration of the enlightened sovereign, formally rigid, unrepentantly classicist—no one could deny the aesthetic merit of his limpid verses, which had fired the imagination of composers across the continent for almost a hundred years. If foreigners wanted to criticize the impoverished state of Italian literature, Italians could point to the universally recognized achievements of their librettist, whose poetry was praised and theoretical texts appropriated by classicists and romanticists alike.

The canonization of Metastasio was swift, thanks in no small part to the glut of rhapsodic eulogies published after his death in 1782. Already in his lifetime, Metastasio had overseen publications of his complete works, organized, edited, bound, and meant for reading and reference rather than to be forgotten when next year's season brought a new assortment of political and romantic intrigue. The demand for such editions increased rapidly in the first decades of the nineteenth century, and some editors of new volumes printed in the 1810s explicitly declared their desire to capitalize on an enthusiasm for Metastasio that had made previous printings rare and prohibitively expensive.⁶ New editions were printed to be read, carried in pockets, thumbed through, worn out, and forgotten, only to be printed again. Thus in 1826, though it had been years since Metastasio had appeared onstage with any regularity, one author could imagine a character stating simply:

⁵ Giovanni Paisiello's *Didone* had been the last new setting of Metastasio's text to premiere in an Italian theater. Ferdinando Paër's version premiered at the Tuileries in Paris in 1810 and was performed twice in Italy in 1817, just prior to the group of works under consideration here.

⁶ *Opere dell'ab. Pietro Metastasio conforme l'Edizione di Lucca del 1781* (Florence: Niccolo Carli e Comp. e Gaspero Ricci, 1814), 1.

“Indeed, I have read Metastasio.”⁷ This chapter considers what it meant to read Metastasio, how editors consciously made his works less theatrical and more literary, how his libretti became storehouses of familiar quotations, and how after a few decades of reading Metastasio silently new libretti were fashioned to evoke readers’ knowledge of a text. To think about what it means to read Metastasio is to think about how Italians related to their operatic literary past. It also means taking seriously an aesthetic that, as we shall see, had little to do with the political debates or quibbling of the romanticists and classicists.

*

Describing the new settings of Metastasio that appeared in the 1820s as a *revival* is only possible because of the trenches that divide the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. A period of swift and unprecedented historical changes, it has now become the land of historiographical uncertainty—thanks in part to volumes footnoted but seldom read through—and it behooves the modern observer to resist narratives that depend on the unstable binaries suggested by geopolitical rupture.⁸ Emanuele Senici has sketched the late fortunes of Metastasio, has documented how new settings of his works limped on through the first decade of the nineteenth century, with the only true absence in new compositions occurring between 1811–18.⁹ And even in these years, interest in Metastasio onstage did not disappear completely, as the annals of opera show us scattered performances of Marcos Portugal’s *Achille in Sciro* and Mozart’s *La clemenza di Tito*. Still, there is a feeling of before and after. Settings of Metastasio had still flourished in the 1790s, with music by familiar names such as Salieri, Paisiello, and Cimarosa, and those works throw into relief the approximately dozen operas of the 1820s composed by the journeymen of *bel canto*: Mayr, Mercadante, Pacini, and the youthful Meyerbeer (see Table 2.1). On the one side we recognize the living tradition of the eighteenth century, composers whom we can only imagine seated at the clavichord with wig and frock coat; on the other side we encounter an array of Metastasio settings by composers who lived long enough to be photographed.

All of this is to repeat from the introduction our discomfort with Metastasio in the nineteenth century. Modern scholars have offered a handful of explanations—some politically sinister, others involving the reasonable exploitation of literary fame—as to why Italians on the road to unification would still turn to the classical versifying of the Habsburgs’ old court poet. If we glance again at the list of new Metastasio settings in the 1820s, we are inevitably struck—following the example set by Senici—by the role that patronage in Turin, Modena, and Naples must have

⁷ See the excerpt from the “polemical dialogue” between Simplicio and Prospero reviewed in the *Annali del teatro della città di Reggio* (Bologna, 1826), 91.

⁸ Anyone trained in musicology after the publication of—and subsequent handwringing about—Lydia Goehr’s *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works: An Essay in the Philosophy of Music* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992) reaches instinctively for inverted commas in order to toss the compulsory cloak of doubt around the “work” and that nebulous period “around 1800.”

⁹ Emanuele Senici, “Mayr e Metastasio: un contesto per *Demetrio*,” in Francesco Bellotto, ed., *Giovanni Simone Mayr: l’opera teatrale e la musica sacra* (Bergamo: Comune di Bergamo, 1997), 285–307.

Table 2.1: New settings of Metastasio in the 1820s (partial list)

Year	City, theater	Title	Composer
1819	Turin, Regio	<i>Semiramide riconosciuta</i>	Meyerbeer
1820	Modena, Corte	<i>Ruggiero</i>	Gandini
1821	Palermo, Carolino	<i>Adriano in Siria</i>	Airoldi
1823	Turin, Regio	<i>Didone abbandonata</i>	Mercadante
1823	Lucca, Giglio	<i>Temistocle</i>	Pacini
1824	Rome, Argentina	<i>Ezio</i>	Celli
1824	Naples, San Carlo	<i>Alessandro nelle Indie</i>	Pacini
1824	Turin, Regio	<i>Demetrio</i>	Mayr
1824	Modena, Corte	<i>Antigono</i>	Gandini
1825	Naples, San Carlo	<i>Ipermestra</i>	Mercadante
1827	Turin, Regio	<i>Ezio</i>	Mercadante

played in this revival; because most of these operas failed to achieve anything resembling success, they remain tightly bound to the royal centers of their premieres.¹⁰ Senici speculated that the spike in Metastasio settings in the 1820s was driven by a clutch of conservative duchies headed by monarchs who possessed an unusual fondness for the theater (and were, moreover, either born or married into Maria Theresa’s brood of grandchildren).¹¹ His operas, after all, promote “a model of society based on a pyramidal structure” at whose top we find “the absolute sovereign of a pre-revolutionary cast,” and thus it is easy to be persuaded that this movement was in part a conspicuous attempt to both legitimize the authority and flatter the vanity of a restoration aristocracy.¹² In the deep autumn of political absolutism, it was Metastasio who, in the lyrical words of Francesco de Sanctis, offered “the most florid portrait of a society close to dissolving, whose institutions were still heroic and feudal, material emptied of the spirit that once animated it, and that beneath those heroic appearances was slumberous, carefree, effeminate, idyllic, elegiac, and common.”¹³

Marco Emanuele’s account of Metastasio in the nineteenth century, in contrast, cleaves somewhat closer to the busy world of Italian theater, the pragmatic concerns of overworked poets and composers. Given the number of changes to a libretto demanded by contemporary fashion, Emanuele asks what appeal any preservation of Metastasio’s name might have had when the final, revised text bore a resemblance only casual, fleeting, if traceable at all. The reality, he tells us, is that “the patina of nobility” conferred by the name or indirect remembrance of

¹⁰ The exceptions are Mercadante’s *Didone abbandonata*, along with Pacini’s *Temistocle* and *Alessandro nelle Indie*, which reached all of Italy’s major theaters and were revived well into the 1830s.

¹¹ Senici, “Mayr e Metastasio,” 287–89. Senici documents the enthusiasm shared by Francesco IV d’Asburgo Este, Duke of Modena and Reggio, and Carlo Felice of Savoy.

¹² Senici, “Mayr e Metastasio,” 290.

¹³ “È il ritratto più fiorito di una società vicina a sciogliersi, le cui istituzioni erano ancora eroiche e feudali, materia vuota dello spirito che un tempo l’animò, e che sotto quelle apparenze eroiche era assonnata, spensierata, infemminita, idillica, elegiaca e plebea.” De Sanctis, *Storia della letteratura italiana*, vol. 2 (Naples: Morano, 1873), 372.

Metastasio amply justified the elaborate *contaminatio*. It makes little sense to fault any impresario or composer—especially a young Meyerbeer, Pacini, or Mercadante—who turned to the reassuring security of the canon in an era when many critics were eager to denounce subjects culled from popular or romantic literature as immoral and unfit for the stage.¹⁴

Whatever the causes of this resurgence, all modern commentators—from Carl Dahlhaus to Senici and Emanuele—acknowledge that any nineteenth-century interest in Metastasio was facilitated by the poet’s unprecedented literary standing and specifically by the availability of his works collected and bound in complete editions. In Dahlhaus’s observation that “the dramas of Metastasio claimed the standing of poetic drama, readable in their own right . . . and accordingly were often published and reprinted in literary editions,” this point is buried mid-paragraph, uninteresting, indisputable, and unworthy of embellishment.¹⁵ For Emanuele and Senici—whose respective readings of Mercadante’s *Didone* and Mayr’s *Demetrio* depend on a literate audience’s “gradation of reminiscences” to recognize each work’s subtle “play of citations”—the implication is that Metastasio was read so frequently that after a few decades his verses simply slipped into the vulgate. This notion of an Italian public attentively reading opera poetry of any variety should cause eyebrows everywhere to be raised in disbelief, considering that early nineteenth-century libretti have been dismissed historically as the insipid hack work of bungling amateurs, that Madame de Staël in 1816 accused opera of enfeebling the intellect of an entire nation, and that it was long thought too frivolous to sustain hermeneutic scrutiny or convey aesthetic or political ideas. Eyebrows remain unmoved, of course, because as much as Dahlhaus, Emanuele, and Senici imply widespread cultural familiarity with Metastasio, they imply equally that this familiarity was several degrees removed from the living theatrical tradition. Opera lives on the stage, not in the book, and the idea of “reading” opera is oxymoronic, perhaps the business of nearsighted critics. And yet to linger over this process of reading Metastasio may yet tell us many things, not only about the ways music and literature were consumed, but also about the ways in which opera mattered to anyone invested in the future of Italian letters.

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We cannot doubt that many Italians read Metastasio. Nothing else could justify the proliferation of editions beginning around 1810. By the end of the decade, when almost no settings of his works were appearing on stage, new printings were released almost annually, with some years witnessing multiple publications from different cities and editors (see Table 2.2). The market would eventually become so saturated with new editions that publishers of other poetry anthologies did not bother to include any of his verses. Metastasio’s appeal, then, undoubtedly extended beyond

¹⁴ Marco Emanuele, “L’ultima *Didone*: il Metastasio nell’Ottocento,” *Musica e storia* 6, no. 2 (1998): 374.

¹⁵ Carl Dahlhaus, “The Dramaturgy of Italian Opera,” in Lorenzo Bianconi and Giorgio Pestelli, eds., *Opera in Theory and Practice, Image and Myth*, trans. Mary Whittall (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 98. The statements by Senici and Emanuele are similarly couched as passing allusions to a truth universally known.

Table 2.2: Editions of Metastasio's complete works, c. 1800–1830

Year	City, publisher	Year	City, publisher
1802	Genoa, Antonio Tealdo	1820	Milan, Classici italiani
1802	Venice, Giacomo Storti	1820	Prato, Luigi Vannini
1803–06	Lucca, Filippo Benedini	1820–22	Florence, Giovacchino Pagani
1804	Venice, Domenico Fracasso	1822	Milan, Giovanni Silvestri
1805	Rome, Vincenzo Poggioli	1822	Rome, Carlo Mordacchini
1805–07	Venice, S. Apollinare	1822	Bologna, Nobili
1808	Venice, Tommaso Bettinelli	1822	Venice, Andrea Santini
1810	Padua, Giannandrea Foglierini	1823	Siena, Onorato Porri
1813	Venice, Pietro Bernardi	1823–24	Milan, Classici italiani
1813	Padua, Bertoni	1823–27	Bassano, Baseggio
1813–14	Venice, Antonio Rosa	1824	Naples, Agnello Tamater
1814	Florence, Vittorio Alauzet	1825–27	Livorno, G.P. Pozzolini
1814	Prato, Vicenzo Vestri	1826	Florence, Stamperio granducale
1814	Milan, Maspero e Buocher	1826	Florence, Giuseppe Molini
1814	Florence, Niccolò Carli Borgo	1826	Milan, Pietro Agnelli
1815	Milan, Giovanni Silvestri	1826	Milan, Antonio Fontana
1816	Naples, Porcelli	1826–30	Venice, Giuseppe Antonelli
1816–20	Mantua, Pazzoni	1827	Cremona, Luigi de Micheli
1817	Milan, Pietro Agnelli	1827	Treviglio, G.B. Messaggi
1818–19	Venice, Pietro Nardini	1829	Turin, Pomba
1819	Florence, Gabinetto di Pallade	1829	Milan, Nicolò Bettoni

a small cohort of monarchs interested in consolidating their sovereignty and returning to the untroubled meadows of the eighteenth century, although, like anything that could be called literary culture at the time, this fashion was available only to the privileged few who could actually read Italian.¹⁶ Although the theatrical revivals in Modena, Turin, or Naples were unquestionably enriched and propelled by Metastasio's persistent and growing popularity in print, the majority of his readers likely never saw one of these operas staged apart from the few that enjoyed modest success. In other words, these two phenomena—the handful of new settings and the steady production of editions—may relate only tangentially.

The history of reading Metastasio in the nineteenth century actually begins in 1782 with the completion of the twelve-volume Paris edition of his collected works. Many of Metastasio's own thoughts on how his dramas should be read—or,

¹⁶ Estimates of literacy rates vary. In 1861 the first census of a united Italy revealed that 78 percent of citizens were illiterate, though by Tullio De Mauro's estimate only 2.5 percent of the population could be considered to speak Italian (De Mauro, *Storia linguistica dell'Italia unita* [Rome: Laterza, 1983], 43). For a more literary perspective, we need only recall the words of Jacopo Ortis: "I asked a bookseller for the autobiography of Benvenuto Cellini. They do not have it. I asked for another writer, but he said, rather spitefully, that he did not sell Italian books. The civilian population speaks elegant French, and pure Tuscan is scarcely understood. Public documents and the laws are written in such a bastard language that the bare phrases bear witness to the ignorance and servitude of those who dictate them." Ugo Foscolo, *Le ultime lettere di Jacopo Ortis* (1802), trans. J.G. Nicholas (London: Hesperus, 2002), 91.

importantly in this case, performed—were deposited in the “Estratto dell’*Arte poetica* d’Aristotile e considerazioni su la medesima,” which fills the entire last volume and serves as an elaborate self-justification for a life’s work; for Piero Weiss, it is also “the final manifesto of classicism.”¹⁷ Metastasio understood his works to be tragedies in the ancient tradition, though he never descended to treating any text as dogma. He was skeptical of the unities, noting that even the ancients often failed to observe them, and distanced himself from the literalism of the French classicists. For Weiss, Metastasio is therefore a “modern” classicist, one who is willing to accept and even praise the rules of ancient theater so long as they accord with modern taste: we are, after all, a long way away from the fourth century B.C., and as mortals we must share in the fashions of our time. But although Metastasio seemed to prioritize defending his literary reputation and was at pains to legitimize his works by affording them the dignity of true tragedies, he also maintained that his works could only be realized fully through performance.¹⁸ Music was indispensable to this conception of tragedy, the singing of arias forming part of “an immemorial custom, apparently handed down to us from the ancient theater.”¹⁹

Today, even those of us unfamiliar with Metastasio’s theoretical writings will instinctively agree. But even as far back as 1756, Carlo Goldoni recognized that this was not always the case: “If my *Drammi* were only seen at performances, and not read, I might hope for a better fate. But . . . custom demands they be printed.”²⁰ Printing libretti, it seems, wrested control from performer to reader, who had access to them whenever he wanted. We are told by the editors of one of the first new editions of Metastasio in the nineteenth-century that lovers of beautiful literature had celebrated the 1781 Lucca edition, as it allowed them to carry Metastasio “wherever they liked,” and as the memories of Metastasio performed on stage began to fade, new editions increasingly recast his works for the reader.²¹

If we lay a few of these editions before us in an effort to find something about their history, we are first struck by the prefaces of various lengths and vigor, publishers, editors, and scholars holding forth, quibbling, expounding and elucidating, above all praising a poet whose name is carved indelibly in the pantheon of Italian letters. Each new editor was at pains to distinguish his printing from its predecessors, trumpeting its neatness, its accuracy, its sequencing of the libretti. Chronological order eventually became the standard so that the reader could witness the gradual flowering of genius, but if he needed some assistance in appreciating Metastasio’s style, he could consult his edition’s newly commissioned scholarly introduction. The perfection of the subject matter long since settled, when critics turned to these new issues they had only the thickness of the paper, the clarity

¹⁷ Piero Weiss, “Metastasio, Aristotle, and the Opera Seria” *The Journal of Musicology* 1, no. 4 (October 1982): 394.

¹⁸ Roger Savage, “Staging an Opera: Letters from the Caesarian Poet” *Early Music* 26, no. 4, Metastasio, 1698–1782 (November 1998): 583–95.

¹⁹ Quoted in Weiss, “Metastasio, Aristotle, and the Opera Seria,” 389.

²⁰ Quoted in Weiss, “Metastasio, Aristotle, and the Opera Seria,” 390.

²¹ *Opere dell’ab. Pietro Metastasio conforme l’Edizione di Lucca del 1781* (Florence: Niccolo Carli e Comp. e Gaspero Ricci, 1814).

of the typesetting, the width of the margins, the degree of portability, the number of volumes, or the benefits of poetry printed in one column over two with which to fill their reviews.²² Some editions bore the scars of the recent foreign attacks on Italian literature, transforming the appreciation of national literary glory into a condition of good citizenship (“lo studio de’ buoni Scrittori vie più si diffonde in tutti le condizioni de’ cittadini”), and it is unsurprising that Metastasio was included in the library of classics published by the Società Tipografici de’ Classici Italiani, an organization founded in 1802 to disseminate new, affordable editions of Italian literature.²³ Publishers wanted to make Metastasio as readable as possible, and to that end one editor sought to scrub from his works all traces of performance: in accordance with the “English practice,” stage directions were subordinated to footnotes so as not to distract *l’attenzione del lettore*. Greater clarity was achieved by restricting changes of scene to actual changes of setting, dispensing with the old theatrical practice of delineating scenes by the arrival or departure of characters. “Why,” the editor asked, “would we frequently interrupt the attention of the reader with a convention of theatrical printing?”²⁴

This removal of the markers of theatrical practice invites us to speculate about what happens when one medium—oral poetry, declaimed from the stage, dealt to us evenly by the composer over dry recitative—is subsumed by another, what happens when *the* canonical works of *opera seria* in all their visual and musical opulence encounter the juggernaut of print capitalism. Metastasio’s domestication by the book corresponds with what has become the orthodox account of media around 1800. Numerous commentators have contemplated what is lost and what residue remains when audiovisual experiences are subsumed by the “blank and silent screen” of print.²⁵ Celeste Langan’s reading of Walter Scott’s poetry is predicated on the inability of the upstart medium of print to muffle the aural resonances of poetry, so that in 1805 a poet such as Scott could manipulate the text in such a way as to evoke a variety of musical and visual impressions. Deprived of the “*immediate* sensory input of verbal melody,” the silent reader’s imagination was nevertheless prompted by a variety of mediated sensory cues, leading to what Langan calls “hallucinations.”²⁶ In attempting to remove as many traces of performance as possible, Metastasio’s editors appear conversely to depend on the invisibility and inaudibility of print. Rather than attempting to summon the experience of

²² See, for example, the review that appeared in the *Antologia* 21 (July 1826): 122–23.

²³ For more on the Società Tipografica de’ Classici Italiani and its founder, Giulio Ferrario, see Sara Faraoni, “Giulio Ferrario, intellettuale milanese ed editore della Società Tipografica de’ Classici Italiani,” *Aevum* 77, no. 3 (September–December 2003): 683–91.

²⁴ “Perchè dunque deve distrarsi con sì frequenti interrompimenti l’attenzione di chi legge un componimento teatrale stampato?” See the *Opere di Pietro Metastasio* (Florence: Giuseppe Molini, 1826), vi–vii.

²⁵ Celeste Langan, “Understanding Media in 1805: Audiovisual Hallucination in *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*,” *Studies in Romanticism* 40, no. 1 (Spring 2001): 49–70. For a recent and persuasive musicological application of Friedrich Kittler and Langan, see Deirdre Loughridge, *Haydn’s Sunrise, Beethoven’s Shadow: Audiovisual Culture and the Emergence of Musical Romanticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 124–25.

²⁶ Langan, “Understanding Media in 1805,” 53.

performance, the excision of superfluous directions for scene changes and distracting visual cues granted readers access to the literary core of opera.

We can only speculate about how these editions were read, for reconstructing historical reading practices is a chimerical pursuit. It may be tempting to reconfigure Metastasio—and opera, as a whole—in terms of attention, pacing, and any variety of “hallucinations” induced by reading libretti silently, but we founder when we attempt to translate those experiences, necessarily digressive, fleeting, multitudinous, into words.²⁷ Any attempt to articulate a historically informed operatic experience—enhanced, refracted, shaped, inflected, or mediated by any constellation of political, social, commercial, or material forces—must confront the same obstacles that have long stood in the way of the historically informed performance movement’s claims about authenticity. Yet even asking what, instead of how, people read challenges much traditional thinking about Metastasio. We know that, to the author’s disapproval, many of Metastasio’s libretti were performed in his lifetime as spoken dramas with the arias removed, a practice unfathomable to anyone who has impatiently skipped those interminably long recitatives in favor of the music. To the modern observer, Metastasio’s libretti cry out for editing, and in the nineteenth century that meant eliminating not only extraneous plot details but action-halting aria texts as well.

Some clues as to what was most prized by Metastasio’s romantic readers can be found in the handful of adaptations, many of which preserve long stretches of recitative while jettisoning the arias in favor of expanded lyrical numbers. “Metastasio without his arias” is strange to experience, especially when conventional music history teaches that it was those polished, epigrammatic aria texts—the *Affekt* often turning on one of Zeno’s old similes, like a rock, like a shipwreck, the stag or the dove—that inspired the finest operatic music of the century. We may have suspected these suggestive texts to circulate well beyond the confines of their original source, especially because we know that a significant part of literary culture around 1800 focused on memory, delighted in the extraction and organization of quotations: Metastasio appears designed for the commonplace book or anthology. Yet if we take Mary Shelley as a representative if highly gifted reader in the early nineteenth century—an admirer of Metastasio, she authored his biography for the “Lives of Literary Men of Italy” in Dionysius Lardner’s *Cabinet Cyclopædia*—we find her extractions from Metastasio, littered across her published works as chapter mottoes, all sourced from recitative. Indeed, although elaborate reworkings of the aria texts do appear in adaptations—the rondo “Il piacer, la gioia scenda” from Meyerbeer’s *Semiramide*, with its attractive harp obbligato, being a fine example—few readers in the nineteenth century venerated them as we might expect.

²⁷ This hesitancy is adapted from William St. Clair, who warns that in surveying the texts of imaginative literature “it is hard to identify any but the loosest cluster of ideas, and when we try to trace them into the busy world of mentalities, we quickly lose sight of them in the crowd”; *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 7. St. Clair’s solution was to restrict his conclusions to those that could be drawn from publishing data.

For all the praise that nineteenth-century critics heaped upon the melodiousness of Metastasio's language, his poetry inspired little music in the 1820s. The blame falls partly on formal expectations, radically different when steady settings of his works ended in the 1790s compared to when the revival began thirty years later. By then, Metastasio's status as a canonic literary figure was secure, though there was a gap between his "sweet verses"—familiar, secure in the minds of all who read him—and the sounds of "modern harmonies."²⁸ That taste grew to demand duets, trios, choruses, and finales was discussed widely among critics of eighteenth-century libretti, and the impresario Alessandro Lanari, writing in a preface to Pacini's *Temistocle*, entreated his readers to pardon the audacious removal and addition of "not one or more verses, but entire scenes of the grand Metastasio."²⁹ Whether such "sacrilegious mutilation" merited applause or censure only the public could decide, but they were assured that, as much as possible, "the admired and eminently dramatic scenes of *Temistocle* remained intact and as they had issued from the pen of the author."³⁰ The result, shared among most of the adaptations in the 1820s, is of mixed breed: long passages of *secco* recitative in which Metastasio's verses are preserved about arias and ensembles in the style of Rossini, replete with phrases—"Che mai sarà?" or "Ah, che fatal momento!" to name two examples that leap from the pages of Mayr's *Demetrio*—that, while convenient for generating slow movements that crackle with suspense, are foreign to eighteenth-century dramaturgy.

In Pacini's *Alessandro nelle Indie*, only one aria and two chorus texts are preserved; secondary characters are eliminated; the final two acts are condensed into one. Some scenes contain only a line or two from the original; others are lifted wholesale, while others begin as faithful reproductions of Metastasio's recitatives before drifting into paraphrase that allow for nineteenth-century musical structures. Much of the action in Act I revolves around the Indian queen Cleofide's repeated attempts to suppress Poro's jealousy, which threatens to disrupt her feigned seduction of the conqueror Alessandro. In Metastasio we witness their confrontation twice in the first act, with the same text—"Se mai più sarò geloso"—serving first as an aria for Poro and a later a duet for Poro and Cleofide. The scene in Pacini collapses their encounter into one multi-movement duet, beginning with a long stretch of Metastasio's original recitative followed by a *tempo d'attacco*, slow movement, and cabaletta that all play on the subjunctive "if" of Poro's aria text. Metastasio's operas are full of such dramatically charged encounters, and it is of little surprise that nineteenth-century spectators were drawn to the elaborate

²⁸ "Da lungo tempo non si erano uditi i dolcissimi versi del Metastasio accoppiati a moderne armonie: Mercadante lo ha tentato, e gli si deve duplice elogio." Review of Mercadante's *Ezio* in "Annali universali di Drammatica, di Musica e Coregrafia moderna," *I teatri* 1, no. 1 (Milan: Giulio Ferrario, 1827), 9.

²⁹ "...a molto maggior ragione comparir dovea temerario non che in sommo grado malagevole il levare ed aggiungere, non uno o più versi, ma intere scene al gran Metastasio." See Lanari's preface to *Temistocle* (Lucca: Benedini e Rocchi, 1823), 5.

³⁰ "Vero è che le scene ammirabili ed eminentemente drammatiche del *Temistocle* rimaste sono intatte e tali quali uscirono dalla penna del suo Autore"; Lanari, *Temistocle*, 5.

incidents and sudden changes of mood spun out in the recitatives rather than the abstract moralizing of the aria texts.

However serviceable—undoubtedly pleasant, frequently dramatic—much of Pacini’s music is, we will search his score in vain if we wish to extract a passage or two to illustrate some bibliographic awareness on the part of the composer, some sense that music was ever summoned to highlight (or at least acknowledge) literary greatness.³¹ Quotations from the original libretto are distinguished neither in the printed text nor by any sonic cues, though some critics claimed that the discrepancy in the quality of the poetry made Metastasio’s words immediately recognizable. One writer, reviewing an 1827 revival of *Alessandro* at La Scala, characterized Metastasio’s works as those in which “the heroes and heroines speak the language of the most sublime poetic truth.” The librettist, probably Andrea Leone Tottola, attempted to approximate the beauty of Metastasio’s poetry, the critic noted, by strewing classical rhymes among his own verses: “But good God! such a reprehensible system recalling the great merits of a desecrated model only served to highlight the poverty of the imitation.”³² Marco Emanuele has drawn attention to the first act finale of another Metastasio revision—the *Didone abbandonata* of Mercadante—which, uniquely, contains a dense web of citations not only from the original text but from other Metastasian libretti as well.³³ It is reasonable to conclude that if such quotations triggered any frisson of recognition for spectators or invited heightened attention to the play of citations, this was possible only thanks to a familiarity cultivated by reading silently and as literature those Metastasian phrases that had once competed with the din and clatter of the opera house.

This conclusion may have been foregone—then, as now, any acquaintance with the rich literary tradition that underpins a theatrical work enhances a spectator’s enjoyment of it, and no one needs the authority of a Mozart to know that audiences are divided eternally between *Kenner* and *Nichtkenner*.³⁴ To see how Metastasio’s influence extended beyond this handful of operatic curiosities—whether we call

³¹ Pacini tells us little about how his work might relate to its predecessor: “The libretto that I set to music was *Alessandro nelle Indie*, a subject already treated by the Cesarean poet, whose work was in part made use of by the versifier Schmidt when he amplified it for the modern stage” (“Il libretto ch’io musicai fu l’ *Alessandro nelle Indie*, argomento già trattato dal cesareo Poeta, lavoro, di cui in parte si servì il verseggiatore Smith [sic] ampliato per le scene moderne”). In other words, he practices the nineteenth-century habit of distancing an adaptation from its source material by casting it as merely another treatment of the same subject that inspired its source material. See *Le mie memorie artistiche* (Florence: Ferdinando Magnani, 1875), 33.

³² “L’*Alessandro nelle Indie* del Metastasio è un componimento ove gli Eroi e le Eroine parlano il linguaggio della più sublime verità poetica. Il signor N. N. autore del Melodramma dato a porre in musica al maestro Pacini ha pur cercato di prevalersi di alcune delle tante bellezze che s’incontrano in quello del discepolo di Gravina; si è pur studiato alla meglio di spargere qua e là ne’suoi versi le classiche rime del Cesareo poeta. Ma buon Dio! con sì riprovevole sistema rammentando egli i meriti grandi di un modello profanato altro non fece che porre in maggior mostra la pochezza della copia”; “Annali universali di Drammatica, di Musica e Coregrafia moderna,” *I teatri* 1, no. 1 (Milan: Giulio Ferrario, 1827), 7.

³³ Emanuele, “L’ultima *Didone*.”

³⁴ Mozart’s famous comments about the piano concertos KV 413, 414, and 415 were written in a letter to his father dated December 28, 1782.

them princely diversions or feasts of recognition for the literary elect—we must turn to his troubled, his often controversial place in the Italian debates between romanticism and classicism, which have hovered specter-like over this discussion. To do so involves retracing some familiar ground, if only to remember just how difficult it is to situate opera within the national conversations that dominated the first decades of the nineteenth century.

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Anne-Louise-Germaine Necker de Staël-Holstein's 1816 article in praise of translations sparked such outrage and had such a lasting impact that it is an unavoidable starting point. Her advice "On the Manner and Usefulness of Translations," which appeared in the inaugural issue of the *Biblioteca italiana*, was modest, tactfully refrained from mentioning romanticism by name, and consisted primarily of a recommendation that Italians could profit from an acquaintance with foreign literature. No man's learning, however disciplined, however omnivorous, could possibly master a continent's languages both ancient and modern, so he must rely on translators to fill the gaps in his education. Each national school of translation may have its faults—the French, the baroness notes, have a tendency to obliterate the style of other languages when transforming them into their own; the English have bungled Homer's noble simplicity—but Italy's is especially inadequate because it hardly exists at all. Oblivious to the work of Schiller, the cosmological wonders of Shakespeare, Italian writers have stubbornly perched themselves upon the ruins of antiquity, and Staël can only warn that "the glory based on imitation is scarce and short."³⁵

Responses from the defenders of Italy's uniquely classical and therefore uniquely superior heritage were prompt, aggressive, often sexist, and galvanized a small contingent of Milanese pamphleteers to assemble in support of Staël: Ludovico di Breme, Pietro Borsieri, and Giovanni Berchet all published tracts of their own and soon founded the short-lived journal *Il conciliatore*, which, while shunting an explicitly romantic agenda, promoted innovation and debate about Italian literature. Even those who disagreed with the particulars of Staël's article, those who balked at the suggestion of importing the work of northern writers, conceded that Italian literature was languishing in the opiate haze of tradition. Pietro Giordani's response to Staël in the *Biblioteca italiana* recognized an excessive recourse to mythology among contemporary Italian authors, though he believed renewed interest in Dante—who, along with Tasso and Ariosto, was frequently cast as romantic in his own right—rather than Milton or Klopstock would properly reanimate Italian letters.

Another instantiation of the eternal battle between the ancients and the moderns, the Italian literary debates of the 1810s are more a historical curiosity than a genuinely impactful political or artistic movement. The debates themselves lasted only a few years, thanks in part to Austrian censorship suppressing even temperate journals such as *Il conciliatore*. Many of the personalities on both sides of

³⁵ Madame de Staël, "Sulla maniera e la utilità delle Traduzioni," *Biblioteca italiana* 1, no. 1 (January 1816): 10.

the debates were relatively minor, and their bewildering insistence on dividing all literary history into either classical or romantic factions, their punctilious discussions both in praise and condemnation of the Aristotelian unities, their flamboyant caricaturing of northern European literature as little more than a patchwork of trapdoors and goblins, were deemed incomprehensible by disinterested contemporaries, Italian and otherwise. Byron and Goethe considered the absolute distinction between classicism and romanticism a false one, and Ugo Foscolo, writing in exile from London, famously described the entire affair as an “idle enquiry.”³⁶

Despite a stray, tangential comment by Staël dismissing opera libretti as mind-addling pabulum—“I will conclude . . . that spending five hours a day listening to the so-called words of Italian opera can only dull, through lack of use, the intellect of a nation”—few of the polemicists writing in the 1810s thought opera worth mentioning at all, and those few who did treated it with indifference or disdain.³⁷ The solution to this quandary was once relatively straightforward. Past scholars have written persuasively about how the stylistic development of *ottocento* opera—with the mature works of Verdi as its *telos*—corresponds neatly with the aesthetic concerns of many Italian romantic writers.³⁸ It is possible to fault this approach for its slack methodology, though anyone whose taste was nurtured by nineteenth-century art will have a difficult time faulting it aesthetically: the romantics’ sympathy for dramatic realism and political liberalism has long been our own, severed as we are from the values of the eighteenth-century classicism. For that reason, perhaps, any account of opera’s relationship with Italian romanticism will necessarily struggle to incorporate the ostensible conservatism of Metastasio (and the 1820s more broadly).

This historiography begins with Rossini, a composer whom no amount of imagination could transform into a political hero; his attitude toward Italian patriotism could, as Gary Tomlinson notes, best be described as “ambivalent.”³⁹ To search his idiosyncratic, endlessly repeatable and imitable music in search of partisan tendencies—never mind the inherent impossibility of drawing conclusions about a composer’s politics based on his works—is to find both innovative and complacent elements. Tragic endings predominate, unprecedented attention is

³⁶ Foscolo’s comment appeared in his 1818 essay “On the Present Literature in Italy.” Quoted in Fabio Camilletti, *Classicism and Romanticism in Italian literature: Leopardi’s Discourse on Romantic poetry* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2013), 22.

³⁷ “E io ne conchiuderò che lo stare ogni dì cinque ore ascoltando quelle che si chiamano parole dell’opera italiana, dee necessariamente fare ottuso, per mancanza di esercizio, l’intelletto d’una nazione.” Staël, “Sulla maniera e la utilità delle Traduzioni,” 16.

³⁸ See, for example, Gary Tomlinson, “Italian Romanticism and Italian Opera: An Essay in Their Affinities,” *19th-Century Music* 10, no. 1 (Summer 1986): 43–60 and Scott L. Balthazar, “Aspects of Form in the Ottocento libretto,” *Cambridge Opera Journal* 7, no. 1 (March 1995): 23–35.

³⁹ In the course of the article, this adjective is applied to Rossini three times, to Bellini once. See Tomlinson, “Italian Romanticism and Italian Opera,” 47–53. Rossini’s personal indifference did not inhibit later writers—notably, Giuseppe Mazzini—from treating his apotheosis of the old style as decidedly romantic. See Mary Ann Smart, *Waiting for Verdi* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2018), 110.

lavished on setting and atmosphere, ensembles become less static, the hegemony of the aria is challenged, all while melodic ornament flourishes unrestrained alongside noisy motivic passages plucked from the *buffo* tradition. However sincerely Isabella may yearn for her *patria* stranded upon the shores of Algiers, her coloratura has historically been read as anti-mimetic, as indifferent, perhaps “atrociously” so, to dramatic and political representation.⁴⁰

After *Il conciliatore* had succumbed to Austrian censorship and its contributors imprisoned or exiled, Italian romanticism would acquire a new political fervor, and the works of Bellini and Donizetti are ineluctably drawn into its orbit during the 1830s, with the theoretical writings of Giuseppe Mazzini at the gravitational center. Mazzini’s prophetic appraisal of Donizetti anticipated some of the stylistic features of Verdi and the mythologizing tradition that would crown him bard of the Risorgimento. His *Filosofia della musica* (1836) is seductive reading, and it is difficult to resist treating it as a repository of widespread national feeling about Italian music, though we know it attracted little attention prior to 1848.⁴¹ If we observe Bellini’s unsettlingly unadorned melodic writing in *Il pirata* and *La straniera* or join Mazzini in praising Donizetti’s evasions of formal artifice in *Marino Faliero*, we cannot help but welcoming a “music-drama of the future” capable of expressing a “social function” congruent with the “progress of civilization.”⁴²

The political sweep of Italian romanticism places Metastasio on the wrong side of this history, representing much that Italian liberals actively opposed. Moreover, new settings of his texts flourished in the 1820s, propagated by composers who, though hardly diminutive, are nonetheless dwarfed by those whose work defined the decades that preceded (Rossini) and followed (Bellini and Donizetti). Given that the classicists were the losers both politically and aesthetically, to advocate on their behalf would be flamboyantly contrarian. Even if we maintain a healthy detachment from heroic constructions of the proponents of romanticism and resist projecting our frustrations with the political present onto imagined solidarity on the barricades of the past, it is hard to envision an alternative history of early nineteenth-century opera that celebrates the reactionary attitudes embodied in the mellifluous, classical verses of Metastasio. Put another way, only idiosyncratic histories (or perhaps those written under the auspices of the Habsburgs) would remember 1827 not as the year of *Il pirata* at the Scala, but as the year Mercadante dashed off yet another Metastasio revival (*Ezio*) in Turin.

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Today, most commentators on classicism and romanticism in Italian literature advise against leaping the gap from aesthetic categories to political ones, against

⁴⁰ 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, no. 4 (2012): 414–26.

⁴¹ Mary Ann Smart, “Magical thinking: reason and emotion in some recent literature on Verdi and politics,” *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 17, no. 4 (2012): 437–47.

⁴² Tomlinson, “Italian Romanticism and Italian Opera,” 50. For an extended discussion of Mazzini’s commentary on Donizetti and *Marino Faliero*, see Smart, *Waiting for Verdi*, 102–27.

seeing this literary schism as simply a divide between the outmoded taste of Bourbon supporters and the barricade-erecting aesthetics of the romantics.⁴³ Metastasio represented far more to Italian readers of all political persuasions than simply the literary filigree of the *ancien régime*.

Writing in 1818, Michele Leoni—a centrist who translated Shakespeare, Byron, and Milton but also wrote tracts denouncing Rossini and the spirit of romanticism—aptly summarized not only the confused nature of the recent debates he had witnessed but also Metastasio’s curious absence from them. “A strange conflict” has recently been born between “two European factions,” he reports in a preface to Byron’s “Lament of Tasso”: “one of the more militant in favor of the classical authors of antiquity, the other of the so-called modern *romantics*.”⁴⁴ Leoni is at a loss to describe what prompted this conflict. Yet like many literary skirmishes and their “vain discourses,” those between the classicists and romanticists effected little change, and it would be a tedious task, he insists, to recount the diverse opinions amongst the vast swathes of literary pretenders. “I will only note,” he concludes with an air of mild curiosity, “that as far as I know nobody in the romantic camp bothered to cite the authority of Metastasio.”⁴⁵

As to why Metastasio may have been appropriated by the romantics, Leoni submits his known criticism of Greek tragedy, not only regarding the unities—eighteenth-century stagecraft afforded frequent and fantastical changes of scene, after all—but also in terms of form and the nature of composition. The sublime heterogeneity of setting found in Metastasio’s dramas similarly delighted Stendhal, who eulogized that the obliteration of Aristotelian constraints was necessary “in order that his characters might be interesting from their resemblance to ourselves.” Metastasio, as Stendhal read him, thus transports his readers far from real life while simultaneously holding a mirror to their character, and in doing so “rivaled Shakespeare and Virgil, and far surpassed Racine and every other poet.”⁴⁶

These complementary comments by Leoni and Stendhal brim with suggestion and allusion to Metastasio’s own theoretical writings, such as the commentary on Aristotle’s *Poetics* adumbrated above. But they also directly contradict the dominant romantic tradition, at the head of which we find August Wilhelm Schlegel. We need not dwell on Schlegel’s central position in Jena romanticism, nor his condescending dismissal of French neoclassicism, nor his influence on an entire generation of writers and composers, nor even his close relationship with Staël to

⁴³ See, for example, Giovanni Carsaniga writing in Peter Brand and Lino Pertile, eds., *The Cambridge History of Italian Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), especially 399–405.

⁴⁴ “Per la qual cosa anche in questi ultimi tempi nacque uno strano conflitto fra due fazioni *d’Europa*, una delle quali militava a favore degli scrittori classici antichi, e l’altra de’ così detti *romantici* moderni.” Michele Leoni, *Lamento del Tasso di Lord Byron* (Pisa: Niccolò Capurro, 1818), i.

⁴⁵ “Noterò dunque soltanto, che nel corso di sì gran lotta nessuno dell’oste romantica si è avvisato, per quanto io sappia, di porre in campo l’autorità del Metastasio.” Leoni, *Lamento del Tasso*, ii.

⁴⁶ Stendhal, “Letter on the Genius of Metastasio,” in *The Life of Haydn, in a series of letters written at Vienna. Followed by The Life of Mozart, with observations on Metastasio, and on the present state of music in France and Italy*, trans. L.A.C. Bombet (London, 1817), 425–26.

imagine the barbed critique of Metastasio that appeared in the lectures *On Dramatic Art and Literature* (1809–11). High priest of the German temple dedicated to Shakespeare, Schlegel did not see, as Leoni and Stendhal did, any place for Metastasio within romantic aesthetics, and his lectures proved to be one of the most notorious assaults on Metastasio known in Italy, inciting bitterly worded defenses well into the 1820s.

In Metastasio one finds, Schlegel claimed, a “total absence of the romantic spirit,” an “insipidity of composition” that, in its attempt at tragic purity, “degenerates into monotony.”⁴⁷ The reforms of Apostolo Zeno inherited by Metastasio, far from engendering any dramatic clarity, simply banished all that was once interesting about opera. Later nineteenth-century critics would parrot Schlegel when they affirmed that despite Metastasio’s “talent of briefly bringing together all the essential features of a pathetic situation,” his delineation of passions is nevertheless “general,” free “from all contemplative matter.” In summary, we find a Metastasio who “is musical throughout,” but “deficient in harmonious compass.”⁴⁸ Schlegel is incredulous that anyone could be moved by Metastasio, but if the reports that Italians weep over his verses are true, he tosses it “back on the nation itself as a symptom of its own moral temperament.”⁴⁹

Schlegel would set the agenda—and furnish many of the most evocative metaphors—for other writers hostile to baroque dramaturgy, among which we can count many of the authors we have already encountered such as Staël, Mazzini, and Foscolo. Staël, though she tepidly acknowledged the beauty of his verses in her article on translations, expressed severe criticism of Metastasio’s poetics in her 1807 *Corinne* (at least if the fictional character Oswald can be read as a mouthpiece for her own aesthetic agenda):

Metastasio, who is praised as the poet of love, portrays that passion in the same way in every country and in all situations. The arias are certainly admirable, sometimes to be applauded for their grace and harmony, sometimes for their supreme lyrical beauties, but especially when they are removed from the plays in which they are placed. For us, however, who have Shakespeare, the poet who has best understood human history and passions, the two pairs of lovers, who share between them nearly all Metastasio’s plays, are unbearable. They are called now Achilles, now Tircis, now Brutus, now Corilas, and all sing in the same way of the sorrows and martyrdom of love, barely touching the soul superficially and depicting insipidly the most violent feeling that can stir the human heart.⁵⁰

The suggestion that Metastasio’s verses appear to the greatest advantage when removed from their source—read independent of situation, or perhaps arranged with other cut flowers of poetry in a commonplace book or anthology—reminds us of the widespread enthusiasm for quotation, though as we saw earlier many readers

⁴⁷ A.W. Schlegel, *A Course of Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature*, trans. John Black (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1846), 216–17.

⁴⁸ Schlegel, *A Course of Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature*, 218.

⁴⁹ Schlegel, *A Course of Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature*, 219.

⁵⁰ *Corinne, or Italy*, trans. Sylvia Raphael (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 116–17.

prized Metastasio's recitatives as much if not more than the arias. But the prevailing spirit of Staël's remarks is familiarly critical, as she contrasts the indifference of the eighteenth-century poet with the heterogeneity of character celebrated by authors in the new century.

Writing in a similarly dismissive tone, Mazzini may have been thinking of Metastasio when in 1830 he described the work of the eighteenth-century librettist:

He composed a certain subject, plot, or design, in the solitude of his closet, and then turned over the history of various nations in search of a fact that would adapt itself to his preconceived plan. For this reason almost all these dramas wear a certain tint of uniformity often degenerating into monotony. They are like musical variations upon different themes, but identical in method of modulation and in style, and played in precisely the same meter.⁵¹

Such uniformity, dullness, and monotony—qualities fatal to both poetry and music—was equally detected among Metastasio's writings by Foscolo, who, like so many other commentators, blamed such longueurs on the *ancien régime*:

Metastasio, to please the court of Vienna, the musicians, and the public of his day, and to gratify the delicacy of his own feminine taste, has reduced his language and versification to so limited a number of words, phrases, and cadences, that they seem always the same, and in the end produce only the effect of a flute, which conveys rather delightful melody than quick and distinct sensations.⁵²

Even in this small sampling of authors we can detect common themes emerging. Metastasio is superficial. He is aloof and indifferent. His poetry, due to its limited linguistic palette, is empty of meaning, hollow, incapable of moving his audiences. His dramas—if it is helpful to deploy a musical analogy to spotlight their deficiencies—are, while undoubtedly beautiful, simply melodies supported by harmonies unvarying or nonexistent.

That Metastasio faced such criticism, whether standing alone or as a conspicuous metonym for a withering Italian literary tradition, should not surprise us. Nor should it surprise us that contemporary Italians were unwilling to allow direct assaults on one of their greatest poets pass without commentary. Although they may have felt the need to defend Metastasio, whether motivated by national pride or by belief in the matchless beauty of Metastasio's verses, many felt equally the need to recognize the validity of at least some of his critics.

Attempts to balance the conflicting impulses of innovation and preservation surface in the writings of the journalist, lexicographer, and sometime librettist Giovanni Gherardini, whose translation and annotation of Schlegel's lectures appeared in 1817. In a series of diffuse endnotes that nearly doubled the length of

⁵¹ "Ideava nella solitudine del gabinetto un soggetto, un nodo, un piano qualunque: poi ricercava nella storia delle nazioni se mai s'affacciasse un fatto che convenisse al proprio concetto. Però quasi tutti que' drammi sortivano una tinta d'uniformità che degenerava sovente in monotonia. Erano variazioni composte, se vuolsi, sopra un tema diverso; ma identiche in modulazioni, di stile, e limitate a un egual numero di battute." Mazzini, "Del Dramma Storico," *Antologia* 39 (July 1830): 39.

⁵² Ugo Foscolo, *Essays on Petrarch* (London: John Murray, 1823), 92–93.

the original publication, Gherardini attempted to parry Schlegel's critique by invalidating it on technical grounds, drawing on a rich history of late eighteenth-century commentary on Metastasio while adopting an air of feigned surprise at Schlegel's curiously poor understanding of literary genre. While Schlegel may have faulted Metastasio and the whole corpus of eighteenth-century libretti as poor approximations of true tragedy—which, quoth Schlegel, impeded room for musical development—Gherardini bristled at the mere mention of the term. "It seems to me strange and ridiculous," he writes, "to pretend that Metastasio did something he never intended to do."⁵³ Occupying a class of its own thanks to the labor performed jointly by music and poetry, *melodramma* may contain some elements of tragedy, but it is folly to judge one genre by the rules of another: false premises beget false conclusions. Gherardini concedes that, in its dramatic liberties, *melodramma* may have transformed into a monster, but a monster that for a century had delighted all the nations of Europe. We owe Metastasio infinite praise, he suggests, for his ability to unite through poetry the interests and pretensions of composer, singer, and public.

In his affected bewilderment, Gherardini is equally dismissive of Schlegel's use of the term "romantic," which, despite or perhaps because of the bluster of recent debates, he sees as an empty category invented by northern writers to balkanize the literary field. For if all literature is needlessly partitioned into either classical or romantic provinces—which, according to Gherardini, was Schlegel's design—then of course works that fall outside either domain will be considered "a rebellion against the spirit of good poetry."⁵⁴ But these are dull matters, of interest only to sophists such as Schlegel who are incapable of recognizing the rich tradition of romantic writing that already existed in Italy. For if we must use new definitions, sighs Gherardini, "romantic" could apply equally to the *Divina commedia*, to *Orlando furioso*, or to Petrarch's sonnets. It may mingle with classicizing elements in a work such as the *Gerusalemme liberata*, which derives its greatness in part from the nobility, elegance, and "spirito classico" of poetry treating fantastical subject matter.⁵⁵ Metastasio belongs to this hybrid variety of genius and cannot be contained by artificial classification, the pedant's immortal insistence on either/or. He is not immune to criticism—Gherardini grants the superficiality of the Metastasian love triangle—but to assert that no modern audience (or only an audience as intemperate as those found in Italy) could be moved by Metastasio is inaccurate. Who among us does not weep at the generous pardon that Tito confers on his enemies? Who can repress tears at the sight of a Temistocle willing to sacrifice himself for a homeland hostile and ungrateful? Gherardini ends with a

⁵³ "Parmi strano e ridicolo il pretendere che Metastasio abbia fatto quello ch' egli stesso non ha mai preteso di fare." Here, Gherardini summons the authority of Aurelio de' Giorgi Bertola, whose commentary on Metastasio first appeared in the 1784. Schlegel, *Corso di letteratura drammatica*, trans. Giovanni Gherardini, vol. 2 (Milan: Paolo Emilio Giusti, 1817), 242–43.

⁵⁴ Gherardini, *Corso di letteratura drammatica*, 244–45.

⁵⁵ Gherardini, *Corso di letteratura drammatica*, 245–46.

burst of impatience: “You alone among millions of men, you alone, oh Schlegel, read Metastasio, while your heart sleeps and your eyes remain dry!”⁵⁶

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From here an investigation into Metastasio’s enduring influence within larger social or political discourses could take any number of paths. Foscolo, later echoed by De Sanctis, dismissed Metastasio in part by labeling him “feminine,” coupling the aesthetics of eighteenth-century art with a kind of limp-wristed foppery incapable of political action. We might, then, consider the gender politics of reading Metastasio in the nineteenth century, asking who actually read all those new editions printed in the 1810s, whether they were not seen as ornamental, precious, untaxing, useful only to women who wished to furnish their minds with poetic delicacies. We might elaborate on the old opposition between harmony and melody (a thinly veiled metaphor for Germany and Italy) that surfaces in so many accounts of Metastasio, speculating about other musical readings of poetry. It was, according to one observer, precisely his musicality, the suavity of his rhythm, his constant harmony, his effortless fluidity, that allowed Metastasio to be performed in the far reaches of the Earth.⁵⁷

If, as Gherardini tells us, libretti in the 1810s were composed with “the most insolent impatience for the gradual development of emotions,” we might also situate Metastasio within the history of those emotions, of affect and the senses.⁵⁸ Like a flash of lightning, the firing of a cannon, *melodramma* now delights in shocking the nerves instead of persuading the intellect or moving the heart, and Gherardini attributes this avidity for violence and suspense—demanded by all who frequent the theater—to the recent years disrupted by war and revolution.⁵⁹ If only Italians could enjoy a period of peace, he prophesied, the public would return to admiring scenes calm, sweet, and tender—“la naturale gradazione degli affetti.”⁶⁰ When, in 1826, Giambattista Corniani claimed that “no reader could read [Metastasio’s] dramas without crying,” are we to take this as a renewal of eighteenth-century sentimentalism or a sign of romantic excess?⁶¹

Nor can we ignore the shift in poetic language around 1800, a phenomenon familiar to anyone who has glanced at libretti from this period and marked the contrast between the lucid verses of Metastasio and the periphrastic, intentionally

⁵⁶ “Tu solo fra tanti milioni d’uomini, tu solo, o Schlegel, leggi il Metastasio, e dorme intanto il tuo cuore, e inaridiscono i tuoi occhi!” Gherardini, *Corso di letteratura drammatica*, 260.

⁵⁷ See the excerpt from Giambattista Corniani’s *I secoli della letteratura italiana* affixed to the *Opere di Pietro Metastasio* (Firenze: Giuseppe Molini, 1826), xxi.

⁵⁸ Gherardini, *Corso di letteratura drammatica*, 258.

⁵⁹ “Ma questa impazienza, quest’avidità di cose straordinarie e impensate che il pubblico mostra al teatro, non dipenderebbe forse dalla portentosa rapidità delle più strange vicende a cui furono avvezzi gli animi nostri dagli ultimi anni di tempeste e di tremuoti politici?” Gherardini, *Corso di letteratura drammatica*, 258.

⁶⁰ “Se così è, quando un sufficiente periodo di vera e benefica paca avrà sopita l’effervescenza delle menti, è probabile che anche ne’ diletti del cuore e dello spirito il pubblico tornerà ad amare la calma, la dolcezza, le tenere immagini, la naturale gradazione degli affetti. Questo è il miracolo che noi ci aspettiamo.” Gherardini, *Corso di letteratura drammatica*, 258.

⁶¹ Corniani, *I secoli della letteratura italiana*, xvii.

obtuse *linguaggio poetico* of the nineteenth century. In Piero Weiss's reading, Metastasio's language—simple, musical, conversational, and “almost devoid of noticeable artifice”—symbolizes “the culmination of French influence in Italian letters.”⁶² Perhaps because of the anxiety of foreign influence or because romanticism relished increasingly obscure historical detail and local color, many Italian writers after 1800 fiercely rejected the cool cosmopolitanism of eighteenth-century poetry and increasingly favored regionalisms and neologisms, while simultaneously pushing word order to the limits of comprehensibility.

Vittorio Alfieri (“Metastasio reversed,” as Schlegel called him) was a leader in this charge, followed closely by writers such as Monti and Foscolo, who, as we have already seen, rebelled against the strictures of Metastasio's vocabulary. Foscolo reached back to the Renaissance to find his poetic ideal, noting that

Petrarch . . . has not only vigorously grasped and beautifully used all the abundance of words—all the variety of numbers—all the graces and energy and idioms of his own language, but he has naturalized those of the Provençal and Spanish poets.⁶³

Defenders of Metastasio would of course reject the “obscurant charlatanry” of contemporary writers, while others would find means of excusing him.⁶⁴ When Camillo Ugoni, himself a patriot and political exile, as well as a personal friend to Foscolo, translated the *Essays on Petrarch* into Italian, he transformed Metastasio's economy into a virtue, claiming in a footnote that he shared with Tasso a language “that is fresh and easily intelligible to everyone.”⁶⁵ Some Metastasio apologists even described a kind of incantatory quality to his verses, as if such consistent eloquence, now deemed unachievable, were only possible through magic.⁶⁶

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A selection of early nineteenth-century opinion both sympathetic and opposed to Metastasio could continue, but we would eventually find ourselves asking with Luigi Russo, “What [will] be the final judgment?”⁶⁷ Charles Rosen offered one answer, insisting that poetic tragedy in eighteenth-century literature was a “disastrous failure” and that “Metastasio is intolerable except in the smallest of doses.”⁶⁸ We might be tempted to agree with him, our minds numb after reading so many stories of canned heroism and aristocratic largesse, but the duties of the historian pressure us to keep such feelings to ourselves. As a genre, reception history

⁶² Weiss, “Sacred Bronzes’: Paralipomena to an Essay by Dallapiccola,” *19th-Century Music* 9, no. 1 (Summer 1985): 42–49.

⁶³ Foscolo, *Essays on Petrarch* (London: John Murray, 1823), 93.

⁶⁴ “Metastasio (la cui poesia dispiace adesso a taluno per le stesse ragioni che la filosofia del Lock e del Condillac, cioè per esser priva di quella oscurità ciarlatanesca così di moda or che uno scrittore tanto più si ammira, quanto meno s’intende) . . .” See Ant. Renzi., review of *Il Riccio rapito* di Pope, *tradotti in italiano da S. Uzielli*, *Antologia* 10 (1823): 157–58.

⁶⁵ It was, moreover, “un italiano, non solo facile agli Italiani, ma neppur difficile alla Corte e alla Nazione, presso cui viveva.” See the footnote in the *Saggi sopra il Petrarca* (Florence: Giuseppe Galletti, 1825), 80–82.

⁶⁶ See again the excerpt from Corniani's *I secoli della letteratura italiana*, xviii.

⁶⁷ Luigi Russo, *Metastasio* (Bari: Laterza, 1921), 245.

⁶⁸ Charles Rosen, *The Classical Style* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1997), 166.

seems to invite such equivocation, to tempt us to leave unsorted the wheat and chaff of criticism and note simply that although Schlegel's verdict would eventually triumph, many Italian commentators confidently dismissed him as a straw man representative of all things foreign and fashionable, whose laughably poor understanding of the Italian language rendered him incapable of judging Metastasio's poetry.⁶⁹ In short, some liked Metastasio, others did not, and any attempt to pin down one literary or operatic experience involves a great deal of anguished handwringing.

But if the tussle between Schlegel and Gherardini leaves us searching for conclusions, it should also remind us of just how inadequate terms such as romantic and classical are for understanding the expressive languages of early nineteenth-century Italy. Two recent studies—one by Mary Ann Smart, another by Ellen Lockhart—have waded into the fray, and although they adopt different poses—Smart bends toward articulating what was romantic about this art; Lockhart traces the enduring influences of classicism—both authors often valorize music and texts that are conspicuously defined against the aesthetics of eighteenth-century *opera seria* and its laureled poet.⁷⁰ Such music is declamatory or quasi-improvisatory, resting somewhere between accompanied recitative and modest lyricism; it seems to shun artifice and ornament, the indifference to text or mood that, we are so often told, is Italian opera's greatest aesthetic transgression. For Smart, excavating the ballets of Salvatore Viganò, it was in part pantomime's absence of voice and melodic excess that allowed it to model “an expressive and absorptive music-theatrical experience,” opening it up as a site for “probing exegesis and aesthetic prestige” that had escaped Rossini in the 1810s.⁷¹ Equally for Lockhart, it was the sparse language of melodrama that most closely approximated the classical desire to fuse gesture and meaning, eventually leading to the more directly expressive musical language of Bellini's so-called *canto declamato* in *Il pirata* or *La straniera*.⁷²

And yet if we follow Metastasio—at least, the ideals of Metastasio, if it proves too difficult to love his poetry on its own terms—we may find a way to avoid the dead ends of subcanonicity. Despite Luigi Romanelli reading *Norma* as thoroughly incompatible with Metastasio's dramaturgy (with which this chapter began), perhaps in Bellini's toga-clad proconsuls we do detect a familial resemblance to Metastasio's heroes. After all, it is commonplace to observe that although *Norma* has come to be representative of Italian musical romanticism, its setting, its static pacing, its dignity and simplicity, and its indebtedness to the tale of Medea seem to flout such a label.⁷³ Felice Romani, unquestionably the most influential librettist of his time, was unwavering in his distrust of romanticism, and references to Metastasio as opera's poetic ideal are scattered throughout his critical writings. In

⁶⁹ See, for example, Giuseppe Urbano Pagani-Cesa, *Sovra il teatro tragico italiano* (Venice: Alfisopoli, 1826), especially 48–66.

⁷⁰ Smart, *Waiting for Verdi* and Ellen Lockhart, *Animation, Plasticity, and Music in Italy, 1770–1830* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017).

⁷¹ Smart, *Waiting for Verdi*, 53, 24.

⁷² Lockhart, *Animation*, 77–78.

⁷³ David Kimbell, *Vincenzo Bellini: Norma* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

the opera, the most beautiful and distinctive music is lavished on moments of inaction, the sublimity of Bellinian melody often coupling with the old similes drawn from the language of eighteenth-century libretti. Must we agree with Mazzini that such music, the music for which Bellini is now universally admired, resembles “Metastasio’s sickly-sweet languor” and is therefore “more inclined to enfeeble, to enervate, and to make sterile the power of the human spirit than to strengthen it”?⁷⁴ Perhaps. But we can also side with the many admirers of Metastasio, who did not write romantic tracts but continued to read him in silent veneration at home, in libraries where politics, even the urgent politics of a nation under foreign rule, were not the matters of greatest concern. They may have worshiped a beauty that has proven impermanent, but their reading habits can nonetheless be a reminder that tradition and the un-revolutionary have meaningful pleasures of their own.

⁷⁴ *Edizione nazionale degli scritti di Giuseppe Mazzini*, vol. 8 (Imola, 1910), 1589. Quoted in Kimbell, *Norma*, 91.

3. Describing Rossini

And it is on the surface only the common gaze will
fall. As to what lies below, leave that with God.

Villette, I. xvii

Let us turn again to one of the most famous passages in Rossini, the expansive instrumental introduction to Tancred's entrance in Act I. Habit dictates that before considering the music—whether that involves pushing play, fumbling at the keyboard, or relying simply on the mind's ear—we first open our libretto to set the scene. Gaetano Rossi's description is brief, but a few suggestive phrases are enough to summon the Mediterranean: “a flowering beach,” “an inlet of the sea,” “waves lapping against the palace walls.” He need not add that the sun is shining, for it could not be otherwise. Glancing at the score, we are relieved that Rossini's rendering of this picture (Example 3.1) relies on familiar topoi, and thus a musicological translation of his music into prose can be as cheerfully brief as Rossi's: a barcarolle, some birdcalls, a plaintive oboe. It is in these terms precisely that Mary Ann Smart hears the introduction, with an added observation about a feeling of “timelessness” induced by the “constant rocking” of the clarinet, violas, and cellos.¹ Richard Taruskin's comments are equally succinct; he describes this passage as “one of Rossini's characteristic tone-paintings, full of nature sounds that conjure up the beautiful landscapes to which Tancredi addresses his first words of accompanied recitative.”² Were this a competition in precision, Heather Hadlock would be our champion, for after noting the key (C major) she summarizes the entire passage with one adjective: “lilting.”³

Upon first impression, the purpose of these few bars—a reassuring blend of convention and mimesis—and similar preparatory music in opera is obvious: along with the librettist's description and a few pieces of painted scenery, they serve to place the spectator at the seaside. To read, then, these musicological accounts alongside score and libretto is to step into a hall of mirrors. For if music duplicates the content of the libretto, any analysis that borrows from the libretto becomes a tautological reproduction of something that was already tautological. Hadlock tells us that Rossini's music mimes the “lapping of the waves,” though this hearing has undoubtedly been led by Rossi's description; the barcarolle rhythmic topos tells us more about the approaching skiff than any water drumming on the shore. Aside from this quibble, however, we cannot substantially disagree with any of the observations made above, for they all draw on settled musicological opinion—to contest what makes this scene “pastoral” and so clearly about the sea would be as futile as contesting what makes the oboe eternally “plaintive.”

¹ Mary Ann Smart, *Waiting for Verdi* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018), 56.

² Richard Taruskin, *The Oxford History of Western Music*, vol. 3, 28–30.

³ Heather Hadlock, “*Tancredi* and *Semiramide*” in Emanuele Senici, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Rossini* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 152.

Andante

The musical score is written for piano and is in 6/8 time. It begins with a dynamic marking of *p* (piano) and a tempo marking of *Andante*. The score is organized into six systems, each containing a treble and bass staff. The bass staff consistently plays a rhythmic accompaniment of eighth notes, often with slurs and accents. The treble staff features more varied melodic lines, including sixteenth-note passages and chords. The piece concludes with a final chord in the bass staff.

Example 3.1: Rossini, *Tancredi*, from Act I, no. 3 Scena e cavatina

Stendhal’s account of this passage—much like his account of everything—ranges freely between analysis and analogy, delights in hyperbole. His words test the modern reader’s willingness to take him seriously as a critic. Rather than simply smiling upon Rossini for his gracefully warbling oboe, Stendhal heralds this moment as a “superb climax of *dramatic harmonization*,” a notable exception to his

aesthetic prejudice against excessive instrumentation.⁴ For Stendhal this introduction is far from ornamental or tautological; he devotes several pages to defending its dramatic necessity, isolating each instrument's unique ability to "voice nuances and overtones of emotion which the characters themselves would never dare put into words."⁵ He maintains that Tancredi "must not speak" when he enters, though he falters when attempting to articulate why. Eventually, for clarity's sake, he resorts to a literary analogy: "I would suggest," he writes, "that Rossini successfully employs a device invented by Walter Scott. . . . Just as Rossini uses his *orchestral harmony* to prepare the way for, and to reinforce, his passages of vocal music, so Walter Scott prepares the way for, and reinforces, his passages of dialogue by means of *description*."⁶ What follows is a lengthy summary of the opening pages of *Ivanhoe*, Stendhal's attempt to reproduce Scott's "long sweeping vistas" that lead the eye to those picturesque "scenes of silvan solitude."⁷ The conclusion is simple: "Composers of genius . . . relate orchestral harmony to vocal melody in precisely the same manner as Walter Scott relates description to dialogue in *Ivanhoe*."

Stendhal surprises us—within a few pages we have leapt from music to literature, from a noble *musico* landing on the shores of Syracuse to a jester and a swineherd huddled together in a Yorkshire wood. And yet as tempting as this analysis may be, no one can quote from the *Life of Rossini* without the blush of self-consciousness. Because Stendhal is so often inscrutable or simply wrong, modern commentators are forced to adopt various poses to acknowledge his idiosyncrasies and contradictions, lest they risk abandoning him as a rich (and precious rare) source of contemporary opinion about music.⁸ The Scott comparison is no mere eccentricity, however. Although analogies across the arts are scattered throughout the *Life*—just a few paragraphs before, Stendhal had invoked the abuses of color in reproductions of Raphael—this passage stands out not only due to its length and its reappearance in Stendhal's other writings, but because it anticipates in miniature an argument advanced in 1832 by the Italian historical novelist Carlo Varese, who at great length insisted on the structural affinities between Scott and Rossini (including likening the effects of reading description in a novel to hearing instrumental music in an opera).

Walter Scott is a familiar protagonist in histories of romantic opera, but Stendhal's and Varese's accounts of hearing Rossini suggest that his influence extended beyond providing the source material for a handful of works. Their Scott is more than a purveyor of myth and romance, the shortbread-tin local color of *La donna del lago*. Reading and rereading Scott has taught them how to listen. In point

⁴ Stendhal, *The Life of Rossini* (1823), trans. Richard N. Coe (Oxford: Oneworld Classics, 2008), 59.

⁵ Stendhal, *The Life of Rossini*, 59.

⁶ Stendhal, *The Life of Rossini*, 60.

⁷ Walter Scott, *Ivanhoe* (1819), I.i.

⁸ For discussions of Stendhal's inaccuracies, see Benjamin Walton's chapter "Deciphering Hyperbole: Stendhal's *Vie de Rossini*" in his *Rossini in Restoration Paris* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 24–67 as well as Melina Esse, "Rossini's Noisy Bodies," *Cambridge Opera Journal* 21, no. 1 (March 2009): 27–64.

of fact, his novels calibrated the expectations for any long work of imaginative fiction. Encouraged, then, by Varese's extended and persuasive corroboration of Stendhal's observations, this chapter considers the role of description in early nineteenth-century Italian opera. Descriptions of various casts abound here, from elaborate, written evocations of foreign landscapes printed in libretti to richly orchestrated passages of instrumental music, *scene* and interludes that, whether via a brief harmonic progression touched by chromaticism or an extended virtuosic display for several soloists, introduce so many of our favorite arias and ensembles.

The critical chatter of the past few centuries has had little positive to say about *description*, preferring, almost unanimously, the more active technique of *narrative* in both literature and the visual arts. For this reason, perhaps, description has been all but absent in the work of musicologists committed to hearing nineteenth-century instrumental music in terms of plot archetypes; they have struggled enough to convince the world that music can narrate without trying to prove that it can describe as well. In opera, "descriptive" music often lacks the genre's most persuasive element (that is, voice), and thus it too has received little attention, even among the more formalist accounts of dramaturgy.⁹ And yet it was Rossini's descriptive techniques—if we may apply this term to his handling of instrumentation and harmony—that prompted some of the most bitter attacks and passionate defenses of his style in the first decades of the nineteenth century. Stendhal and Varese were hardly the only ones to borrow from (or even ascribe agency to) literature in an effort to understand what set Rossini apart from his predecessors.

The discussion that follows is part historical, part analytical. It aims to articulate something about the messy and (more often than not) ineffable ways that literature and music commingle in Italian opera, how the reception of Scott's innovative descriptive techniques came to merge with the reception of Rossini's. To confront operatic descriptive language involves turning to old debates about narrative in music, the limits of imitation and mimesis, as well as accusations of German harmony infiltrating Italian opera, a question often raised but seldom answered. Detailing the expressive characteristics of this music also invites us to answer recent calls from both musicologists and literary critics to revel in the surfaces of art. We are now attuned, for example, to the lively world of topics crowding late eighteenth-century instrumental music, though the literalness of many of Rossini's descriptions seems to defy similar analyses: while Mozart could use horn calls or a *siciliana* to evoke feelings of nostalgia or melancholy, Rossini returns them to the service of the hunting party and the shepherdess. As the *Tancredi* example shows, it can be difficult to discuss such generic, descriptive music without invoking the things being described. This repertory is alternately celebrated and condemned for its dependence on convention, but it is this very conventionality that may force us to

⁹ In Marco Beghelli's account of Rossinian dramaturgy, descriptive *scene* seem to exist outside of the action proper, occupying a blank preparatory space before the recitative or *tempo d'attacco*. See "The dramaturgy of the operas" in Emanuele Senici, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Rossini* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 85–103.

reconsider not only the way Rossini describes, but how we describe as well. Today, description is often suppressed in favor of more objective or argumentative language. Writing about music, however, will always be a literary and descriptive practice, and this chapter insists that we reclaim description as a technique, perhaps *the* technique, that is central to the discipline.

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Carlo Varese's essay "On Rossini and Walter Scott" is bewildering, even by the standards of nineteenth-century criticism. Perhaps it is the singularity of its proposition that induces confusion—"Walter-Scott è il Rossini della letteratura, Rossini è il Walter-Scott della musica"—or perhaps it is simply that Varese's discussion sprawls across sixty pages.¹⁰ We can easily account for our predecessors' unfamiliar metaphors, though we seldom encounter such commitment to them. The overarching argument is simple enough: Varese suggests that both Scott's and Rossini's unprecedented success is the fruit of the happy union of competence and efficiency, aided by the cultural and political circumstances particular to the early nineteenth century. Regrettably—at least for a man of middling talents in the business of novel writing such as Varese—their popularity has also corrupted public taste, condemning aspirant composers or novelists to purgatorial careers as imitators. While this story (mediocrity outshone by genius) is an ancient one, Varese's thesis also has a more ambitious edge: he wants to show how listening to Rossini is phenomenologically equivalent to reading a Scott novel.

References to passages in operas or novels—*The Barber of Seville* and *Kenilworth* are particular favorites, said to achieve their effects through identical means—tumble by one after another. Drawing on specific examples, we are told, will help to "fix the analogy between the thought expressed with words and the thought expressed with musical notes."¹¹ Varese's insistence on particulars makes him a valuable source among the sea of nineteenth-century music criticism usually awash with generalizations, though as we read we soon recognize that our skepticism is provoked not by the boldness of the argument but by the handling of the evidence. For Varese is no musical authority; in fact, he openly confesses his poor theoretical understanding, likening himself to a sightless wanderer lost in an unknown kingdom. To supplement his lay instincts, he has turned to a discussion in the *New Monthly Magazine* that had recently circulated in several Italian journals. The article brims with now familiar arguments for and against Rossini's style—its rhythmic vitality and intelligibility of ideas, its mannerisms and flagrant plagiarism—onto which Varese grafts the poetics of Scott's novels. It is here, moving between music and literature, that Varese stumbles, though because

¹⁰ The *dissertazione* "Di Rossini e di Walter Scott messi a confronto come genii di indole identica" appeared as a preamble to Varese's novel *Preziosa di Sanluri* (Milan: Stella e Figli, 1832), v–lxiii. Emanuele Senici has leveraged Varese's passing accusation of Rossini's and Scott's "atrocious indifference" to the representation of reality to contemplate the relationship between operatic representation and more general understandings of politics; Senici, "An atrocious indifference: Rossini's operas and the politics of musical representation in early nineteenth-century Italy," *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 17, no. 4 (2012): 414–26.

¹¹ Varese, xxii.

historical misreadings can tell us as much about how people listened as any other form of criticism, we might momentarily suspend our doubts and follow his lead.

One of the mannerisms (or, to put it more charitably, characteristic gestures) allegedly shared by Rossini and Scott is an overreliance on the crescendo. The English article, where Varese procured much of his understanding about music, speaks of the Rossinian crescendo with an analytical clarity that, save for its richness of expression, would not be out of place in any modern music history textbook:

Some simple phrase, of four bars or so, founded on an alternation of the tonic and dominant harmonies, is selected to serve as a peg to hang on the darling crescendo; and nothing remains but to ring the changes on the passage in question, taking care to let the instruments step in successively, and to augment the bustle in gradation, by increasing not only the momentum of sound, but also the number and speed of the notes.¹²

The emphasis on instrumentation attracts Varese's attention, and he is quick to assert the similarities between Scott's use of description and Rossini's orchestration. "Anyone with any musical understanding who has read the descriptions of the Scottish novelist," he writes, "will confess with me that the magical effect produced by them is due in particular to the rapid succession of images, almost taking the place of the instruments in the music."¹³ The analogy is plausible, not only because it so clearly relates to what Stendhal heard in Tancred's introduction but also because it aligns with what many commentators in the previous decade identified as one of the most recognizable idiosyncrasies of Rossini's style. Frustrated by Rossini's habit of using short, melodically unrelated syntactic units—a marked contrast to the balanced four- or eight-bar phrases of Paisiello or Cimarosa—Eleuterio Pantologo declared that "without any logical connection, images give way to images and motives to motives."¹⁴ Perhaps Varese's ear is sharper than he would have us believe.

Yet Varese has also misunderstood the writer for the *New Monthly Magazine*, and in order to make a technical term such as crescendo equally applicable to both music and the novel, he has broadened its definition to mean any "contrivance of grand effect" ("artificio di grande effetto nella musica e nella romanza").¹⁵ In this way the calumny aria in *Il barbiere di Siviglia* is representative of the Rossinian crescendo, insofar as it culminates in "the deafening uproar of all the instruments imitating the disorder of a fierce tempest."¹⁶ Conveniently—perhaps suspiciously so—Varese alights on a moment of calumny in Scott's Elizabethan romance

¹² G.L.E., "The Characteristics of Rossini's Compositions," *New Monthly Magazine* 28 (1830): 57.

¹³ "Chiunque ha letto con qualche disposizione musicale le descrizioni del Romanziere Scozzese, confesserà meco che l'effetto magico da esse prodotto è dovuto particolarmente a quell'avvicinarsi rapido delle immagini, quasi successivo sottentrare degli strumenti nella musica." Varese, xxxiv.

¹⁴ Eleuterio Pantologo, *La musica italiana nel secolo XIX. Ricerche filosofico-critiche* (Florence: Coen, 1823). Quoted in Carlida Steffan, ed., *Rossiniana: antologia della critica nella prima metà dell'Ottocento* (Pordenone: Edizioni Studio Tesi, 1992), 127.

¹⁵ Varese, xxxiv.

¹⁶ Varese, xxxv.

Kenilworth to relate this technique to literature. When, in an act of political expediency, the impious Varney sets out to defame the character of Amy Robsart before her husband Leicester—who is keeping his marriage a secret so as not to incur the disfavor of the queen—his speech is paced along the lines of a Rossinian crescendo. “Every word of the vile counselor,” Varese tells us, “is a semitone more vigorous than the previous, is a *stretta* more harmonious, is truly a device that gradually increases the noise and multiplies the strength of the sound and the number and the speed of the notes.”¹⁷ The smoke has cleared, the mirror cracked, and we now see that Varese seeks merely to drape his newfound vocabulary onto various scenes in the *Waverley Novels*: Scott has a habit of narrating in triplets, and his descriptions of landscape or Highland dress take the shape of Rossini’s *appoggiaturas*.

As Varese lurches through his discussions of Scott and Rossini, he reminds us of one of the chief obstacles in writing about music and literature in the early nineteenth century. Words will always fail us if we try to recover the experiences of a reader and listener such as Varese, who, like Stendhal, turned with pleasure to the opening pages of *Ivanhoe* and heard Rossini’s harmonies ringing in his ears. Metaphor, especially literary metaphor, is no longer a viable mode of analysis, so we must recast what he tells us into the fiat currencies of our sober age. It makes sense that we can wrest many truths from historical informants such as Varese about consumption, popularity, print culture, and the media landscape of post-Napoleonic Italy. The greater challenge, however, is how to take seriously Varese’s analytical impulses without appearing self-indulgent. In private, when we allow our imaginations to roam freely, we might pull from the shelf our thumbled and creased copies of *The Antiquary* and ask what secrets it has to tell us about Rossini, but scholarly diligence will always prevent us from mistaking these moments of intemperance for historical truth.

There is a middle path, however, one that proceeds cautiously from Varese and Stendhal toward a broad survey of Rossini’s descriptive passages themselves in the hope of unveiling the mechanism behind their purportedly magical effects. Rossini’s operas largely predate the mania for Scott’s novels in Italy, and thus before turning to questions of reception and critical discourse, before seeking the whys and wherefores that drew them together, we can first indulge in that old musicological pastime of bringing to our desk a pile of scores and librettos and reporting on what we find. The grim specter of presentism may be there waiting for us, but we must learn to greet him as a friend if we are to see the importance of description—a musically enriching, additive, thickening, serendipitous, compromised, ubiquitous, and, not only legitimate, but discursively responsible, analytical practice.

*

As with the *Tancredi* example, the natural starting point for any discussion of operatic descriptions is those offered by librettists, and throwing a glance back into

¹⁷ “Ogni parola dell’infame consigliere è un semitono più gagliardo dell’antecedente, è una stretta più intonata, è proprio un artificio che aumenta a grado il rumore, e moltiplica la forza del suono e il numero e la velocità delle note.” Varese, xxxvii–xxxviii.

the decades that preceded Rossini may help to set the work of his poets into relief. In eighteenth-century *opera buffa* descriptions of scenery and setting are often arrestingly brief, such that we can easily forget that all of life does not take place in the sparsely decorated rooms of country houses, where maidservants will go on outwitting their boorish masters until the end of time. The action of *Il matrimonio segreto*, for example, is confined to a *sala*, a few *appartamenti*, and a *gabinetto*—generic spaces, universally recognizable. While serious opera, with all its ruffles and bewigged classicism, could occasionally venture into more fantastic realms, magic islands ruled by sorceresses who ride dragons across the sky, more often than not its librettists similarly found little to describe in the rosy-hued landscapes of antiquity.

As new literary fashions in the nineteenth century—call it what you will, romanticism, the gothic, setting aside the frustrating inadequacies of importing these terms across the Alps discussed in Chapter 2—led opera plots out of Arcadia, descriptions began to grow in detail and length. To capture the particularities of, say, a fisherman’s hovel, a Highland glen, or baskets of ocher-colored spices in a Baghdad market could require up to half a page of printed text.¹⁸ British settings consistently inspired some of the most elaborate descriptions, surely a result of all those tawdry novels featuring slight heroines in sublime natural settings that were churned out of England around 1800 (and subsequently translated into Italian). Gaetano Rossi’s work is representative of this fashion, as can be seen in his *Etelinda*, set in fifteenth-century Scotland:

The scene shows part of a pleasant house on the shore of a lake. Sigemaro’s hut rests on a boulder rising from the lake and is reached by a rough flight of steps carved into the rock: along the coast behind the cabin the rest of the hamlet is formed of various huts and shacks. To the right of the hut is the entrance to a grove, where Sigemaro has constructed a kind of arbor. A chain of small rocks rises from the lake. In the distance various landscapes and mountains. Around the hut are nets, traps, hooks, and everything that points to the life of a fisherman. A boat on the shore.¹⁹

We can have no doubt that such descriptions were modeled directly on description in poetry and the novel, especially if we turn to Rossi’s distillation of *Ivanhoe*, in which he reproduced memorable details from Scott:

¹⁸ For the description of a Baghdad *bazaar*, see Felice Romani, *Il califfo e la schiava* (Milan: Giacomo Pirola, 1819).

¹⁹ “La decorazione rappresenta parte di ameno casale sulla riva d’ un lago. La capanna di Sigemaro è piantata su d’ un masso che s’ avvanza nel lago a cui si ascende per una rozza scalinata scavata nella roccia: dietro la capanna, e lungo la riva il rimanente del casale formato di varie capanne e casucce. Alla destra, rispetto alla capanna sull’ imboccatura di un boschetto, Sigemaro ha costruito una specie di berceau di verdura. Una catena di piccioli scogli s’ alza dal lago. Nel prospetto in lontananza vari punti di paesaggi e montagne. All’ intorno della capanna sono distese delle reti, delle nasse, degli ami e tutto ciò che addita il soggiorno di pescatori. Un battello alla riva.” *Etelinda* (Milan: Giacomo Pirola, 1818), 37.

Hall in Rotherwood Castle. – Table in the middle in the shape of a T. – At its head, two chairs reserved for the Thane and for his daughter. – Saxon knights seated on both sides of the table. – A butler and two cup-bearers at the head. – Pages and domestic servants. – Two large windows at the bottom. – Two large side doors.²⁰

True, many of these compressed, telegraphic fragments are of a generic cast; they suggest far more than they instruct; they offer only the lightest sketch of a scene, cues for the set designer. And yet what lover of *Ivanhoe* could forget that Cedric's banqueting tables resembled "the form of the letter T," such that even this detail alone, plucked out of many, calls to the mind oversized fireplaces, roof beams encrusted with soot, moldering tapestries, and all the other trappings of a proud but disenfranchised Saxon family?²¹

If not all libretti pointed to specific locations or imported descriptive phrases directly from popular novels, enough of them do contain at least one rote evocation of the picturesque to identify the presence of cliff and cataract, mountain, heath, cavern or dell as a stylistic convention much like any other in this period. Description in Felice Romani's *Margherita d'Anjou*, for example, borders on the perfunctory:

A dense thicket on the base of a craggy mountain, from which rushes a torrent of water that is crossed by a broken tree. To the left a hut covered by vegetation.²²

We have stood in the shadow of this mountain countless times before. To account for the presence of these descriptions is to retell many familiar narratives about the late eighteenth century.

These are histories of aesthetics, of the sublime and picturesque; they involve new ways of seeing, cataloguing, and appreciating the natural world; microscopes and telescopes; travel writing; tourism; mass-produced prints of distant landscapes where the trees grow taller, the sun shines brighter. All of these strands have been gathered together by Cynthia Wall in her study of early romantic description.²³ Her argument—founded on classic definitions of description as a way of directing attention, of seeing—touches on many aspects of late eighteenth-century life, from consumers' expanding appetite for the goods of the marketplace to changing attitudes toward the general and the particular. The sudden self-consciousness about the allegedly barren, un-descriptive nature of much early eighteenth-century prose was prompted, she argues, by the "collapse of the memory storehouse"; as

²⁰ "Sala nel castello di Rotherwood. – Tavola nel mezzo in forma di T. – Nell'alto di essa, due sedie destine pel Thane, e per la di lui figlia. – Sedili ad ambe le parti della tavola, su quali cavalieri Sassoni. – Un Maggiordomo, e due coppieri all'alto. – Paggi, domestici in servizio. – Due vaste finestre nel fondo. – Due grandi porte laterali." *Ivanhoe* (Venice: Vedova Casali, 1832), 7.

²¹ Scott, *Ivanhoe* (1819), I. iii

²² "Foltissima boscaglia, nel fondo dirupata montagna, dall'alto della quale si precipita un torrente, che si attraversa sopra un albero rotto. Alla sinistra una capanna coperta dalle piante." *Margherita d'Anjou* (Milan: Giacomo Pirola, 1820), 22.

²³ Cynthia Sundberg Wall, *The Prose of Things: Transformations of Description in the Eighteenth Century* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006).

those common spaces—the *sala* and *gabinetto*—lost their familiar, universal qualities, they were no longer “a priori visible,” and thus it became the task of the poet or novelist to draw our attention to the world of previously unnoticed things scattered around us.²⁴

That opera followed a similar trajectory, moving from closed, domestic spaces to sending spectators galloping across uncharted terrain, we can see in those extended descriptions of librettists. But this collision with romantic literature has long been understood to have generated musical effects as well, inspiring composers to experiment with the old forms and find new ways of rendering audible details that, as Stendhal and others argued, were *necessary* to prepare for dramatic confrontation. By the time Rossini began composing his serious operas for Naples in the mid-1810s, descriptions of nature—both as gentlest mother and as site of awful sublimity—were a consistent presence in French and Italian opera, having arrived with the thundering crash of Cherubini’s famous avalanche in *Eliza* (1794).²⁵ Hunters with their horns, a lady in her bower accompanied by soft woodwinds, Alpine summits forever echoing the *ranz des vaches*: these are the conventions of operatic landscape.²⁶ If we open a libretto to a page calling for a “folto bosco ombroso,” we hardly need to consult the score to know how the composer responded: a few chords—likely arpeggiated, slowly, by the strings—to set the key followed by the main event, a passage of lyrical, obbligato writing for winds or horn.

Such moments abound in the operas of Johann Simon Mayr, a composer whose influence on Rossini and Donizetti cannot be overstated.²⁷ His immensely popular *Ginevra di Scozia* (1801) straddles two centuries, classical and romantic, with descriptions in the libretto both general and particular: Ginevra’s Scotland is simultaneously a pastoral ideal and civilization’s untamed frontier.²⁸ The story was familiar—Rossi reworked the old tale of Ariodante from Ariosto—but rather than confine himself to the heroic, imperishable, placeless quality of classical opera, the composer seemed determined to capture something of those fogs that had rolled into the Scottish Highlands with the strum of Ossian’s harp. The wood in Act II is both “foltissimo” and “vasto,” Ariodante is alone, and Mayr’s description features both an expansive horn solo and, charmingly, a few Scotch snaps (Example 3.2). That such music is meant to describe *something*, we cannot doubt—“Where am I?”

²⁴ Wall, *The Prose of Things*, 39.

²⁵ Michael Fend, “Literary Motifs, Musical Form and the Quest for the ‘Sublime’: Cherubini’s *Eliza ou le Voyage aux glaciers du Mont St Bernard*,” *Cambridge Opera Journal* 5, no. 1 (March 1993): 17–38.

²⁶ There have been many studies of landscape and Italian opera, perhaps the most original (and summative) being Emanuele Senici, *Landscape and Gender in Italian Opera: The Alpine Virgin from Bellini to Puccini* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

²⁷ Scott L. Balthazar’s writings are instructive on this topic. See, as a representative example, his “Mayr, Rossini, and the Development of the Early *Concertato* Finale,” *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 116, no. 2 (1991): 236–66.

²⁸ For a discussion of Scotland’s changing role in the European (musical) imagination during this period, see Matthew Gelbart, *The Invention of “Folk Music” and “Art Music”: Emerging Categories from Ossian to Wagner* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

Larghetto

p *sfp* *sfp* *sfp*

Horn

Clarinet

sfp *sfp* *sfp*

Horn

sfp

Clarinet

Flute Violins Bassoon

sfp *p*

Violins Woodwinds

sfp *p*

Example 3.2: Mayr, *Ginevra di Scozia*, from Act II, no. 8 Scena e cavatina

our hero asks, surveying the scene in wonderment—but aside from that there is little we can say about it; we will not hear this melody again in the opera; it will not be taken up, dignified, made memorable, perhaps eternal, by the turns of a star singer; this is no pantomime; there are no mute bodies to draw our gaze. If the many passages of instrumental music in Mayr's operas seem to have this blank, generic quality, it is only because he is in the act of creating that genre.

Description in a libretto was not always matched by musical description. A long paragraph on the page is accompanied by the jingle of *secco* recitative just as often as by any distinctive (or indistinctive) tone painting. Its function was structural as well as aesthetic; it allowed for moments of pause, a slower pace after the busyness of an ensemble. Scott's descriptions, as will be discussed below, were both praised and derided by Italians for their tendency to grind the action to a halt, and if a composer had recourse to similar effects, he invariably placed a descriptive episode in the center of an act. Just as operatic heroines were often introduced midway through Act I surrounded by *damigelle* in their gardens, so were heroes lost or imprisoned in the second act in some forest or dungeon, a mournful woodwind enlisted to give voice to their isolation and melancholy.

Mayr's Scotland is a natural introduction to Rossini's, though we must be cautious not to place all our hopes in a decidedly exceptional work, which has already attracted considerable musicological attention. Much has been made of the singularity of the *Introduzione* in *La donna del lago*, of Andrea Leone Tottola's extended description of the Trossachs and Loch Katrine in the libretto, of the harmonically ambiguous and richly orchestrated descending opening third motive played in front of a lowered curtain (Example 3.3a), of the unconventional succession of dramatic episodes, of the "naturalness" of Elena's barcarolle (Example 3.3b), of the "stereophonic" horn calls that, when all taken together, conjure up glen, moor, heather, and a thousand images of tartan-mantled chivalry.²⁹ This scene shows us Rossini's romanticism, his attention to setting, his subtle manipulation of individual *tinte* for his operas, all of which anticipate the Gallic manifestos in praise of *couleur locale* or *couleur du temps*.³⁰ The Neapolitan operas are, we are so often told, the works of an innovator, a composer who dispensed with formal contrivances such as overtures, expanded ensembles, and gifted us with some of early nineteenth-century opera's greatest set pieces: storms that rattle the casements of Desdemona's chamber; the nymphs and demons of Armida's pleasure gardens; the parting of the Red Sea.³¹

But in addition to these select, highly original responses to setting, Rossini also relied on descriptive techniques of a more generic cast. In surveys of Rossinian dramaturgy, custom has, not without good reason, led observers to parse his works

²⁹ The idea of the "stereophonic" comes from Fedele d'Amico, *Il teatro di Rossini* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1992). Other discussions of this scene can be found in Sabine Henze-Döhring, "La 'natura' nelle opera di Rossini," *Bollettino del centro rossiniano di studi* (1983): 113–23; Daniela Tortora, *Drammaturgia del Rossini serio* (Rome: Torre d'Orfeo, 1994); Marco Emanuele, *L'ultima stagione italiana: Le forme dell'opera seria di Rossini da Napoli a Venezia* (Florence: Passigli, 1997); and Alessandro Turba, "Ancora sulla *Couleur Ossianique* e il contesto cultural de *La donna del lago*," *Bollettino del centro rossiniano di studi* (2011): 5–110. Emanuele takes his cue from Carlo Ritorni's notion of a "introduzione squisita." See Ritorni, *Ammaestramenti alla composizione di ogni poema e d'ogni opera appartenente alla musica* (Milan, 1841).

³⁰ Anselm Gerhard also draws attention to the unique "color" of this opera in *The Urbanization of Opera*, trans. Mary Whittall (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

³¹ Three depictions of nature from *Otello*, *Armida*, and *Mosè in Egitto*, respectively. Praise for the formal innovation of these works can be found in Gossett and Balthazar. See also Lorenzo Tozzi, "*Armida* ou la couleur fantastique," *Bollettino del centro rossiniano di studi* (1975): 27–56.

Maestoso
Bassoon

+Clarinet, Strings

pp sottovoce

Cello - Bass

+Trbn.

8

Tutti

Example 3.3a: Rossini, *La donna del lago*, from Act I, no. 1 Introduzione

ELENA

Oh mat-tu - ti - ni al - bo - ri! vi ha pre - ce - du - ti A-

[p]

337

mor. Da' bre - vi miei so - po - ri a ri - de - star - mi

[p]

Example 3.3b: Rossini, *La donna del lago*, from Act I, no. 1 Introduzione

based on the number of characters onstage, to analyze the composer's standard operating procedure in aria, duet, *introduzione*, *gran scena*, and finale, to see how he both consolidated and resisted any *solite forme*. Less frequently have questions been asked about Rossini's realization of spaces or landscapes that occur across many operas.³² There are tempests that overturn carriages. There are the expected

³² There are a few notable exceptions. See again Emanuele, *L'ultima stagione italiana*, especially his discussion of "la 'tinta' individuale," 32–37.

moments of luxuriant pastoralism—think of the *cor anglais* obbligato addressing the “campagna vastissima” in *Sigismondo* or the flutes singing in full-throated ease on the banks of the Euphrates in *Aureliano in Palmira*. But by far the most common spaces described by Rossini are those subterranean vaults or prisons, those *scene delle tenebre* of anguish and inner turmoil in which our hero finds himself alone, shackled in darkness.³³

Dungeon scenes, such as those found in *Tancredi*, *Aureliano in Palmira*, *Elisabetta*, *Mosè in Egitto*, *Ricciardo e Zoraide*, and *Maometto Secondo* all follow a similar formal prototype, beginning with three harmonic statements by unison strings separated by responses from a high chorus of woodwinds. This timbral opposition is assuaged in the subsequent, central passage, which invariably features an ostinato or perpetual motion figure in the strings to support a lyrical theme from either high strings or woodwinds. This section is then repeated almost *in toto*, though while the ostinato continues, the lyrical theme is subject to fragmentation. Amenaide’s imprisonment scene in *Tancredi* cleaves closely to this model, and here the eternally plaintive oboe returns to pipe the lamentation, just as it did for that shepherd who first took it up some golden evening in Arcadia. Much like Mayr’s landscapes, Rossini’s prisons and tombs rely on the abstractions of a single melody than any effort to render particular a sense of character or place.

The prison scene in Act I of *Zelmira* draws on similar elements, though because it precedes a *cavatina* rather than an accompanied recitative, Rossini offers a concentrated version of this prototype. The opening opposition of woodwind and strings is collapsed, while the central musical “material” of this passage, if one can call it that, is a short melodic fragment presented three times in a harmonic sequence marked by a metrically accented applied dominant, the third iteration of which is sweetened by the addition of the flute and the relative major mode. *Zelmira*’s earliest critics were attuned to the preparatory work performed by such descriptive music, work that could be compromised if the action onstage contradicted the message from the orchestra. “In vain,” the reviewer for the *Giornale del Regno delle due Sicilie* noted, “Maestro Rossini artfully expressed the various emotions and prepared the positions of the actors; [but] the eye was almost always in contradiction with the ear . . . and diminished the effect.”³⁴ His frustrations accord with those of Stendhal, who likewise insisted that to unmoor the action from its descriptive introduction is to render it incomprehensible. Peter Lichtenthal

³³ Rossini’s prison music draws on many of the same techniques found in the analogous scene in *Fidelio*, techniques that predated Beethoven in Cimarosa’s prison scenes and even extended as far back as the works of early century Neapolitans such as Vinci and Hasse. For an extended discussion of such prison scenes before Rossini, see Helga Lühning, “Florestans Kerker im Rampenlicht. Zur Tradition des Sotterraneo,” in Helga Lühning and Sieghard Brandenburg, eds., *Beethoven: Zwischen Revolution und Restauration* (Bonn: Beethoven-Haus, 1989), 137–204. Marco Emanuele (*L’ultima stagione italiana*, 54–55) also briefly touches on the *scene delle tenebre*.

³⁴ “Invano il maestro Rossini esprimeva con arte i vari affetti e preparava le posizioni degli attori; l’occhio quasi sempre in contraddizione con l’orecchio ne roffreddava e diminuiva l’effetto.” *Giornale del Regno delle due Sicilie* 41 (February 18, 1822): 163.

agreed, writing in his 1826 *Dizionario della musica* that “such scenes are of great interest in operas because they prepare the great arias, duets, and so forth.”³⁵

In these and other scenes we immediately note, as did Stendhal and Varese, how Rossini deftly manipulates contrasting timbres. Thus to consider musical description is to resurrect accusations that late in his Italian operatic career—that is, with works such as *Zelmira* and *Semiramide*—Rossini’s idiom verged on the overly complex orchestration of the Teutonic style. The links between conspicuous obbligato writing and German influences were noted by almost every early commentator on Rossini’s style. For some it was simply an observable fact that Rossini’s instrumental passages “united Italian beauty with German vigor” (“i suoi concerti istrumentali riuniscono alla robustezza alemanna l’italica venustà”), while his detractors attacked his tendency to overuse the most “barbaric sonorities of ultramontane harmony” (“barbari accordi dell’armonia oltramontana”).³⁶ Stendhal was indefatigable in his insistence on the opposition between Italian melody and Germanic harmony, which only a genius such as Rossini could have reconciled, while for Giuseppe Carpani, in whose eyes Rossini could do no wrong, it was the “ingenious assignment of passages to different instruments” (“le ingegnose assegnazioni di passi ai diversi strumenti”)—a hallmark of Haydn and Mozart—that allowed him to rival musically the chiaroscuro of Rembrandt or Caravaggio.³⁷

Thanks to the influence of German theorists and historians, many of them writing in the 1830s or later (and, in the case of Carl Dahlhaus, much later), this opposition between national styles has come down to us as a rivalry between the idioms of Beethoven and Rossini, spawning a series of binaries—text vs. performance; symphony vs. opera; noumenal vs. phenomenal—said to characterize the entire musical nineteenth century. Today this historiographical vision rests on unstable ground, thanks in part to the criticism mounted against it by musicologists.³⁸ The Beethoven-Rossini dyad tells us more about German anxiety than anything else—a politically fractured country in need of cultural heroes found a convenient foil in Rossini’s sugary melodic extravagances, despite their unprecedented popularity—and it is now commonplace to assert that any differences in national style were discursively constructed (insofar as we still believe such differences to exist at all). As Benjamin Walton has noted, anyone turning to *Zelmira* in search of Beethoven’s fingerprints is bound to be disappointed, whatever

³⁵ “Tali Scene sono per lo più di sommo interesse nelle Opere, perchè preparano le grandi Arie, Duetti ec.” Peter Lichtenthal, *Dizionario e bibliografia della musica*, vol. 2 (Milan: Antonio Fontana, 1826), 183.

³⁶ Pantoligo, *La musica italiana nel secolo XIX*, and Marco Santucci, *Sulla Melodia, sull’Armonia e sul Metro* (Lucca: Bertini, 1828); quoted in Steffan, *Rossiniana*, 126 and 151, respectively.

³⁷ Carpani, *Le Rossiniane, ossia Lettere musico-teatrali* (Padua: Minerva, 1824); quoted in Steffan, *Rossiniana*, 75.

³⁸ Nicholas Mathew and Benjamin Walton, eds., *The Invention of Beethoven and Rossini* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

claims might have been made about it being almost “more German than Beethoven.”³⁹

It can be difficult to understand fully what Italians thought of Beethovenian harmony in the 1810s and ‘20s, especially when “harmony” had so many different meanings, some of them disappointingly pedestrian. It could, as it does today, point to specific, usually unexpected sonorities, but it could also refer to cadential articulation, obbligato instrumental writing, something elusively novelistic, or simply the size of an orchestra. One writer doubted that Rossini was, as many had claimed, a “profound expert in uniting [instruments] in harmony,” especially since he had recently attended a concert during which the stage seemed to empty as the players reshuffled themselves after *Wellingtons Sieg* in preparation for one of Rossini’s overtures.⁴⁰ And yet, despite claims to the contrary, Italians encountering Rossini for the first time did have a clear sense of the twin styles; Beethoven just had little to do with them.

This opposition was between Rossini and the masters of the late eighteenth century. If we believe Italians writing in the 1820s, what set him apart from, say, Paisiello were the same qualities that set Mozart apart from Cimarosa. Unfortunately for the modern observer, these differences lie somewhere between the obvious and the ineffable, and to entertain questions of Rossini’s German style is to run up against at least two obstacles. First, because the Italian style was still the international style at the border of the new century, to enumerate what Rossini shares with Mozart is to reach for the most familiar tools in a composer’s workshop. Put differently, to label Rossini as German (in the manner of Haydn, Mozart, or Beethoven) merely closes a historiographical circle, it being one of the great achievements of twentieth-century musicology to rub out the lines connecting Viennese classicism to Bach and retrace them in the direction of Pergolesi.⁴¹ The second obstacle relates to the difficulties of articulating these differences in an age that has largely lost faith in *Stilkritik* and connoisseurship. We might look to the sister disciplines for inspiration: art historian Elizabeth Prettejohn has recently argued that “artists may be most themselves—most significant aesthetically as well as historically—when they draw closest to the precursors they wish to explore.”⁴² But these are largely not the priorities of musicologists, which is perhaps why when Emily Dolan cites Stendhal’s provocative assertion that the trio in *Otello* shares

³⁹ The claim was made by Carpani. See Walton’s chapter, “More German than Beethoven’: Rossini’s *Zelmira* and Italian Style,” in Mathew and Walton, *The Invention of Beethoven and Rossini*, 159–77.

⁴⁰ Ferdinando Giorgiotti, *Lettera al Signor Eleuterio Pantologo introno alle sue Ricerche filosofico-critiche sulla musica del XIX secolo* (Florence, 1828); quoted in Steffan, *Rossiniana*, 141.

⁴¹ Daniel Hertz, “Approaching a History of 18th-Century Music,” *Current Musicology* 9 (1969): 92–95.

⁴² Elizabeth Prettejohn, *Modern Painters, Old Masters: The Art of Imitation from the Pre-Raphaelites to the First World War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017).

much with the musical language of *Don Giovanni*, it does not occur to her to reach for a score and see what he might mean.⁴³

Neither of these obstacles is insurmountable, but the aspirations of this chapter lie elsewhere. Although Stendhal insisted on the equivalences between Germanic harmonies and musical description, to argue for or against Rossini's indebtedness to Mozart's handling of a wind band will bring us no closer to understanding what all those preparatory instrumental passages might have to do with description in Walter Scott—or any other novelist for that matter. For even a listener who had never read Scott could detect something unsettlingly literary about Rossini's orchestration: writing about the premiere of *Armida*—and therefore before 1821, when the first translations of Scott appeared in Italy—the reviewer for the *Giornale del Regno delle due Sicilie* noted that the “barbarous fashion” to which Rossini had succumbed was undoubtedly “because he [was] overwhelmed by the reading of foreign classics.”⁴⁴ The agency is perplexing here. This writer seems to suggest that reading foreign literature was some kind of contagion that could escape its generic quarantine to infect other works of art. In order to understand (or even imagine) how this might be possible, how a composer or listener—historical or modern—might draw music and literature together such that the boundaries between them become indistinguishable, it is worth retreating briefly to remind ourselves of what “description” has meant outside of the highly original definition offered by Stendhal and Varese.

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An unwavering belief in the inferiority of description is one of the oldest prejudices in the arts and humanities, particularly when it is viewed alongside its imperishable rival, narration. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, rhetoricians and critics treated description with deep skepticism, as it amounted to almost a negation of literature (belonging to the non-literary realms of travel writing and science) or supplied what was only superfluous or ornamental; the “detail,” as one observer has it, is a moment of over-determined meaning and significance, one that “stops, blocks, and suspends the momentum of reading.”⁴⁵ Pierre Larousse, the great nineteenth-century lexicographer, warned against description's untamable freedom, which, imposing no limits on a reader's response to a text, might encourage the dangerous habit of *skipping*.⁴⁶ For Georg Lukács the stakes were even higher, for in addition to jeopardizing the cohesion of a narrative work, description also threatens to alienate readers with its jargon, its “vain competition with the visual arts,” and its fetishizing of objects that renders man as “appurtenances of things, static

⁴³ Emily I. Dolan, *The Orchestral Revolution: Haydn and the Technologies of Timbre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 247.

⁴⁴ “. . .adorno di barbari modi sia perchè sedotto (Rossini) dalla vertigine della moda, sia perchè soverchiamente nutrito dalla lettura dei classici stranieri.” *Giornale del Regno delle due Sicilie* 288 (December 3, 1817): 1502.

⁴⁵ Philippe Hamon and Patricia Baudoin, “Rhetorical Status of the Descriptive,” in Jeffrey Kittay, ed., *Yale French Studies* 61 (1981): 11.

⁴⁶ Hamon and Baudoin, “Rhetorical Status of the Descriptive,” 9–10.

beings.”⁴⁷ In the visual arts themselves, as Svetlana Alpers has discussed, it was the atemporal, descriptive quality of Dutch paintings, their silverwork and peeled lemons, that long marked them as inferior to the narrative dynamism of the Italian Renaissance.⁴⁸ If some scholars closer to our time have offered more neutral, even reparative, treatments of description—Gérard Genette stresses its indispensability to narrative; Seymour Chatman affirms the integrity of its own poetic logic—what unites all accounts is a belief that description exists “outside any event and even outside any temporal dimension.”⁴⁹ Description, in other words, is simply *there*.

To confront, perhaps even to summarize the vast body of literature on description is to hold a teacup before a torrent that could fill baths, lakes—the aisles devoted to description and its (primarily negative) reception are long, extending back to the earliest imaginative literature in the West. We might begin by digging out a copy of the *Iliad* to recall how Hephaestus wrought earth, heaven, and sea upon the shield of Achilles; we could sit beside Lessing, marveling at the Laocoön Group, and contemplate the limits of poetry; we could read Flaubert and Michelet with Roland Barthes. Both the *effet de réel* and theories of ekphrasis are central to evolving conceptions of “the descriptive,” though Rossini’s melodies are likely to sound hollow if played inside too vast a theoretical edifice. There is, fortunately, ample literature on Scott’s descriptive techniques, such that we need not stray too far from the analogies put forward by Varese and Stendhal. Varese allowed himself to fashion connections between Rossini and Scott partly because of the fact that everyone had read at least five or six of his novels, and even the briefest of glances at other Italian literary reviews from the 1820s reveals how Scott had become the standard by which to measure description in both history and fiction.⁵⁰

One of the most detailed and incisive essays on Scott and his style appeared in Vieuzeux’s *Antologia* in April 1824. The author was Sansone Uzielli (1797–1857), a member of a prominent Livornese banking family who at the age of twenty-three had left Italy for an extended tour of England and Scotland. The passions of impressionable young people are shared universally, and thus it seems only natural that while abroad Uzielli fell under the spell of both British literature and, after visiting a mill at New Lanark, the utopian socialism of Robert Owen. Upon his return to the peninsula, Uzielli set out to translate *The Rape of the Lock* and authored several critical essays, the most significant of which was a two-part article on the current state of the novel in Italy and the historical novels of Scott.⁵¹ In the 1820s,

⁴⁷ Georg Lukács, “Narrate or Describe?” (1936) in *Writer and Critic and other essays*, ed. and trans., Arthur Kahn (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1970), 111.

⁴⁸ Svetlana Alpers, *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

⁴⁹ Gérard Genette, “Frontiers of Narrative,” in *Figures of Literary Discourse*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 133. See also Seymour Chatman, *Coming to Terms: The Rhetoric of Narrative in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990).

⁵⁰ See, for example, the review of a biography of Napoleon published in *L’Eco* 1, no. 151 (December 17, 1828): 601–603. According to the reviewer, Scott is the benchmark of history writing due to his masterful descriptions of both war and the manners of the past.

⁵¹ S[ansone] Uzielli, “Del Romanzo storico, e di Walter Scott” *Antologia* 13, no. 39 (1824): 118–44.

the critical climate in Italy was still largely unfavorable for the novel, but despite the impermanence of fashion—Ugo Foscolo rejected the idea that one could speak of literary fashion in Italy at all—it was easy for Uzielli to discuss Scott, the only novelist who received unequivocal praise.⁵² Scott’s few detractors, we are told, need only reacquaint themselves with the great classical epics, which when stripped of their poetic attributes resemble the historical novel.

Accurate descriptions of manner, dress, and setting were, according to Uzielli, both an integral part of Scott’s project and one of his novels’ principal sources of pleasure; above all, Scott deserved praise for his ability to “describe [an object] to you in such a way that it truly seems that it is present.”⁵³ Our critic’s judgment is balanced, however, and he freely admits that description, when summoned at inopportune moments, could compromise a novel’s coherence. He quotes from *Waverley*, pointing to a now-famous passage illustrative of Scott’s self-consciousness:

The earlier events are studiously dwelt upon, that you, kind reader, may be introduced to the character rather by narrative than by the duller medium of direct description; but when the story draws near its close, we hurry over the circumstances, however important, which your imagination must have forestalled, and leave you to suppose those things which it would be abusing your patience to relate at length.⁵⁴

Use of this practice is infrequent, Uzielli reports with relief, though the fact that Scott resorts to it at all leaves his novels open to accusations of monotony: especially when nearing its conclusion—where this passage intrudes into *Waverley*—the narrative is often wrapped up at a speed likely to baffle even the most committed of readers. Importantly, Uzielli sees the use of description as intimately tied to anyone’s engagement with a text. While he cannot put his finger on how the reader’s attention is sustained across an entire novel, what allows him to float in careless rapture from the opening sentence to the last chapter, perhaps it owes something to Scott’s matchless ability to render “*visible and audible truths both general and particular*, making us *contemplate and listen* more than reflect and judge.”⁵⁵ If description in the hands of a master prompts us both to see and *hear* in new ways, the leaps made by Varese and Stendhal are suddenly no longer surprising.

Uzielli’s insistence on the sensory immediacy of reading is striking and anticipates much of what today’s critics—especially those interested in the ways new media have shaped our interaction with the world—have found so important in Scott. His descriptions are a literary achievement, a landmark in the history of

⁵² In his “Essay on the Present Literature of Italy” (1818), Foscolo argued that Italy, lacking a capital, also lacked a literary center, and thus it was impossible to articulate widespread consensus or prejudice. “The favourite of *the town*,” he writes, “would be an absurd solecism in a country where there are twenty towns with distinct literary interests and pretensions, and where the attachment of one city secures the opposition of another. . .”

⁵³ Uzielli, “Del Romanzo storico, e di Walter Scott,” 132.

⁵⁴ *Waverley* (1814), Chapter III, xxii.

⁵⁵ Uzielli, “Del Romanzo storico, e di Walter Scott,” 133; emphasis in the original.

the novel; he is credited with a technique that, as Franco Moretti has it, deliberately decelerated the narrative pace through the accumulation of “moments of pause,” which with their “new analytical-impersonal style” would define the realist novel. Ina Ferris, building on Moretti’s attention to Scott’s descriptions, has highlighted the multi-sensory, quasi-apparitional effects that Scott’s writings produced on so many of his readers, who attested to the extraordinarily visual aspect of his evocation of place and character, his ability to allow them to see with astonishing vividness a past about which they had previously only read.⁵⁶ Celeste Langan’s thesis must be reiterated here as well, her insistence that the traces of older media, imperfectly subsumed by the cold silence of print, could induce “audiovisual hallucinations” in readers of Scott’s poetry.

Such imaginative speculations about how Scott was enjoyed by our reading forefathers are based on the accounts of innumerable historical witnesses such as Uzielli. And yet, persuasive though these conclusions may be, they are equally dispiriting and impersonal, for they tell us things we can no longer feel. As with Varese’s vision of dialogues that crescendo and cadence, our language—clear, sober, scholarly—falters when we attempt to historicize the experience of reading or listening. True, we can find the unprecedented in Scott; we can believe readers who report on how his descriptions sent them into fits of delight, transported them—just short of literally, it seems—to moonlit bays where smugglers load barrels onto tall-masted ships and cloaked horsemen race across the sands; but in the end we are doomed by our exposure to later novelists and later media. He is always anticipating something—photography, the cinema, Flaubert, Tolstoy, those objects invested with almost oppressive significance in the novels of Henry James, beside which Scott’s descriptions necessarily feel unordered and often unjustified.⁵⁷

And Rossini—perhaps he arouses similar feelings. Notable exceptions aside, his instrumental preludes are stubbornly inert, often confined, as Smart has put it, to either “a static landscape” or “a single emotion” experienced by a character.⁵⁸ They are, in short, descriptive, and in that sense contrast, at least according to some early listeners, with Bellini’s more active depiction of character in an opera such as *Il pirata*. Here, in the opera’s concluding mad scene, we also find a famous passage for woodwind obbligato, music to accompany Imogene as she staggers across the stage; but unlike Rossini’s serene, disinterested pastoralism in *Tancredi*, the melodic line in Bellini is fragmented, influenced “moment by moment” by the heroine’s “erratic feelings and delusions.”⁵⁹ Highlight any advancement in the portrayal of character or musical realism, and the teleology becomes almost inescapable; soon we are likely to find ourselves praising the instrumental writing of Wagner, that

⁵⁶ Ina Ferris, “‘Before Our Eyes’: Romantic Historical Fiction and the Apparitions of Reading,” *Representations* 121 (Winter 2013): 60–84.

⁵⁷ For a recent discussion that casts Scott’s descriptions not as static but as kinetic and narrational, see Yoon Sun Lee, “Vection, Vertigo, and the Historical Novel,” *Novel* 52, no. 2 (2019): 179–99.

⁵⁸ Smart, *Waiting for Verdi*, 54.

⁵⁹ Smart, *Waiting for Verdi*, 58.

technological wizard who came closest to turning operas into movies.⁶⁰ Such comparisons raise questions that are central to both music and literature, but even without attempting to answer them they can help clarify what Rossini is not. He will not show us bodies racked in pain, nor build leitmotivic associations from act to act; swords will not cry out as they are pulled from trees and held aloft; he will not offer us elaborate programs or pantomimes. But Rossini nonetheless has the power to create a scene and leave us, quietly observing, to imagine the details of what he describes.

That, at least, is how the historical argument of this chapter might be articulated. For a variety of reasons—the influence of Mayr and Germanic orchestration; romanticism and its attention to setting and atmosphere—Rossini composed a great deal of preparatory instrumental music.⁶¹ Some of these passages follow perceptible schemata, others mime the prescriptions of the libretto. In turn, critics trying to make sense of Rossini's style could not help but notice his foregrounding of contrasting timbres, often to the point of abuse. Given the contemporaneous praise for Scott's descriptions, how strikingly pictorial they felt, how description, good description, at least, came to be seen as a vital component of the novel and inspired imitation by librettists, it does not stress credibility to believe that a few listeners with predilections for the literary might spot similarities between written description and music that performed a similar function.

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But there is a second argument to be made here, one relating less to the reception of allegedly descriptive instrumental passages and more to the difficulties of believing that music can describe at all. These are perennial musicological questions; ask *what* or *how* music describes and all the old doubts about program music come home to roost: its troubled relationship with the absolute, the limits of articulating the influence of literature on music, and, of course, the extent to which music might be said to narrate.

But while the questions are ancient, their answers elusive, they are no longer debated with the heated passion they once were, and thus we approach yesterday's musicological battles much like we approach any other ruined and smoldering battlefield—with reverence, perhaps, or simply bewilderment. The reenactors still come, of course. They march out, clutching texts by Adorno and Mahler under their arms, and take their shots at the old citadel, blissfully (or perhaps purposefully) unaware that the mistress of the keep is no longer home.⁶² She is Carolyn Abbate,

⁶⁰ Gundula Kreuzer offers a nuanced discussion of this old question, whether Wagner anticipates cinema, and the limits to hypothesizing about what he would have done if he had had access to the technology of the twentieth-century. See *Curtain, Gong, Steam: Wagnerian Technologies of Nineteenth-Century Opera* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018), 223–24.

⁶¹ There were other influences as well. As is widely noted, Rossini, writing for a Neapolitan theater, would have been required to compose accompaniments for his recitatives thanks to the imposition of French practices during the rule of Napoleon's brother-in-law Murat. See Philip Gossett, *Divas and Scholars* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 247.

⁶² A few important recent essays on music and narrative include Andrew Davis, *Sonata Fragments: Romantic Narratives in Chopin, Schumann, and Brahms* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press,

and after she had her say on whether music can narrate—in most cases, no, it cannot—narrative formalism was largely discredited; she has since moved on to wage other campaigns.⁶³ Because we are always telling stories, because interest in narrative will never cease in literary studies, because the allure of other disciplines is unlikely to diminish, musicology will continue to find something of value in narratology, but we must not fool ourselves into believing that any new perspective on music, pacing, and plots will reawaken the spirit of the 1980s.

With that in mind, let us avoid the battlefield for now. For much of what Abbate found unpalatable in the “interpretive promiscuity” of Edward Cone, Leo Treitler, and Anthony Newcomb—their undue favoring of an authorial, narrative voice; their tendency to enforce critical uniformity, a “mere machine for naming any and all music”; their conflation of music’s ability to mime with its ability to speak; their nostalgia; their empty analogies—had already been expressed by someone much closer to Rossini. Of course music can depict many things, Giuseppe Carpani insisted; of course it can “describe the perturbations of [the human soul] in all their gradations”—but what it describes exactly, we cannot know.⁶⁴ Show me a musical phrase, he challenges his critics, that signifies God, life, death, man, or woman without fail. We might believe that we know how to articulate the salient features of the *buffo* style, but Carpani doubts whether we can truly differentiate it from the *eroico*, the *accademico*, or the *pastorale*. To illustrate his point, Carpani offers the example of a sweet melody over a sustained bass—then, as now, a musical topic of seemingly incontestable clarity. But can we be sure that such music points to the pastoral? Could it not also remind us of a languishing love? Could it not exist in contexts both heroic and comic? Do we not find music of this character in both the *Stabat Mater* and the *Serva padrona*? For Carpani the conclusion was clear: lacking the precision of language, music has no way to “express a sentence, to form a discourse” (“la musica, mancando di linguaggio, non ha il modo di emettere una sentenza, di formare un discorso”).⁶⁵ If we read these words, we hardly need Abbate to remind us that music has “no past tense” and cannot narrate.

And yet far from being cause for despair, music’s inability to narrate or describe with any accuracy was an unquestionably good thing for Carpani, for it allowed him to dismiss critics of Rossini who faulted the habit of writing music that sounded the same regardless of the dramatic situation. The blame lies not with the

2017); Steven Vande Moortele, “Form, Narrative and Intertextuality in Wagner’s Overture to *Der fliegende Holländer*,” *Music Analysis* 32, no. 1 (March 2013): 46–79; Byron Almén, *A Theory of Musical Narrative* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008); Vera Micznik, “Narrative in Music Revisited: Degrees of Narrativity in Mahler and Beethoven,” *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 126, no. 2 (Fall 2001): 194–249.

⁶³ Carolyn Abbate, *Unsung Voices: Opera and Musical Narrative in the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991). For her most recent intervention, see her “Sound Object Lessons,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 69, no. 3 (Fall 2016): 793–829.

⁶⁴ Carpani, *Le Rossiniane*. Quoted in Steffan, *Rossiniana*, 107. Carpani anticipates Abbate’s famous dictum that “music makes distinctive sounds when it is speaking (singing) *in a narrative mode*, but we do not know *what* it narrates”; *Unsung Voices*, 28.

⁶⁵ Carpani, *Le Rossiniane*; quoted in Steffan, *Rossiniana*, 107.

composer, he tells us, but with music itself. Few today would disagree with this thesis. Programs belong to another age, after all, and however pleasurable it might be to imagine that in Beethoven we find moonlight and storms, fate knocking, elephants dancing, or Napoleon mounting his horse, to argue for these narratives from the score is simply impossible. It is undoubtedly for this reason that even the most enthusiastic proponents of narrative in music took “plot” to mean sonata form rather than the life and death of a hero.⁶⁶

We should be wary of quoting Carpani with too much enthusiasm, however, for he also suggests something far more disquieting, even radical. We may not know what music narrates or describes, but we do still have faith that to label a *siciliana* over a drone bass as “pastoral” expresses an analytical truth that holds even outside the wild permissiveness of some narratological fairyland. Defenders of topic theory, for this is what Carpani is disputing, are accustomed to dealing with skeptics, who see horn calls, peasant drones, or military marches as cheap programmatic effects “just one step away from local color.”⁶⁷ Wye J. Allanbrook makes clear the difference between narratives derived from topics, with their “sensitivity to the functions of convention,” and narratives that merely attempt to mask the formalists’ interest in the absolute.⁶⁸ The topic, with its origins in shared social practices, is neither ancillary to the drama of form—which often disregards much fine music—nor the invention of the presentist. Rippling the surface of much late eighteenth-century music, the pastoral, the heroic, the academic styles—those “expressive commonplaces” shared by composer and listener—are discrete and identifiable, and it is hard to believe that even Carpani could hear the first movement of KV 332 and doubt what such music is communicating.

True, many today remain unconvinced that topic theory is as useful—or as historically legitimate—as its advocates insist.⁶⁹ Admirers of Rossini can avoid making any endorsements, however: whatever topic theory promises to tell us about the surfaces of Viennese classicism, its relevance to nineteenth-century opera is far from certain. If we go to the library and pull down a great volume dedicated to topoi innumerable—learned, brilliant, Turkish and all—we find the whole hundred years after Mozart squeezed into one short chapter.⁷⁰ This is no scholarly oversight; it simply reflects how topics evolved in the nineteenth century as the memories of their original social function began to fade. Kofi Agawu reads this evolution as a “transformation of sign into symbol,” adding that

Whereas eighteenth-century music defamiliarizes “ordinary” materials such as fanfares, hunt-calls, brilliant-style effects, and so on, therefore making them

⁶⁶ The most compelling discussion of these plots in Beethoven can be found, of course, in Scott Burnham, *Beethoven Hero* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

⁶⁷ Wye J. Allanbrook, *The Secular Commedia: Comic Mimesis in Late Eighteenth-Century Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 115.

⁶⁸ Allanbrook, *Secular Commedia*, 167–69.

⁶⁹ See, for example, Stephen Rumph’s chapter, “Topics in Context,” in his *Mozart and Enlightenment Semiotics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 78–107.

⁷⁰ Julian Horton, “Listening to Topics in the Nineteenth Century,” in Danuta Mirka, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Topic Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 642–63.

properly and self-consciously artistic, Romantic music, without abandoning this gesture, often prefers a break with the outside world by entering into private, biographical realms in which the cryptic sign holds the key to meaning in the musical work.⁷¹

In other words, even the most intimate familiarity with the old social order will not help us to decipher the private narratives suggested by Schumann and Chopin. But if we return to Rossini's use of topics—in, say, that now familiar illustration of the sea in *Tancredi*—what strikes us is not a move toward the abstractions of the romantics, but rather a brazen literalness. The rocking boat, the lapping waves, and the squawking seabirds seem to belong with Haydn's frogs in the dangerous, aesthetically disgraced realm of imitation. Far from “defamiliarizing” the pastoral, Rossini returns it to the herder and his flock; military marches are once again served up by the rat-a-tat-tat of the regiment's band; horn calls no longer evoke absence or melancholy, but rather announce the approach of hunters in the glen. Paradoxically, the innovative depiction of space in *La donna del lago* relies on the most traditional of musical signs. Here, no one can claim that the German formalists and their obsession with abstract designs made him forget how to listen. There is no analytical white magic to be performed in Rossini's Scotland, where topics continue to do what they have always done.

If there is nothing to analyze in Rossini at his most awkwardly literal, we are left only to describe, which perhaps explains the convention of naming what music depicts in language cribbed from the libretto.⁷² To project the imagery from the libretto onto the score is to reenact, perhaps unwittingly, the listening practices of early audiences, who, we are so often reminded, could fill vast expanses of generic, “pure” instrumental music with battles and shipwrecks, even whole novels and plays, with only the gentlest of promptings from a title or program. In this realm, topics have a distinct advantage: in their precision, they save us from dealing in the “subjective cloud pictures” that, as James Hepokoski warns, are forever tempting writers on program music.⁷³ The “hunt” expresses some truth about a succession of perfect intervals, even if the bluntness of a single word may feel inadequate, may fail to capture how the horn's warm, brassy resonance reminds us of the honeyed mellowness of autumn and causes our eyes to flood with the green of a forest scene. The stag flies, the boar resists, the hounds assail the one and pursue the other. Do we not hear the shouts of men, the clatter of horses' hoofs, while every group advances with all the fury of the chase?⁷⁴ Another scene: *Tancredi* makes his way

⁷¹ Kofi Agawu, *Playing with Signs: A Semiotic Interpretation of Classic Music* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 137–38.

⁷² As a representative example, consider Dolan's analysis of Haydn's orchestration at the start of *The Creation*: “Unsure of how to behave, the instruments produce a confusion of mismatched and fragmentary gestures; they emerge out of the primordial mud of sound and search for their identities.” No one today would allow himself to describe any music as “the primordial mud of sound” without the permission the libretto. See *The Orchestral Revolution*, 140.

⁷³ James Hepokoski, “Program Music,” in Stephen Downes, ed., *Aesthetics of Music: Musicological Perspectives* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 62–83, here 71.

⁷⁴ This particular description is adapted from Scott, *The Antiquary* (1816), I. x.

to the shore. Flute and oboe are in attendance; the boat rocks; beads of turquoise water are thrown into the air and transformed into a shower of white jewels as they catch the sun. The setting is a classical seascape, and out of the corner of our eye we glimpse a mermaid lolloping across the waves and Triton trumpeting his shell.

No one has ever denied that audiences have always listened in this way, though attempts to follow them, to replicate their instincts in our own analytical models, have been met with derision. Allanbrook singles out a particularly fanciful reading by Leo Treitler, who in his *Music and the Historical Imagination* had this to say about the slow movement of Mozart's Symphony No. 39:

The dialogue has taken on an air of urgency and anxiety. On their third try the first violins succeed in breaking away and immediately become frisky in their new freedom. . . . The passage has the character of desperate thinking, looking for a way out, first in one direction, then in another. . . . Altogether the reprise seems to have gotten some trouble out of its system.⁷⁵

Programmatic readings often proceed in this vein, and Allanbrook easily unmasks Treitler's poorly disguised desire to elevate—in high romantic style—Mozart's instrumental music above his operas. Abbate similarly has little patience for the reenactors, who hide their modernist obsession with form behind “a wish to recapture the agreeable charm of nineteenth-century storytelling analyses of music, though they avoid characteristically nineteenth-century assertions that transpose musical gestures into concrete images.”⁷⁶ But where, exactly, does the critique lie? Not, apparently, in that the motives for such analyses are historically illegitimate—only the results. No nineteenth-century writer worth reading would ever commit to the page a phrase as strikingly graceless as “frisky in their new freedom.” However methodologically unsound anyone might find modern programmatic readings of symphonies, often their greatest crime is that they fail as poetry.

The fear of embarrassment prevents most of us from making nineteenth-century assertions, the fear that, in attempting to capture—in words—the experience of listening in the past, we will catch a glimpse of ourselves in the mirror, only to find that the researcher who thought he was expressing some historical truth is actually a child playing dress up from the old attic trunk. And so we busy ourselves with more grown-up activities. We theorize and scrutinize; we unpack and interrogate; we are objective and impartial. Abbate does not tolerate naïve listening habits from any time period. She is more interested in questions of music's (or Music's, rather) ontology, and we can easily imagine her accusing the writer of that oft-quoted review of Haydn's “Surprise” symphony—who interpreted the Andante as a drowsing shepherdess startled by the discharge of a fowling-piece—of trafficking in empty analogies about music's isomorphisms. She was hardly the first musicologist to repudiate the loose subjectivity of literary analysis. In 1956 Hans Keller dismissed Tovey's writings—evocative, though hardly flagrantly novelistic—

⁷⁵ Leo Treitler, “Mozart and the Idea of Absolute Music,” in *Music and the Historical Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 205, 207, 211. Quoted in Allanbrook, *Secular Commedia*, 169.

⁷⁶ Abbate, *Unsung Voices*, 24.

as redundant and tautological, since “description gives a verbal account of what you hear and is essentially unnecessary.”⁷⁷ Even Roland Barthes, at the outset of his notoriously enigmatic essay on the “grain” of the voice, challenged those who wish to talk about music to do so “without using a single adjective.”⁷⁸ Oboes should be no longer plaintive, trombones no longer tenebrous. The use of any adjective always involves an imaginative leap, for no words exist in English that can describe the timbre of a clarinet more accurately than the word “clarinet.” For the opponents, poetic descriptions of music’s content (narrative or otherwise) produce as much real knowledge as Aldous Huxley did when he likened the taste of champagne to both an apple peeled with a steel knife and Scarlatti’s harpsichord music: beautiful, yes, but fundamentally hollow.⁷⁹

Although overtly theoretical language has been largely suppressed in this chapter, the arguments made here have involved transforming the honest—though irrecoverably strange—aesthetic responses of Varese and Stendhal into a study in the history of mediation. At this point it hardly needs to be said that to describe is to mediate; we know instinctively that to have something described to us is different than seeing it for ourselves. “Green in nature is one thing, green in literature another,” Virginia Woolf insists, evidently sharing the sentiments of Proust, who, reading in the garden in Combray, observes how “the landscape, more or less projected before my eyes, in which the story was taking place . . . made a far stronger impression on my mind than the other, the actual landscape.”⁸⁰ Such feelings were hardly exclusive to modernism, for Varese and Uzielli both could have said something similar about Scott, as could have all those nineteenth-century tourists who ran up to Scotland, only to be disappointed that the real Highlands often paled in comparison to the Highlands of *Waverley* and *Rob Roy*.

If we are interested in “descriptive listening” as an audile technique, to speak à la mode, then we can safely argue that it was a technique born of this particular moment, when Scott’s poems and novels, with all their glorious and stubbornly tedious descriptions, dominated the media landscape.⁸¹ Such is the grown-up response to Varese and Stendhal, who, loving *Ivanhoe* perhaps too much, were tricked into believing something that we, writing dispassionately with the omniscience of historical distance, know has nothing to do with the score. But at the risk of putting it too bluntly, Varese and Stendhal were simply doing what

⁷⁷ Hans Keller, “K. 503: The Unity of Contrasting Themes and Movements,” *Music Review* 17 (1956): 48–58. Quoted in Joseph Kerman, *Contemplating Music: Challenges to Musicology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 76.

⁷⁸ Roland Barthes, *Image Music Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977), 179.

⁷⁹ The analogy appears in *Time Must Have a Stop* (1944), chapter 12.

⁸⁰ See Virginia Woolf, *Orlando* (1928), chapter 1 and Marcel Proust, *Swann’s Way* (1913), trans. C.K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin (New York: Random House, 2003), 118.

⁸¹ To argue that music could elicit a “textual” response is a harmonious counterpoint to recent studies that have explored the rich visual culture underpinning late Enlightenment and romantic musical evocations of light and shadow. See Deirdre Loughridge, *Haydn’s Sunrise, Beethoven’s Shadow* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

imaginative people are always doing when listening to music—making up stories. They just happened to have Scott close at hand.

*

Much of this chapter has elaborated on the skepticism laid out in the Introduction, that something as elusive as the “operatic experience” is almost impossible to articulate, particularly when it concerns the *aesthetic* part of that experience, the impressions strange and innumerable that bombard us when we encounter any work of art. The problem hardly diminishes with the passing of two centuries, especially when we must somehow account for how Rossini’s instrumental music could prompt associations with Walter Scott. Much of the history tracked here—the delayed but nevertheless measurable influence of romantic literature on Italian opera—has been told in different ways before, but there is always value in lingering over what we mean, exactly, when we speak of these flirtations between the arts.

A discussion of description in novels or operas—those stubborn, atemporal passages that allow the imagination to drift away from the narrative and frustrate *régisseurs* who must fill “blank” time onstage—freely gives way to a discussion of our own descriptions, especially when we are confronted with music that toggles between the tautological and the opaque. As an unavoidable and yet often belittled critical practice, description has caught the attention of literary scholars such as Sharon Marcus, Heather Love, and Stephen Best, who have invited us to consider the unique kinds of knowledge afforded to us when we attend to it.⁸² Far from being derivative or superfluous, description for Marcus, Love, and Best is not only an inescapable critical practice, but also a means to rethink objectivity, to foreground the relationship between words and our world. Neither literature nor literary criticism can exist without description, and when we pay close heed to its workings, the authors insist, we can often learn as much about the describers as the described.

Their invitation is seductive. What would better description in musicology look like? Do we dare write with imaginative abandon—or simply more artfulness—about our objects of study, or would doing so only further erode the “basis for dialogue and disagreement”?⁸³ The importance of our descriptive practices has already been identified by Abbate, who stresses that “our experience of musical works is, of course, conditioned by verbal codes, by literary explanations, so that any attempt to separate writing about music from *music itself* is futile, because interpretive writing on a given work becomes in some sense *part* of that work as it travels through history.”⁸⁴ For Abbate this is cause for despair: verbal descriptions are always inadequate evocations of music, for the simple reason that music is “radically unlike language.”⁸⁵ Something of this sentiment colors George Eliot’s

⁸² Sharon Marcus, Heather Love, and Stephen Best, “Building a Better Description,” *Representations* 135 (Summer 2016): 1–21.

⁸³ Nicholas Mathew and Mary Ann Smart, “Elephants in the Music Room: The Future of Quirk Historicism,” *Representations* 132 (Fall 2015): 73.

⁸⁴ Abbate, *Unsung Voices*, 18.

⁸⁵ Abbate, *Unsung Voices*, 18.

lament that “we can so seldom declare what a thing is, except by saying it is something else.”⁸⁶

Perhaps musicologists have always felt these limitations instinctively, which is why description is almost never used as an end unto itself. To fault passing comments on Rossini’s seascape—by Smart, Hadlock, or anyone else—would be an act of willful misreading, for they make no claim that a mention of birdcalls or a lilting barcarolle offers revelatory insights into those few bars alone. The description of opera scholars is often folded into larger arguments about the social lives and experiences of historical listeners—a few well-chosen adjectives are enough to summon the aria in question, which serves as one piece of evidence among many—explaining why our techniques bear so little resemblance to those of music theory. Still, perhaps it is worth questioning the ease with which we allow the topical associations of the text or dramatic situation to guide what we have to say about a piece of music, even if what we have to say is only a waypoint en route to more consequential social or political readings.

This difficulty is particularly evident if we direct our attention to operas composed in the decades prior to Mozart and Rossini, when *Affekten* rather than topics set the terms of the analysis. Mere mention of a “rage” aria conjures up both coloratura and its attendant imagery—clouds fulminate; winds blast; ships founder. One of opera scholarship’s most sublime descriptions appears in an essay by Katherine Bergeron, who has argued that Handel’s 1750 revisions of “But who may abide the day of his coming” allows us to recover partially the virtuosic voice of the castrato Guadagni:

If the melody Handel first conceived for bass rolled along like molten rock, this version is definitely more than a few degrees hotter. The long melisma on “refiner’s fire” is this time not just twice as long but at least twice as fast, bubbling with a fierce, hysterical intensity that seems to burn right through the words to release the essence of the Old Testament prophecy. After this barely controlled screaming, which ends as abruptly as it began, the aria returns suddenly, almost schizophrenically, to the calmer questions of the first part. But this too quickly breaks off, as if unable to withstand the force of the heat, and the aria—again breaking convention—erupts prophetically into an unexpected final refrain of the enflamed music, now completed by a cadenza, to send up the whole orchestra together with its possessed singer in a blaze of glory.⁸⁷

This is thrilling reading to be sure, and Bergeron does not conceal the fact that her choice of adjectives was inspired by the libretto. But there seems little reason to resist this kind of writing, especially when metaphor and simile are the central rhetorical figures of opera: take away the ability of describing an emotion as like something else and all of eighteenth-century opera is reduced to a few lines of recitative.

Theories of metaphor do exist, of course—Hepokoski has proposed them as a way to think productively about associative listening—but we must ask what

⁸⁶ *The Mill on the Floss*, II. i.

⁸⁷ “The Castrato as History,” *Cambridge Opera Journal* 8, no. 2 (July 1996): 177.

advantages (and what satisfaction) we might gain from any discussion of “conceptual blending” and its efforts to medicalize and thus obliterate the ineffable.⁸⁸ Aristotle would have nothing of such discussions; for him, it is the command of metaphor alone that “cannot be imparted by another; it is the mark of genius, for to make good metaphors implies an eye for resemblances.”⁸⁹ If nothing else, taking seriously the resemblances detected by our ancestors can bring us slightly closer to both Scott and Rossini. The curious reception of both of them confirms that reading and listening have always been inseparable. As long as we continue to write about music, we will continue to describe. It would be impossible to do otherwise.

⁸⁸ Hepokoski, “Program Music,” 71–75.

⁸⁹ *Poetics*, xxii. 16.

4. Bellini's Idyllic Endings

Hills peep o'er hills, and Alps on Alps arise!
Pope

There is reason to doubt whether *La sonnambula* is a pastoral opera. That doubt does not come from the archive—no, there we find only unity of opinion, beginning with the work's earliest critics. Bellini deserves praise for his handling of “una scena pastorale,” wrote one; the score is suffused with “una tinta di pastorale melodia,” another.¹ Carlo Ritorni called the whole a chimera, though there was no point in disputing that it was simple, tender, pastoral.² George Eliot slipped an allusion to the tenor's aria into *The Mill on the Floss*, thereby reinforcing the pastoral mood of one work with reference to another.³ The consensus continues all the way up until this day, with Julian Budden, Elizabeth Forbes, Simon Maguire, John Rosselli, and Mary Ann Smart all doing their part to affirm *Sonnambula*'s pastoral character.⁴ Critics, whether they derive their authority from reputation or from historical proximity to Bellini himself, are of course not infallible, but anyone who turns to the opera must confess that setting and subject matter make disagreement all but impossible. The village is Alpine, the characters rustic. All the earth is in bloom, the heroine tells us. The meadows, undisguised *luoghi ameni*, resound with song and the preparations for the wedding feast. Dramatic tension arises from a single pebble—suspected infidelity—dropped into the pool; but those ripples are easily calmed, the placid harmony restored.

For the writers above, there is nothing to discuss. The pastoralism of *La sonnambula* is a matter of fact. If the task is to explain rather than to assert, however, confidence in the label might waver. A sleepwalking Swiss girl and a handful of fine melodies—where, exactly, does the pastoralism lie? Glancing over a few hundred years of writing on the pastoral reveals only contradiction and confusion. Definitions are numerous, which seems only fitting considering that “pastoral” is applied freely to vast swaths of art from antiquity to the present. The idylls of Theocritus; Hardy's novels; Frost's poetry; the landscapes of Claude; Scarlatti's cantatas; Mozart's comedies; symphonies from Beethoven to Vaughan Williams—pastoral applies to one and to all. In literature it is a mode, a “broad and flexible

¹ See, respectively, the reviews published in the *Corriere delle dame*—here quoted in *Vincenzo Bellini: Nuovo Epistolario 1819-1835 (con documenti inediti)*, ed. Carmelo Neri (Aci Sant'Antonio: Editoriale Agorà, 2005), 183—and the *Gazzetta privilegiata di Milano* 74 (March 15, 1831): 293.

² Carlo Ritorni, *Ammaestramenti alla composizione* (Pirola: Milan, 1841), 61–62.

³ In book 6, chapter vii, Philip's performance of “Ah, perchè non posso odiarti” is interpreted by Maggie as a sign of his continued attachment.

⁴ Julian Budden, Elizabeth Forbes, and Simon Maguire, “*Sonnambula, La*” in *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera*, 4 vols, ed. Stanley Sadie (New York: Macmillan, 1992), vol. 4: 452–54; John Rosselli, *The Life of Bellini* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 80–89; Mary Ann Smart, “In Praise of Convention: Formula and Experiment in Bellini's Self-Borrowings,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 53, no. 1 (Spring 2000): 29.

category” uncontained by the limits of a single genre.⁵ In music it is a topic, a tradition that “encompasses the whole of the notated repertoire.”⁶ For some, pastoral refers exclusively to depictions of the lives of shepherds; for others it is a catchall for anything naïve, simplistic, and superficial, where landscapes are idealized and the sufferings of the world irresponsibly avoided. The pastoral garden gives shelter to both prelapsarian innocents and sexual hedonists. It is a term of abuse and a term of praise. The nature of opera—that it depends on the cooperation of all the arts—challenges us to hold these definitions in balance. Is the pastoral in *Sonnambula* to be found primarily in the gentle arc of its plot? Or is it confined to the setting, painted stage hangings showing mill and mountain pine? Is there a single page in the score that could dispel all uncertainty?

For Emanuele Senici, the most important writer on *La sonnambula* in recent years, the answer to this last question is an emphatic *no*. Only once does a shepherd step forward to address his flock upon the mountainside; only once does Bellini signal any interest in the pastoral. Indeed, despite the subject matter, the composer refused to “take full advantage of the devices traditionally used to create an Alpine ambience.”⁷ In the early nineteenth century it was the high meadows of Switzerland, Senici demonstrates, that substituted for the once generic *locus amoenus* of classical poetry, and thus to refuse an Alpine ambience is to refuse a pastoral one.⁸ Other authors in others ages may have chosen Arcady or Arden for the location of their retreats, but for the romantics it was the Alps, with all their purity and indifference to man, that would become the “sentimental’ version of classical Arcadia,” an appropriate habitat for the virginal songbirds of *Sonnambula* and *Linda di Chamounix*.⁹ Senici turns to old topical associations to show how music might create a sense of place; that “all we find in the score is a simple horn call whose last two chords are echoed” is therefore evidence of the composer’s repudiation of setting and mood (Example 4.1) .

No early critic identified specific moments as pastoral, and thus we cannot be sure whether these horn calls alone were enough to lend the opera that “tincture of pastoral melody.” Regardless, identifying a few isolated invocations of the *ranz des vaches* does not begin to account for the opera’s distinct and pervasive atmosphere.

Horn in E♭

Andante mosso

ALTRI in lontananza

p *pp*

Example 4.1: Bellini, *La sonnambula*, from Act I, no. 5 Recitativo e coro

⁵ Paul Alpers, *What Is Pastoral?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 44.

⁶ Raymond Monelle, *The Musical Topic* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 185.

⁷ Senici, *Landscape and Gender in Italian Opera* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 4.

⁸ Terry Gifford explains that “whether the author’s choice of Arcadia is classical Greece, the only-just-disappeared Golden Age, the present Golden Age, a utopian future, an Alpine summit, Antarctica, Arden or the garden, that choice will be made with its contemporary audience in mind.” See his *Pastoral* (Routledge: London, 1999), 81.

⁹ Senici, *Landscape and Gender*, 16.

Commentators historical and modern have long identified the new direction Bellini took with *Sonnambula*, a marked retreat from the austere declamatory style of *Il pirata* or *La straniera*, often dubbing it a disappointing “rapprochement” with the florid excesses of Rossini.¹⁰ Whether or not this flight from what might be called a stance of melodic realism relates to the pastoral setting of *La Sonnambula* is difficult to say, because a handful of discrete musical examples cannot capture the evenness and serenity that characterize so much of this score. To listen to the opera is to be always half-conscious of some pattern hanging in the sky, such that without referring any few bars to a special place, they have that meaning that comes from their being parts of a whole design, and not an isolated fragment of unrelated loveliness.¹¹

It is that design, this chapter argues, that gives *La sonnambula* its pastoral character—far more than its libretto or occasional uses of local color. To enter Bellini’s pastoral world, to see how an Italian opera premiered in 1831 may have subsumed two thousand years of literary convention, is no easy task. In part this is a problem of methodology. Much of this dissertation has been working against the impulse to historicize. Questions of genre and style are only partially answerable through recourse to the archive, and no certainties about the extent to which the pastoral is a meaningful category for Bellini’s opera will emerge from the reconstruction of an operatic experience from a handful of newspaper clippings alongside translations of the Eclogues. *La sonnambula* does not exist in the past alone, and this chapter insists that great rewards can be found in a sympathetic hearing of the opera as it appears to us today. Examining Bellini’s self-conscious treatment of musical formulas, for example, reveals much about historical and contemporary ideas of closure, pacing, genre, and the pleasures that can be found in musical and literary convention. This chapter explores ways to write about such large-scale effects. At times it is an experiment in description, in ways to capture something of an opera’s gestalt, which is so often ill-served by analytical systems and a narrow selection of musical examples. Talk of the pastoral invokes those dangers that come with importing terms from other disciplines, though this chapter argues that there is some truth in the resemblances that strike us across music and literature, even if they appear superficial and fleeting when held up to scrutiny.

*

One convention of writing on *Sonnambula* is to begin with an apology, to acknowledge the gap between the world of the work and today, when—it is assumed—audiences are no longer willing to spend an evening listening to some maiden in a flowered apron fret about her chastity. “It is hard to take [the opera]

¹⁰ The word is used by both Mary Ann Smart and Melina Esse. For a discussion of Bellini’s change in direction in this period, see, respectively, their “Bellini, Vincenzo,” in the *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 7th edition (London: Macmillan, 2000), vol. 3, 194–212 and “Speaking and Sighing: Bellini’s *canto declamato* and the Poetics of Restraint,” *Current Musicology* 87 (Spring 2009): 7–45.

¹¹ This sentence is adapted from Virginia Woolf’s essay on Spenser. See “*The Faery Queen*” in *The Moment and Other Essays* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948), 24–30.

seriously nowadays,” says Senici.¹² For Rosselli it is a matter of faith, for *Sonnambula* can only be understood properly “if the conductor and players believe in the work.”¹³ Such statements are themselves pastoral, if the term is allowed its elegiac connotations, a longing for a time when the relationship between the opera and its audiences was less disquieting than it is today.

There is a long and distinguished history of not taking pastoral works seriously; readers and listeners “nowadays” are hardly the first to look upon the merrymaking of shepherds with some distaste. Pages of testimony could be called upon to demonstrate this fact, though Samuel Johnson’s comments on *Lycidas* are perhaps the most famous. For him, the form of the pastoral was “easy, vulgar, and therefore disgusting: whatever images it can supply are long ago exhausted; and its inherent improbability always forces dissatisfaction on the mind.”¹⁴ For many critics, that “long ago” was Virgil, and attempts to revive the myth in the intervening centuries have produced a raft of mediocre parodies. Schiller is equally famous for his dismissal of the pastoral, writing in *On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry* about the “inherent defect of idyllic poems” that resulted from the oversimplification of human nature and the repudiation of all art.¹⁵ The opinion, if we can believe the papers, was shared by many Italians in 1831:

The Arcadians, with their mawkish lovers, those coy nicknames such as Tirsi, Elpino, Amarilli, Dori, and Nice, have made the poetry called bucolic or pastoral distasteful in the eyes of Italians. . . . Indeed, if we decided to go rummaging about in the poems of this kind written in our age, we would find nothing worthy of particular mention.¹⁶

If *La sonnambula* is indeed pastoral—and therefore a repository of clichés—it is easy to see how it was read as stylistically regressive by those who favored the “philosophical” style of Bellini’s earlier operas.

Those sympathetic to pastoral works have found many ways to step outside of this tradition of censure and dismissal. “The characteristic way,” according Paul Alpers, “is to claim that [the pastoral] undermines or criticizes or transcends itself.”¹⁷ Senici may insist that he takes *La sonnambula* seriously both historically and aesthetically, but for him this involves an “interpretation of the relationship between the two main characters . . . as less idyllic and idealized than critics have

¹² Senici, *Landscape and Gender*, 21.

¹³ Rosselli, *The Life of Bellini*, 89.

¹⁴ Samuel Johnson, *Lives of the English Poets* (London, 1820), 134.

¹⁵ *Schiller’s Complete Works*, ed. and trans. Charles J. Hempel, vol. 2 (Philadelphia: I. Kohler, 1861), 568.

¹⁶ “Gli Arcadi con que’ sdolcinati loro amori, e con que’ leziosi soprannomi di Tirsi, di Elpino, di Amarilli, di Dori, di Nice han fatto sì vile agli occhi degli Italiani la poesia che ciamossi bucolica o pastorale. . . . Se noi in fatto ci proponessimo di andar razzolando le poesie di questo genere dettate nella nostra età, nulla troveremmo che degno sia di particular menzione.” Ambrogio Levati, *Saggio sulla storia della letteratura italiana nei primi venticinque anni del secolo XIX*, vol. 1 (Milan: Stella e figli, 1831), 113.

¹⁷ Alpers, *What Is Pastoral?* 35.

Flute *pp molto legato*

Oboe *pp molto legato*

Clarinet in Bb *pp molto legato*

Horn in F *pp*

Horn in F *pp*

Violin I *pp molto legato*

Violin II *pp*

Viola *pp*

Violoncello *pp*

Contrabass *pp*

Example 4.2: Bellini, *La sonnambula*, from Act II, no. 12 Scena ed aria finale

suggested.”¹⁸ Less idyllic—is it not disappointing that taking *Sonnambula* seriously involves denying one of its most agreeable qualities? But it is Bellini who had little interest in pastoral landscapes, according to Senici, Bellini who was reluctant “to give the audience musical clues sufficient to allow them to determine where the

¹⁸ Senici, *Landscape and Gender*, 4.

The image displays a musical score for a section of a work, labeled "Example 4.2 continued". The score is arranged in a system with ten staves. The instruments are: Flute I (Fl.), Oboe (Ob.), Clarinet (Cl.), Horn I (Hn.), Horn II (Hn.), Violin I (Vln. I), Violin II (Vln. II), Viola (Vla.), Violoncello (Vc.), and Contrabass (Cb.). The key signature is B-flat major (two flats). The woodwinds (Fl., Ob., Cl.) play a melodic line with trills and slurs. The horns (Hn.) play a sustained harmonic accompaniment. The strings (Vln. I, Vln. II, Vla., Vc., Cb.) provide a rhythmic and harmonic foundation with various textures, including sustained chords and moving lines.

Example 4.2 *continued*

action takes place.”¹⁹ The point is reiterated multiple times, though here the eye is tempted to linger over the word “sufficient.” Once—the shepherd’s call cited above—is evidently not enough, but it would be difficult to say just how many times a horn must send an echo down the valley to ensure no one forgets that we are in the Alps. This is not the only instance of idyllic color, however, for Bellini does provide a rival moment of indisputable pastoralism: during the second, climatic

¹⁹ Senici, *Landscape and Gender*, 54.

sleepwalking scene, Amina's safe arrival over the mill wheel—she has been treading perilously on a beam, the opera's most iconic moment—is welcomed with a song of thanksgiving that would not be out of place in any pastoral symphony (Example 4.2). The classic signifiers hold court uninterrupted for eight bars: string and horn sustain the tonic, while all other voices play the alpine melody in unison. The tune is both novel and generic; it appears nowhere else in the opera, but it contains no artifice of composition. The listener must accept it for what it is, complete in itself; there is nothing to develop or fragment, so it can only be repeated.²⁰ Rosselli, curiously, says the horns “take over” at this point, but their warmth is enlisted primarily to lend some color, even if the melody itself may sound as if it were taken from them.²¹

Perhaps it is because the horns are denied a more prominent role in this scene that Senici does not hear it as unambiguously alpine—timbral and melodic associations have been temporarily sundered. Topics, however, are flexible. Their viability is derived in part from being identifiable outside their original social function: it is said, to summon one famous example, that we are meant to smile upon hearing the beginning of Haydn's Symphony No. 6 “Le matin,” recognizing that the signal of dawn associated with the horn has been gifted to the flute. Senici cites the shepherd's song in Paisiello's *Nina* as an important precedent for the pastoral in *Sonnambula*, which suggests that such license was no longer possible in 1831. As was discussed in Chapter 3, topics that once roamed freely across symphonies and sonatas have returned to Italian opera as local color and realism. If the pastoral is confined to the shepherd's pipes, then Bellini “refused” to exploit the opportunities for local color that Rossini had splashed across *Guillaume Tell*.²²

But if timbre, melody, and even rhythm are allowed to speak independently of each other, then there is no shortage of musical evidence for the pastoral throughout *Sonnambula*, beginning with its opening bars. The start of the opera is announced with a horn fanfare (Example 4.3a), pure timbre and rhythm—6/8, of course—reft of any melodic contour. When the curtain rises, this gesture is handed to the *banda* onstage, who echoes its first blast after one measure of silence, evidently the amount of time it takes for the call to make it down the glen and back (Example 4.3b). A more traditional operatic depiction of landscape cannot be imagined. If anyone doubted what these short flourishes and the subsequent melody were supposed to mean, the libretto offers a helpful reminder: simply and unequivocally, *Sonnambula* opens with a series of “suoni pastorali.” Describing the chorus that follows presents some challenges, for the selection of the appropriate adjective risks confusing assertion for observation: that the melody is repetitive, that the text, with all its la-la-las, reminds us of the natural songs of childhood, conjures up words such as “rustic,” “jaunty,” even “naïve.” Surprisingly, some commentators hear no

²⁰ Compare this moment to the similar melody that opens *Guillaume Tell*. Rossini must compose rather than merely record, thus the movement to the submediant after the first statement.

²¹ Rosselli, *The Life of Bellini*, 89.

²² Anselm Gerhard, “‘Schweizer Töne’ als Mittel der motivischen Integration: Gioachino Rossinis *Guillaume Tell*” in Anselm Gerhard and Annette Landau, eds., *Schweizer Töne: Die Schweiz im Spiegel der Musik* (Zurich: Chronos, 2000), 99–106.

Allegro

Horn in G
Horn in C

p

Example 4.3a: Bellini, *La sonnambula*, from Act I, no. 1 Coro d'Introduzione

44

VUOTA

BANDA
(sul Palco)

ff *pp*

(*Odonsi da lungi suoni pastorali e voci lontane che gridano: Viva Aminal!*)

Example 4.3b: Bellini, *La sonnambula*, from Act I, no. 1 Coro d'Introduzione

“prominent echo effects” and insist that the whole of the *introduzione* is “conventional,” perhaps “external to the intimate substance of the work.”²³ To invoke the pejorative overtones of convention is to repeat the old slur against both pastoral poetry and early nineteenth-century Italian music, forgetting, perhaps, that the pastoral depends on convention, on convening, often for the pleasures of song.²⁴ Whatever the quality of the melody that closes the *introduzione* (“In Elvezia non v’ha rosa”), to begin a work with a farmer’s diegetic song is to invoke convention with purpose, to place the opera squarely within the tradition of literary pastoral.

None of these observations necessarily contradict Senici’s sympathetic reading of the opera, but we nevertheless sense that his interest in the geographic specificity of the Alps leads him to overemphasize what *Sonnambula* is not. The Alpine setting may have been only incidental, a nod to fashion in a work that seems more interested in recalling the pastoral conventions of the previous century than leading us to the sublime. And yet, Senici’s reluctance to couple the opening horn fanfare with the shepherd’s call later in the act plants a seed of doubt, and we begin to question the ease with which “pastoral” could adhere to any page in the score. It can be difficult to judge, in other words, at what point a horn call ceases to be pastoral (or to partake of its sister topic, the hunt) and returns simply to being a horn. If the pastoral is to mean anything at all, we must attempt to get to the heart of this term’s relation to music, to find some clarity amid its promiscuous usage across musicology and music theory.

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In his analysis of the various topoi crowding the first movement of Mozart’s String Quintet in C major KV 515, Kofi Agawu makes a curious distinction: at one moment we are meant to hear the pastoral, at other moments the assembled

²³ Senici, *Landscape and Gender*, 54. This second quote is Senici’s summary of other critics’ reading of *Sonnambula*, though Senici does not contradict it.

²⁴ Alpers, *What is Pastoral?* 79–93.

musicians pipe a musette.²⁵ The comparison seems curious, like distinguishing between rectangles and squares, red fruits and pomegranates. Surely all musettes are pastoral, though Agawu and other theorists seem to agree that some music can be pastoral without the characteristic effects of the musette. In other words, some vision of Arcadia is possible that does not feature a lone shepherd droning and tootling upon the hillside.

Agawu's first moment of pastoral appears in bars 38–41 (Example 4.4a), and it is easy to see why this is unlike the musette that begins in bar 86 (Example 4.4b): no pedal point, no bagpipe, no shepherd. What, then, is characteristically pastoral about it? Its simplicity, perhaps—the shift in texture that throws all attention on the top voice, which merely outlines and then decorates the triad while the supporting voices drift between tonic and subdominant, harmonic bedfellows because of the importance of their shared scale degree. Nothing much happens (the

Example 4.4a: Mozart, String Quintet in C major, KV 515 (1. Allegro), bars 38–41

Example 4.4b: Mozart, String Quintet in C major, KV 515 (1. Allegro), bars 86–89

²⁵ Kofi Agawu, *Playing with Signs* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 88–89.

tonic C is sustained by the second viola throughout), but evidently there is still enough harmonic motion to disqualify these bars as a musette.

Confusion about the musical pastoral arises from its strangeness as a topic, even though it seldom stands apart from its peers. In Wye J. Allanbrook's alphabetically arranged universe of topics, for example, it sits unassumingly between "passepied" and "pathetic."²⁶ Its singularity becomes apparent, however, upon leafing through Raymond Monelle's *The Musical Topic*, a book organized around the three central topoi of late eighteenth-century music: the hunt, military, and the pastoral.²⁷ Monelle begins each section with a history of the topic in question, before pointing to representative quotations in the repertory. For the hunt, he tells of the development of the horn and the various calls that echoed through the woods of Fontainebleau during the reign of Louis XIV. The history of military music is one of marches, piccolos, the drumming of the tattoo, and everything else meant to excite both soldier and citizen with war's alarms. The origins of the pastoral, by contrast, are not to be found in shared social practices or the evolution of instruments. With the pastoral, attention turns to literature, and if its history—whether narrated by Monelle or anyone else—is going to be discussed at all (rather than cited as something self-evident), the reader is reminded of Theocritus and Virgil, Spenser and Shakespeare, and all those innumerable poets who spun out stories of nymphs and satyrs and shepherds who drank from the cup of Bacchus and filled their afternoons with song. We may have records of actual horn calls and bugle calls that allow us to recognize them as topics in the rollicking symphonic world of Haydn, but we will never hear the melodies that Tityrus played beneath the beech tree at the opening of *Eclogue I*.

To invoke the pastoral in music, then, is to flirt with myth and metaphor, which perhaps explains the diversity of the term's use among scholars. For some it is the music typically assigned to shepherds in eighteenth-century opera and oratorio, the drone and *siciliana* of Handel or Rameau. For others, such as Agawu in the example above, it can apply to any moment of simple lyricism and harmonic stasis. The divide is hardly new, as a passing glance through an old dictionary reveals: for Peter Lichtenthal, writing in his *Dizionario della musica* just a few years before Bellini's first triumphs in Milan, pastoral refers to "a musical composition of simple and rustic (but delicate) character, usually in 6/8 with a moderate tempo." This is the pastoral at its most easily identifiable, the musical imitation of the shepherd's pipes, however stylized, however far removed from the actual music making of the laboring poor. Undoubtedly the shepherds were not playing a baroque *pifa* when the angels brought them news of Christ's birth, but the custom is familiar enough that no one could claim to be bothered by the artifice of it all. Lichtenthal's definition is incomplete, however, for pastoral also has another, suspiciously imprecise meaning. He goes on to note that pastoral designates "any opera that represents some episode of idealized country life, in which every sentiment

²⁶ Wye J. Allanbrook, *The Secular Commedia: Comic Mimesis in Late Eighteenth-Century Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 110.

²⁷ Raymond Monelle, *The Musical Topic* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2006).

expressed bears the mark of rural simplicity and innocence.”²⁸ Here is the literary pastoral, the amorphous “mode” that draws under one heading *The Shepherdes Calender*, the *Aminta* of Tasso, and opera after opera in which Orpheus strums his lyre while charmed beasts and white-handed nymphs gather in fields of asphodel. This definition of pastoral is far more expansive than its topical counterpart, at least insofar as it is relevant to music. How, exactly, might a sonata or symphony relate to Virgil’s Arcady? Imprecision and metaphor—the perils of leaping between literature and music—has not discouraged many commentators, however.

The most basic narrative trajectory of any pastoral story proceeds from harmony, through rupture, to reconciliation. Because this narrative happens to correspond with the trajectory of almost every piece of tonal music, it is possible to catch glimpse of the pastoral wherever one might turn. Robert Hatten, for example, draws Op. 101 into the world of the pastoral, by listening for a surface gleaming with a “graceful and gentle expressivity” only momentarily disrupted by tragic outbursts.²⁹ Maynard Solomon goes so far as to label the beginning of the *Eroica* symphony as pastoral, until the C-sharp of course.³⁰ For William Caplin, the pastoral, with its emphasis on root position tonic stability, often characterizes the start of movements or serves what he calls a “post-cadential” function, filling lengthy codettas where the tonic is pleasurably reaffirmed over and over again.³¹ In Eden, Hatten, Solomon, and Caplin seem to suggest, no one ever thought to leave the initial tonic, and the pastoral begins to stand in for all music otherwise called classical.

The exalted claims made about Viennese classicism—that the works of Mozart and Beethoven are repositories of truth and beauty, that at their best they allow us to catch a glimpse of heroism, genius, the face of the divine—mean that when these commentators invoke pastoral they are in fact invoking the tradition of pastoral in its entirety: a mere two thousand years of poetry, not to mention the work of critics from Sidney to Shelley to the distinguished lecturers of the past century who have taken up their pens for its defense or condemnation. Solomon turns to a gallery of tweeds for his reading of Op. 96, and even though William Empson, Frank Kermode, and Renato Poggioli had few thoughts on how Virgil or Shakespeare or Wordsworth might relate to a Beethoven violin sonata, Solomon does not hesitate to stride across vast domains of Western literature to say something about the cramped grove of tonal music that flourished for a few decades around 1800. The

²⁸ Peter Lichtenthal, *Dizionario e bibliografia della musica* (Milan: Pirola, 1826), 114.

“PASTORALE, s. f. dinota o un componimento musicale di carattere semplice e campestre, ma tenero, per lo più in Tempo 6/8, con movimento moderato; o un dramma musicale che rappresenta qualche avvenimento dell’ideale vita campestre, ed in cui tutti i sentimenti espressi hanno l’impronta della semplicità ed innocenza rurale.”

²⁹ Robert S. Hatten, *Musical Meaning in Beethoven: Markedness, Correlation, and Interpretation Advances in Semiotics* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1994), 91–111.

³⁰ Maynard Solomon, *Late Beethoven: Music, Thought, Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 75

³¹ William E. Caplin, “On the relation of musical *topoi* to formal function,” *Eighteenth-Century Music* 2, no. 1 (2005): 120.

“Diabelli” variations are pastoral, he tells us, the “utter indestructability” of the theme attesting to the “unwearying tenacity of every individual,” offering a “token of assurance of a permanent place in the order of things.”³² Other scholars have similar recourse to the mythic and universal, from Owen Jander’s notorious reading of the “Scene by the Brook” as a “prophetic” conversation between the brook, the birds, and the composer himself to Richard Will’s historically sensitive yet nonetheless Miltonic interpretation of the Sixth Symphony as an essay in the manipulation of time—both idyllic and “real”—that “dramatizes fundamentally human concerns about morality.”³³ Such attitudes were given popular expression in Disney’s animation for *Fantasia*, which has taught generations of young people to associate the *Pastoral* symphony with the celestial lawns of Olympus rather than the humble meadows surrounding Vienna.

The point here is not necessarily to efface this picture of Beethoven hand-in-hand with the ancients, but rather to try to imagine how Bellini and his Italian contemporaries might be included in the image as well. If we follow these theorists, or anyone who insists that guileless harmony or elegiac lyricism is reminiscent of rural innocence, we are likely to spot Virgilian rustics peeping out in the most unexpected places: however fanciful the vision, it may be that the lament of Eclogue II, the pining of Corydon with his pipe hewn of “seven hemlock stalks,” sounded a bit like the *cor anglais* solo that opens the mad scene in *Il pirata*. Never mind searching for horn calls, for page after page of Bellini’s music would be called pastoral if it were slipped into a sonata by a northern composer. Hatten considers the use of parallel thirds to be a pastoral gesture, thereby reminding his readers of every duet in Italian opera for at least a century and a half.³⁴ For this reason, perhaps, topic theory has made few inroads into Italian opera of the early nineteenth century: part of the appeal of drawing attention to surface gestures such as the pastoral is to make the sublime, the recondite, and the canonical more humble and democratic, and some of that enchantment is surely lost when the subject is music already associated with convention and the popular.

Thinking of Beethoven alerts us to other challenges as well, and not all of them can be chalked up to the century of hero worship and myth making that followed his death. His sixth symphony was composed at a time when the understanding of pastoral was undergoing a radical shift, and many scholars take for granted that works written after 1800 bearing the name “pastoral” are responses to the newly aestheticized and highly romantic view of “nature.” Seemingly with one stroke—

³² Solomon, *Late Beethoven*, 21.

³³ See Owen Jander, “The Prophetic Conversation in Beethoven’s ‘Scene by the Brook,’” *The Musical Quarterly* 77, no. 3 (Autumn 1993): 508–559 and Richard Will, *The Characteristic Symphony in the Age of Haydn and Beethoven* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 186. Charles Rosen’s vision of pastoral should be included here as well—for Rosen, the Ländler rhythms and bagpipe effects in Haydn’s symphonies could not be pastoral alone, so he transformed them into models of the “heroic pastoral”: Haydn’s melodies, he tells us, “seem detached from all that they portend, unaware of how much they signify.” See *The Classical Style*, expanded edition (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997), 162–63.

³⁴ Hatten, *Musical Meaning in Beethoven*, 98.

guided, no doubt, by Haydn and his oratorios—the musettes of the eighteenth century were transformed into the sublime landscapes of the nineteenth, preparing the way for everything from Schubert’s song cycles and Mendelssohn’s Hebridean seascapes to the mountains, fjords, ice, and snow of Grieg and Sibelius.

Senici claims that nineteenth-century interest in the Alps “built on the much older topos of the sentimentalized countryside,” though readers of Paul Alpers will wonder at this use of “much.”³⁵ “It is not self-evident,” Alpers avers, that nature and idyllic landscape, the Golden Age and its nostalgia, “are the defining features of pastoral.”³⁶ Emphasizing nature over the lives of shepherds, he insists, is a distortion of Schiller and the romantics that has clouded understanding of Virgil and the pastoral revival of the English and Italian Renaissance. For an example of this distortion in music history, consider Berlioz’s praise for the *Pastoral* symphony: although Theocritus and Virgil were “great in singing the praises of landscape beauty,” their works nonetheless “pale in significance when compared with this marvel of modern music.”³⁷ Beethoven is not only worthy of being placed alongside the ancients; he even improves on them.

Given that Alpers, like many writers on pastoral literature, was more interested in reading the Eclogues and *As You Like It* than revisiting familiar histories of romantic nature worship, perhaps he should be left aside. After all, Bellini was a product of the nineteenth century, which should inspire any researcher to turn dutifully to the discourses on nature by Schiller and his contemporaries. It is important to recall a theme running throughout this dissertation, however: the simple fact of writing about the 1820s and 30s (especially in Italy) does not necessarily mean that romanticism is the topic at hand.³⁸ Outwardly, an opera such as *La sonnambula* may display many romantic features—sleepwalking, the Alps, a strong undercurrent of sexual repression—but with a libretto by arch-classicist Felice Romani, it is hardly surprising that the whole thing struck one reviewer as “worthy of Metastasio” (“ci parve essa degna di Metastasio”).³⁹

It would be unwise to argue that national context and perspective matter a good deal when discussing pastoral music in the early nineteenth century—that what one tradition of criticism might believe appropriate to Beethoven and his acolytes simply does not apply to Bellini. Such a relativist approach unhelpfully reinforces a pastoral mythology about Bellini himself, the flaxen-haired Sicilian boy with a preternatural gift for song whose graceful melodies lie beyond the tools of language and traditional analysis. It also stiffens divisions between Germany and Italy, tacitly recognizing that one school of composition aspires to the universal while the other is doomed to the provincial: Beethoven wrote for the gods, Bellini for La Scala.

³⁵ Senici, *Landscape and Gender*, 3–4.

³⁶ Alpers, *What is Pastoral?* 28.

³⁷ Quoted in David Wyn Jones, *Beethoven: Pastoral Symphony*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 83.

³⁸ Italy’s troubled relationship to European romanticism has been widely explored. For a representative essay, see Joseph Luzzi, *Romantic Europe and the Ghost of Italy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).

³⁹ See the *Gazzetta privilegiata di Milano* 67 (March 8, 1831): 266.

Though it can be difficult nowadays to make aesthetic judgments with any certainty, it does seem unjust to allow Beethoven his time with Virgil and Shakespeare and deny that opportunity to Bellini: is there not some truth that he might have to share with us as well?

*



Figure 4.1: Title-page engraving from *La bucolica di Virgilio* (Rovereto: Luigi Marchesani, 1828)

Virgil and the pastoral tradition can be made relevant to Bellini, of course, but to draw the connection involves tired techniques of historicist recovery—asking what the pastoral meant for Italians in the 1830s, how reading the many new translations of the Eclogues might have shaped the operatic experience of hearing *Sonnambula* for the first time. The engraving that adorns the title page of one edition of *La bucolica* (as the Eclogues were sometimes known in Italian) offers some clues.⁴⁰ The cramped image shows

mixed vegetation—a leafy oak tree stands before slopes of evergreen pine—and a pair of generically rustic (though far from classically inspired) buildings (Figure 4.1). In fact, the image is so generic that it is difficult not to spot resemblances between it and Sanquirico’s original stage designs for *Sonnambula* (Figure 4.2), which, because of their own free mixture of trees, leads Senici to argue once again that there is “some sort of ambivalence towards a fully-fledged Alpine ambience.”⁴¹ He goes on to cite a moment in Act II, scene 2, in which Amina reminisces about when she and Elvino would sit “under the shadow of beech trees” (“di questi faggi all’ombra”), further evidence that the opera fails to be as fully Alpine as one might wish.⁴² True, beech trees may not belong in the Alps, but they do belong in Virgil: the first pages of *La bucolica* describe how Meliboeus first spies Tityrus seated in the “spazioso faggio all’ombra.”⁴³ The trees should not distract anyone from the shadows they cast, however, for numerous commentators have stressed the centrality of this shade, *umbra*, to Virgilian pastoral and the *locus amoenus*. No less an authority than Wendell Clausen observes the sense of cadence that shade lends to Eclogues I and X, while Peter Smith calls it Virgil’s “most prominent pattern of visual imagery.”⁴⁴ Sanquirico, fittingly, placed Amina and Elvino in a “shaded vale”—an “ombrosa Valletta”—and thus it seems only fitting that, upon surveying the hillsides in Act I, scene 1, Rodolfo calls them “luoghi ameni.”

⁴⁰ *La bucolica di Virgilio tradotta in versi italiani* (Rovereto: Luigi Marchesani, 1828).

⁴¹ Senici, *Landscape and Gender*, 45.

⁴² Senici, *Landscape and Gender*, 45.

⁴³ *La bucolica*, 9.

⁴⁴ See Wendell Clausen, *A Commentary on Virgil, Eclogues* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), xxv and Peter L. Smith, “*Lentus in Umbra*: A Symbolic Pattern in Vergil’s *Eclogues*,” *Phoenix* 19 (1965): 298.

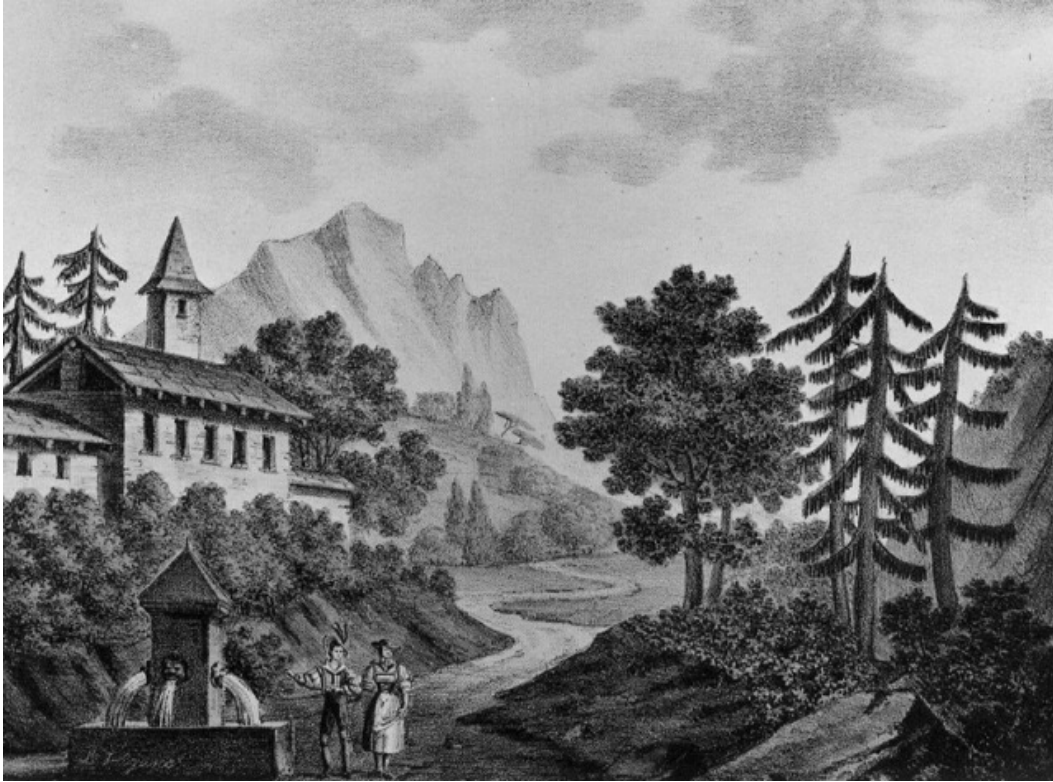


Figure 4.2: Alessandro Sanquirico, set design for *La sonnambula*, Act II, scene 2

Any Italian reader who, like generations before and after him, had spent hours in hot school rooms being lectured to on the perfection of Virgil's Latin must have recognized the echoes of classical pastoralism in Romani's libretto, which perhaps explains why one critic, unsure of how to classify the curiously serene tone of the opera, likened it to "un' Egloga pastorale."⁴⁵ This said, any discussion of pastoral literature should also recall the more recent, more familiar traditions of the *cinquecento*, the visions of Arcadia put forth in the *Aminta* and *Il pastor fido*, both of which had never ceased to be read. These works were often printed jointly in the nineteenth century, and critics of *Sonnambula* unwilling to reach all the way back to antiquity eagerly placed Romani alongside the master poets of the Renaissance: according to one, the libretto brimmed with "all the grace and good taste" ("con tutta quella grazia e quel sapore") with which Tasso and Guarini had adorned their subjects.⁴⁶ As far as beeches and shade are concerned, however, there is no reason to distinguish between antiquity and the Renaissance: in Act I, scene 2 of the *Aminta*, the eponymous shepherd describes how his love for Silvia was first kindled sitting "a l'ombra d'un bel faggio."

⁴⁵ *Gazzetta privilegiata di Milano* 74 (15 March 1831): 294.

⁴⁶ See, for example, *L'Aminta e L'amor fuggitivo di Torquato Tasso; Il pastor fido del Cav. Batista Guarini* (Florence: Leonardo Ciardetti, 1824). The *Aminta* is prefaced by the authoritative notes of Pierantonio Serassi; for more on the reception of Tasso, see chapter 1. This review appeared in the *Corriere delle dame* (March 10, 1831): 106.

The pastoral tradition had its detractors of course. In the wake of Madame de Staël's infamous attack on the servile imitation of the ancients, Alessandro Manzoni singled out for derision those Italian poets who had "transformed themselves . . . into so many shepherds who lived in some region of Peloponnesia under names that were neither ancient, modern, pastoral, nor anything else."⁴⁷ Their herds and bagpipes, their meadows and huts were a national embarrassment, and even a work as celebrated as *Il pastor fido* was, in the eyes of another critic, shot through with "scenes superfluous and idle," "incidents incoherent and unnecessary."⁴⁸ As is the case with most strands of historical reception, definite judgments are hard to come by. Many critics dismissed pastoral poetry for the staleness of its imagery, while others could speculate about the endless variety possible in the depiction of "domestic peace; the affection between husband and wife, friends and brothers; paternal and filial love." If critics found fault with the pastoral, they did so because of lack of understanding rather than any limitations inherent to the mode.⁴⁹ At best, pastoral poetry offered "a clear plot, characters simple and innocent, passions quiet and never overwrought, fluid and sweet versification, a style pure and natural, familiar and plain," attributes reviewers also freely associated with *La sonnambula*.⁵⁰

Historical criticism, then, offers up a few conclusions: reading a libretto that evokes the Eclogues, early Italian listeners were drawn to fashion connections with the long tradition of pastoral literature, still enjoyed and debated in the 1830s. Whatever traces of alpine grandeur we might detect (or wish to detect) in the opera today, for the first listeners of *La sonnambula* the long shadows of Arcadian evening were still more familiar than any part of Switzerland. The question remains, however, whether the pastoral is a useful category for early nineteenth-century Italian opera, whether it applies to any aspect of *musical* style that can be held in the mind and meaningfully distinguished from other conventions of the period. The historicist approach falters here, for early reviews of *Sonnambula* are filled with language similar to those patches of literary criticism cited above, effusions of adjectives that leave the modern critic nowhere nearer to identifying actual moments of pastoral simplicity in the score, let alone the overarching design of the whole. It is not necessary to invoke grand theories or mythic claims about what Bellini has to teach us about our shared humanity. Something can be said about the opera that does not leave it to be heard as a wash of pleasantness alone.

Placing *Sonnambula* alongside another opera may help to discriminate its features more clearly. The comparison was often made—and continues to be made, especially as it was sanctioned by Bellini himself—with Paisiello's *Nina*, though the comparable shepherd's song aside, the work was written several decades prior, and stylistic differences are such that there is little to observe beyond the most superficial of likenesses. Closer musical relations are to be found in another opera with an

⁴⁷ Manzoni, "Letter on Romanticism," trans. Joseph Luzzi, *PMLA* 119, no. 2 (2004): 307.

⁴⁸ "Quante scene superflue ed oziose! quanti accidenti slegati ed inutili!" Giovanni Andres, *Dell'origine, progressi e stato attuale di ogni letteratura*, vol. 2 (Pisa: Niccolò Capurro, 1829), 279.

⁴⁹ This, at least, was the claim made by Angelo Maria Ricci in his *Della vulgare eloquenza*, vol. 2 (Rieti: Salvatore Tringhi, 1828), 26.

⁵⁰ Andres, 279.

extended pastoral scene, one performed at Milan's Teatro alla Canobbiana a few months before *Sonnambula's* premiere: Donizetti's *Alina, regina di Golconda*. Composed in 1828—and thus easily overlooked among the operas that preceded *Anna Bolena* (1830)—*Alina* was a modest success, revived across Italy several dozens of times well into the 1850s. At first glance, there are many similarities with *Sonnambula*: a semi-serious plot, a shepherdess as heroine, a confused blend of romantic topics. There are pirates and shipwrecks, enchantment and jealousy, and the whole thing takes place in an imaginary kingdom in India, where, presumably, the air is scented with spice and no one questions having a sorceress queen. The French shepherdess Alina, now Queen of Golconda, spends much of the opera putting her former lover through a series of tests, the last of which involves conjuring up, in the style of Armida, the garden in Provence in which they first met.

The libretto, also by Romani, is filled with those stock descriptions familiar from Chapter 3:

The scene depicts a village in Provence: a small wood on one side, on the other a rustic dwelling, in front of which a stream is crossed by a small bridge: in the distance, knolls and hills.⁵¹

Donizetti responds to Romani with a lesson in Italian pastoral: 6/8, A major, and a prominent rhythmic figure that, as a stylized version of the Scotch or Lombard snap, did so much to create the rustic character of *La donna del lago* (Example 4.5).⁵² It is also possible to speak of diatonic purity, chains of thirds and sixths, and a limited harmonic orbit, as long as it is remembered that such observations apply to reams of non-pastoral music as well. Helpfully, the libretto calls for a brief passage of “musica pastorale,” immediately identified by Volmar as “i flauti de' Pastori”: here, at least, the flute—and not the horn—remains the quintessential pastoral instrument.

For the modern analyst, this scene is striking: not only do score and libretto make explicit the pastoral sound of Italian opera around 1830, but both beginning and end, the limits of pastoral, are not left to conjecture. The *scena* and subsequent *romanza* are well bounded—A major reigns throughout. There is no doubt that a pastoral scene has passed when the chorus of maidens comes to a close, the last cadence sounds, and recitative begins once more. What is pastoral (more or less everything in this scene) and what is not pastoral (more or less everything outside of this scene) is clear. But in its very boundedness and transparency, this example from *Alina* also illustrates one of the principal challenges of writing about the pastoral, recalling the two analogous yet divergent definitions of pastoral.

This scene in *Alina* is an example of what might be called the “topical” or the “characteristic” pastoral. In opera studies—and writing on music more broadly—

⁵¹ “La decorazione rappresenta un paesetto in Provenza: un boschetto è da un lato, dall'altro una rustica abitazione, di fronte un torrente attraversato da un ponticello: in lontano poggi e colline.” *La regina di Golconda* (Milan: Gaspare Truffi, 1830), 23.

⁵² Volmar shares his name with the husband in Rousseau's *Julie*, the work that did so much to advertise the Alps as a retreat for sentimental European readers.

Larghetto

The musical score is for a piano accompaniment in 6/8 time, marked *Larghetto*. It consists of five systems of music. The key signature is three sharps (F#, C#, G#). The first system begins with a forte (*ff*) dynamic in the right hand and piano (*p*) in the left. The second system features a piano (*p*) dynamic in the left hand. The third system is marked *dolce*. The fourth system features a forte-piano (*fp*) dynamic in the left hand. The fifth system features a forte-piano (*fp*) dynamic in the left hand and piano (*p*) in the right hand.

Example 4.5: Donizetti, *Alina, regina di Golconda*, from Act II, no. 7 Coro e duetto

listening for such localized effects is reinforced by the limits of the musical example as it appears in book chapters or journal articles. Space is limited, printing scores for the specialist expensive, perhaps unnecessary, and the eight- or sixteen-bar excerpt depends on the author's ability to take a stick and point at some relation that can be readily grasped. "These bars are pastoral; I see the drone, the echoing horn calls." *La sonnambula* has few bounded pastoral moments similar to Donizetti's *Alina*, however, though it is possible to listen to the opera again, making note of every prominent horn effect, every aria or duet in a compound meter (there are several), and every melody that, even by the standards of the day, bespeaks self-conscious simplicity. Some lists and charts, perhaps a graph or two—these are

inadequate substitutes for this opera. It is therefore necessary to turn to the second, the looser understanding of pastoral.

This version of the pastoral is far more forgiving. It depends on “pastoral principles and outcomes,” as Hatten has recently argued, to reveal “an overarching mode that coordinates the dramatic trajectory and expressive significance of the work.”⁵³ Hatten sees the distinction between the two versions of pastoral as aligning neatly with classicism and romanticism, or the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries more broadly. One age deployed the pastoral as a topic, enjoyed its characteristic pieces, its drones and musettes; the other “troped” the pastoral, expanding it in various directions to encompass whole movements or even whole symphonies. When the pastoral becomes a title, a trope, it gathers together all other topics; they cease to operate independently, and it is no longer possible to discriminate measure from measure. Hatten’s theory—however much it might be said to reproduce rather too neatly Schiller’s opposition between the naïve and sentimental—works for analysis, for it allows larger arguments to be made about style, about how music might relate to literature, to retreat, to closure and convention, to our shared “double longing after innocence and happiness.”⁵⁴ Indeed, amid a wide-ranging critique of topic theory and topic theorists, Stephen Rumph singles out Hatten’s treatment of the pastoral for its ability to show how an individual topic “is articulated through oppositions within the musical structure.”⁵⁵

All of this returns the discussion to the central problem of the pastoral. It is a musical topic—discrete, uncomplicated, historical—that can be taught to anyone who can identify a drone. It is also a vague amalgam of feelings—about purpose, labor, sexuality, landscape, tradition, alienation, longing—that has found expression in some of the best (and worst) poetry of the past two thousand years. Ingenuity is not needed to identify the first kind of pastoral. Undergraduates can hear the shepherds’ music in *Messiah*; the discussions in this chapter of *Alina* or *Sonnambula*’s horn calls involved no analytical wizardry. The presence of the first type of pastoral, however, serves as a pretext to write about the second type, with concrete, indisputable observations (these bars do not leave the tonic; here is the flute and the horn) giving way to sweeping assertions about our shared humanity. In the end, the problem of the pastoral has very little to do with the advantages and limitations of topic theory, for it is a problem that plagues all sensitive people who wish to write about aesthetic experience. In Hatten’s reading of Schubert’s Piano Sonata in G major—the reading praised by Rumph—he detects a “penetration to the sublime by means of the fulfillment of plenitude and the timelessness of mystic oneness.”⁵⁶

⁵³ Robert S. Hatten, *Interpreting Musical Gestures, Topics, and Tropes: Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017), 53.

⁵⁴ This characterization of pastoral is taken from Renato Poggioli, *The Oaten Flute: Essays on Pastoral Poetry and the Pastoral ideal* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975), 1.

⁵⁵ Stephen Rumph, *Mozart and Enlightenment Semiotics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 95.

⁵⁶ Hatten, *Interpreting Musical Gestures*, 67.

Wanting to feel at home in the world is a shared human desire, and many writers believe that, understandably enough, music can offer a glimpse of the garden from which we have all been banished. The visions of Beethoven or Schubert differ from that of Bellini, however, and thus to enter Bellini's pastoral world requires us to readjust our expectations for what counts as musically significant. What follows is a discussion of Bellini's treatment of closure in his pastoral opera, his experiments with a pervasive but seldom discussed musical convention that he would not repeat in *Norma* or *I puritani*. It may have little to do with the listening habits of early spectators, but if two thousand years of pastoral poetry have taught us anything, it is that some things may have to be accepted as lost and unrecoverable.

*

BELLINI'S IDYLIC ENDINGS

Near the end of the Act I finale, a few words from a distraught Elvino are enough to throw the entire universe of *La sonnambula* into disorder: "Non più nozze!" ("There'll be no wedding!") The community—the chorus, joined by Alisa and Alessio—takes up this call. The curtain falls and the audience is left to contemplate how the world will be set right in Act II. In early nineteenth-century Italian opera, the Act I finale is conventionally the moment of greatest dramatic tension, and Romani's gesture here cannot be called particularly subtle. It is a testament to the stability of the social order enjoyed by Amina, Elvino, and their friends that the most catastrophic disruption imaginable is the cancellation of the wedding feast. That this is a world governed by the conventions of comedy could hardly be more obvious: there may not be a wedding now, but from the beginning no one could doubt how it will all end.

It is thanks to Wye J. Allanbrook that we are now attuned to how these conventions governed not only dramatic but musical logic as well. Symphonies and piano concertos could have happy endings just as often as operas, and Allanbrook's interest in comedy leads her to ponder one of the most fundamental of musical gestures: the cadence. Cadences, humble yet indispensable, are everywhere in late eighteenth-century music, whose "emphatically end-oriented" design is, for Allanbrook, "an enormous part of its appeal" and grants many of the works of Mozart and Haydn their "sense of dramatic coherence, of something having been seen through to an end."⁵⁷ Her praise of the cadence is in keeping with her characteristic defiance of all those romantics who distrust the endings of KV 466 or Op. 37, not to mention the legions of theorists who, following them, are apt to consider the merry train of dominants and tonics at the end of any instrumental work "much ado about nothing, mere comic dither."⁵⁸ The harmonic drama of sonata form—or whatever one chooses to call the large-scale opposition between two key areas a fifth apart—requires this sense of closure, these "waves" of cadences spilling over the page at the end of both exposition and recapitulation. Though often void of any distinctive melodic character, occurring at moments of motivic liquidation, if one wishes to follow Schoenberg, these successive iterations of V-I

⁵⁷ Allanbrook, *Secular Commedia*, 139.

⁵⁸ Allanbrook, *Secular Commedia*, 145.

are “by no means structurally superfluous,” even if they can easily become “the butt of musical caricature.”⁵⁹

Allanbrook’s words ring with the self-assurance of the iconoclast, though her quarrel with the theorists seems to have been inspired by the methods—rather than the results—of analysis. “The just amount of cadential formulas required to gain the period is,” she writes, “a function of syntax,” later noting how cadences are essential to achieving a sense of “judicious proportion.”⁶⁰ Just and judicious—there is no effort to conceal praise of the master, even if these conclusions have been reached by a pleasantly unfamiliar route. One wonders whether all composers’ judgment was as sound as Mozart’s in an age when—“perhaps at no other time before or since”—closure was “such a significant musical issue.”⁶¹

Few would wish to dispute Mozart’s authority in matters of syntax, but it is possible to question whether his age was unique in its obsession with closure. Romani, for example, reminds us how the rules of comedy were still observed in Milan in 1831, while Rossini, Bellini, and Donizetti wrote opera after opera alongside which Mozart’s interest in formal and harmonic closure appears to shrink to indifference. Any listener familiar with this repertory will instinctively recognize the importance of cadences, and the historical record reassures us that he is not alone in enjoying their pleasures: Giuseppe Carpani called their appearance in Rossini an embarrassment of riches (“lusso e dovizia di cadenze”), the frequent “invigorating and enriching of the harmony” or the “resolution of the dissonance” leading to pleasures inexpressible (“producono un piacere indicibile”).⁶² If Haydn could occasionally use cadences to pointed effect, Rossini made them an integral part of his style.

One of the cadences most frequently used by these composers—and joyously anticipated by audiences—is the so-called *felicità* cadence, a name borrowed from Donizetti, who, when setting out to edit *Poliuto* to make it more palatable to Parisian tastes, wrote to Mayr about the need to reduce the “cadenze felicità felicità felicità.”⁶³ It is marked by a melodic descent $\hat{5}-\hat{4}-\hat{3}-\hat{2}$ (or $\hat{3}-\hat{2}-\hat{1}-\hat{7}$), which is repeated, often several times, often with the rhythm diminished, before a final arrival on $\hat{1}$. The harmonies are invariably the same—I(6)–ii6–V6/4–V5/3, with the goal naturally being I—and Donizetti was evidently recalling the frequency with which the word “felicità” was set to this pattern when he complained about it to his mentor. Rossini had made them famous, a representative example being the conclusion of Isabella’s first aria in *L’italiana in Algeri* (Example 4.6; bars 135–36).

The *felicità* cadence is often joined by several other cadential figures at the end of a cabaletta, though it derives its force in part from the fact that one need not have paid any attention to several minutes’ worth of music for the ear to latch on to

⁵⁹ Allanbrook, *Secular Commedia*, 140 and 145.

⁶⁰ Allanbrook, *Secular Commedia*, 146.

⁶¹ Allanbrook, *Secular Commedia*, 139.

⁶² Quoted in Steffan, *Rossiniana*, 83.

⁶³ Letter dated April 8, 1839. Here quoted in Giorgio Pagannone, “Tra ‘cadenze felicità felicità felicità’ e ‘melodie lunghe lunghe lunghe’: Di una tecnica cadenzale nel melodramma del primo Ottocento,” *Il Saggiatore musicale* 4, no. 1 (1997): 53.

ISABELLA

fe-li-ci - tà, fe - li - ci - tà, fe - li - ci - tà, da va-ga

132

fem-mi na fe-li - ci - tà, da va-ga fem-mi na fe-li - ci - tà, fe - li - ci -

136

tà, fe - li - ci - tà, fe - li - ci - tà.

Example 4.6: Rossini, *L'Italiana in Algeri*, from Act I, no. 4 Coro e cavatina

the pattern and recognize how to enjoy it. Much of its effect comes from what Janet Schmalfeldt has called the “one more time” technique. The term—almost disarming in its simplicity—does not describe any moment of mere repetition, she insists; what distinguishes this practice is

its capacity to withhold resolution precisely where the cadence reaches its highest degree of tension, its potential for creating surprise through thwarted expectation,

and for disrupting the rhetoric of closure, with the result that what is repeated becomes imperative, and thus emphatically dramatic.⁶⁴

Such cadences are scattered through late eighteenth-century music, adaptable to any variety of melodic figurations, so long as, by leaping to an active scale degree, the expected arrival on 1 is temporarily deferred. A few examples in Cimarosa or Paisiello aside, however, it was Rossini who standardized the shape—brazenly straightforward—endemic to Italian opera, such that Giorgio Paganonne can place it alongside the lyric form or the groundswell as one of the favored conventions of the age.⁶⁵

While it is possible to speak of Mozart’s “just” handling of proportion and form, recent studies of the romantic overture have been eager to stress the unbalanced proportions favored by Rossini and his followers. For Steven Vande Moortele, the crescendos and cadences in Rossini’s overtures “overshadow all that precedes [them], in spite of the fact that [they are] structurally optional,” while Scott Burnham hears them as “mark[ing] generic convention, again and again” in a manner that does not “relate to the rest of the overture.”⁶⁶ Though many of his techniques—“one more time” and all—were inherited from the previous century, it was Rossini, as these analysts hear him, who transformed form into the formulaic. Because Rossini would never use a *felicità* cadence in an overture—the pattern was conceived for a voice (or voices) supported by a monolithic orchestral texture—it is possible to bypass these discussions of form: some commentators have ignored formalist concerns altogether and assigned these cadences the workaday function of reminding spectators when to clap. The Germans, disparagingly, invented the term *Bettelcadenz* for cadences that “beg” for recognition, while for David Kimbell, their “loudness and brashness illuminate no dramatic issue; they serve merely to stimulate the audience’s enthusiasm.”⁶⁷

It is difficult to disagree with Kimbell’s assessment, though his observations do little to explain the appearance of the *felicità* pattern at moments when prompting applause would not seem to be the task at hand. Take the beginning of the Act II trio in *La donna del lago*, for example, when Elena’s first statement—miles from the end of the number—is rounded off with a cadence that seems to have been plucked from the previous century: the harmonic movement quickens; the voice outlines the supertonic before a graceful turn around $\hat{1}$ at the cadential dominant; an oboe oversees the whole thing from above. Rossini immediately asserts himself over

⁶⁴ Janet Schmalfeldt, “Cadential Processes: The Evaded Cadence and the ‘One More Time’ Technique,” *Journal of Musicological Research* 12, nos. 1–2 (1992): 6.

⁶⁵ Paganonne, 86.

⁶⁶ Steven Vande Moortele, *The Romantic Overture and Musical Form from Rossini to Wagner* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 61 and Scott Burnham, “Making Overtures” in Nicholas Mathew and Benjamin Walton, eds., *The Invention of Beethoven and Rossini* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 200.

⁶⁷ Mention of the *Bettelcadenz* can be found in a review of a Milanese performance of *La clemenza di Tito* that appeared in the *Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung* 19 (1817): 176. David Kimbell, *Verdi in the Age of Italian Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 81. Both are discussed in Paganonne, 54.

ELENA

Al - la ra - gion deh - rie - da l'al - ma a - gi - ta - ta, op -

Strings

31

pres - sa, ed al - l'a - mor suc - ce - da la te - ne - ra a - mi -

Ob.

38

sta, la te - ne ra a - mi - sta, la te - ne - ra a - mi -

Tutti

42

- sta, si, l'a - mi - sta, la te ne - ra a - mi - sta.

Example 4.7: Rossini, *La donna del lago*, from Act II, no. 9 Terzetto

Mozart, however: virtuosity and *felicità* follow, such that we almost forget that the singer had already reached a satisfactory ending (Example 4.7). In Caplin's terms,

such moments can be described as overbrimming with “cadential content,” bearing little resemblance to the true “cadential function” of the formal ending.⁶⁸

In this example, the contrast between the late eighteenth- and the early nineteenth-centuries’ sense of harmony is at its most dramatic. Germany vs. Italy; harmony vs. melody; form vs. content; text vs. performance: all the old oppositions come swimming to the surface once again. It is true that the proportions may seem unbalanced on the page; it is true that the cadential gestures strike the ear as excessive, ostentatious, pedestrian and theatrical. Before accepting the terms of defeat and choosing instead to celebrate melody and song, it is first necessary to acknowledge what seems a basic, though seldom articulated, distinction about how musicians on both sides of the Alps handled their inheritance of the classical style. When the great fog of romanticism descended on northern Europe, composers in damp, lonely rooms across Germany and Austria began to resist the old conventions by turning inward; open any page of a celebrated *Lied*, and one is likely to find harmonic movement at the level of the bar—dense, twisted, often unexpected—that few composers writing in the settled decades before 1789 would have dared imagine. Today, those in the business of writing about music have much to say about this repertory, though their techniques can only ever be imperfectly mimicked when dealing with Italian opera: the reliable use of \flat VI notwithstanding—and how much has been made of this sonority!—this is not a repertory of harmonic daring. That is not to say that it is a repertory without a sense of harmony, only that the sense of harmony works by the page rather than by the bar. On the whole, the Italian response to the eighteenth century’s sense of punctuation and tonality—its “emphatically end-oriented” design—was to expand rather than contract, thus the seemingly disproportionate number of cadential gestures needed to close overtures, arias, and ensembles that never strayed far from the tonic.

The logic of these cadences is so indispensable to early nineteenth-century Italian opera that even though Bellini may, in *Il pirata* and *La straniera*, have cultivated a style that eschewed Rossini’s pyrotechnics, he could not abandon the Rossini cadence. The cabaletta that closes the Act I duet between Alaide and Arturo in *La straniera* is representative of Bellini’s temperate approach in the opera (Example 4.8a). There is nothing extraneous in either accompaniment or vocal line until the end, where the speech-like text setting is engulfed by the *felicità* cadence (Example 4.8b). Any number from *La straniera* could illustrate this point: for all of Bellini’s radicalism in the main lyric numbers—marked by their lack of melody, something closer to arioso than aria—the conclusions are invariably, and pleasurably, the same.⁶⁹ Perhaps Bellini knew his austere style would challenge audiences in Milan enough that he did not wish to leave them in doubt about when to applaud as well.

⁶⁸ William Caplin, “The Classical Cadence: Conceptions and Misconceptions,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 57, no. 1 (2004): 82.

⁶⁹ Bellini’s treatment of cadences has received little attention to date, even by those whose interests are more traditionally analytical—for an important and sympathetic treatment of Bellini in this vein, see William Rothstein, “Tonal Structures in Bellini,” *Journal of Music Theory* 56, no. 2 (Fall 2012): 225–83.

Allegro moderato
ALAUDE

Allegro moderato

pp stacc. sempre

pian - to mi ce - la che il ci - glio ti ve - la, pre - ga - re tu dè - i, non pian - ger per me...

Example 4.8a: Bellini, *La straniera*, from Act I, [no. 5] Scena e duetto

And yet, are the proportions in Rossini and Bellini not just? Would any listener be satisfied if these cadences were expunged? To establish what counts as musically sound in this repertory—at least insofar as pacing and closure are concerned—is no easy task, particularly given the performance record. Here there is chaos instead of consolation, for over the past century conductors have subjected Rossini’s, Bellini’s, and Donizetti’s cabalettas and their codas to the most savage of cuts. Changing the score is inevitable, often welcome, but there are few things as disorienting in the theatre as hearing a *felicità* cadence prematurely initiated (or unexpectedly removed). Completeness need not be the ideal in order to question what makes one arrangement of cadences at the end of a movement successful and another not. Writing about them presents its own challenges, for such moments also stretch the boundaries of what is possible in the printed example. Though it is undoubtedly a singular, recognizable musical feature, the *felicità* cadence cannot always be captured on the page, as anyone who has ever listened to an Italian opera with the score at hand will know. Especially at the end of an act or a large ensemble, one is not so much reading the score as trying to keep pace with the page turns. A chart may be of some use—does a cabaletta of a certain length seem to demand a certain number of cadences? If the repeat is cut, should the cadential material be proportionally cut as well?—but on the whole any writer will struggle to put words to something that must be felt rather than seen.

Once we accept the importance of closure and cadences to this style, how does our view of the pastoral elements of these works change? Asking what, if anything, the lives of shepherds have to do with the logic of musical closure leads to two contradictory theses. On the one hand, the cadence is antithetical to the pastoral.

ALAIDE
 e un rag-gio di cal-ma im - plo-ra ad u - n'al-ma che for - se più mi - se-ra è fat - ta per

ARTURO
 è mia la tua sor - te in vi-ta ed in mor-te, o te - co som - mer-so, o sal - vo con

te, è fat - ta per te, è fat -

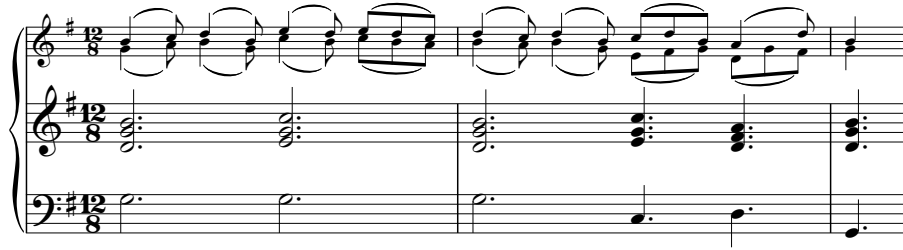
te, o sal - vo con te, o sal -

ta per te, è fat - ta per te.

vo con te, o sal - vo con te.

Example 4.8b: Bellini, *La straniera*, from Act I, [no. 5] Scena e duetto

The natives of Arcadia were content to remain in the tonic, and cadences often mark the moment when the illusion of the garden becomes apparent. This tension between a sense of timelessness and the conventions of our world is displayed in miniature in Corelli's offering for the birth of Christ. The last movement of the *Concerto fatto per la notte di Natale*, Op. 6 No. 8, is in 12/8 and features violins moving in thirds above a sustained bass. But Corelli cannot maintain the atmosphere for more than a bar and a half before the drone passes away and the violins diverge for the voice leading demanded by the cadence (Example 4.9). The



Example 4.9: Corelli, Concerto grosso, Op. 6 no. 8 [VI.] Largo. Pastorale *ad libitum*

pleasures of pastoral *otium*, Corelli shows us, are fleeting.⁷⁰ On the other hand, to return to a point raised by Caplin, the pastoral's insistence on root-position tonic stability makes it a close ally to the cadence, or at least reinforces its effects.⁷¹

These were not idle concerns for Bellini, especially given his handling of the *felicità* cadence in *La sonnambula*. The first duet shared by Amina and Elvino in Act I ("Prendi: l'anel ti dono") is a leisurely affair, even by the standards of Bellini's long melodies. Though 12/8 is not necessarily an unusual meter for Italian opera, nor B-flat major an unusual key, both conspire to produce an atmosphere of hushed tranquility fitting for a pair of lovers who have no reason to expect anything but a cloudless future.⁷² Technically, the critical edition insists, this is Elvino's entrance aria, but given the amount of the time the characters spend singing together, to hear it as an aria rather than a duet demands an unlikely commitment to rule-following.⁷³ The orchestration—soft woodwinds in thirds—could have been borrowed from any of Mozart's most tender scenes and is reminiscent of the opening of the Act I finale in *Così fan tutte*. This is Bellini at his most pastoral, though it is hard to say whether the harmonies are more reserved, the melody more serene than in any other opera.

The Act I duet between Giulietta and Romeo from Bellini's previous opera offers a useful comparison in this respect. Formal considerations are more important here, for identifying the *Sonnambula* number as an aria—rather than a duet—means that it is not surprising that Elvino begins his slow movement with no preparation. The duet in *I Capuleti e i Montecchi* has its *scena* and the customarily agitated *tempo d'attacco*, which inevitably casts the slow movement as a kind of retreat, a moment of reflection, a bower of musical loveliness. The form corresponds with the dramatic exigencies of the scene: Romeo urges Giulietta to flee with him, and she hesitates in the name of duty. Questions of honor and the heart are duly contemplated over an Andante. In *Sonnambula*, by contrast, Bellini is free simply to present one of his long melodies. There is no dramatic justification for this mood,

⁷⁰ This example, along with other imitations of the *pifferari*, is discussed in Monelle, *The Musical Topic*, 229.

⁷¹ See again Caplin, "On the relation of musical *topoi* to formal function," 120.

⁷² The number is in B-flat major in the critical edition, though the scores published by Ricordi record it as being a whole tone lower. This discrepancy does not alter the analysis that follows, however; few conclusions about the number's pastoral quality could be drawn from either of these keys.

⁷³ Indeed, in the scores published by Ricordi, Elvino's cavatina was often listed as duet.

but then again shepherds have never needed a reason to express their happiness in song. That the melodies also have markedly different shapes is also noteworthy, insofar as we believe melodic contour can tell us something about character. Romeo's range is more extensive than Elvino's, regularly reaching below 1, with upward leaps as wide as a ninth. Elvino barely extends beyond a fifth, and when anything is assigned to him that is not stepwise, those leaps are usually downward, though these are sighs of contentment rather than sighs of grief.

The fast movement in the *Sonnambula* number differs little in mood from the first movement—we have not left B-flat major, and 6/8 hardly contrasts with 12/8—but if there was little dramatic justification for the slow movement, there is even less for the transition to the cabaletta. Amina's brief use G minor is a sign of her sadness, to be sure, but these tears mark a joyful speechlessness rather than any real sorrow. When the chorus of villagers enters to encourage their love, they are accompanied by a perpetual motion figure in the strings over alternating tonics and dominants—a series of scales, motivic liquidation; the hand of the organ grinder is spied out of the corner of the eye—which reaches an abrupt end to allow for Amina and Elvino a chance to repeat their song. When the chorus enters for a second time, however, Bellini's difficulties become apparent: how does one terminate such circular music? The unison Abs are expected by no one, and before it is possible to conceive of what new directions this music may take, Bellini has initiated a *felicità* cadence and the duet is swiftly brought to a close (Example 4.10). The differences with the Corelli excerpt are matters of degree rather than kind, for both composers must find a way to reconcile musical and pastoral convention, which in this instance are fundamentally at odds. The *felicità* cadence thus sounds unusual here, especially for such a careful composer, if only because it cannot be conceived as the inevitable conclusion to the accumulation of musical energy.

It is difficult to say, of course, whether the pastoral mood of *Sonnambula* prompted Bellini to be more self-conscious about his habits of closure, but there are enough idiosyncrasies in the opera that such a thesis can at least rest in the land of possibility. Rodolfo's aria, which follows almost immediately on this duet, also features an unusual ending. Much about the aria can pass without mention, though the last section of the cabaletta, marked *più mosso*, offers a lesson in the Italian cadence. This section too has a feeling of being somewhat detached from the preceding music, perhaps because the bass line, which had lain dormant, at least unnoticeable, for the past minutes, suddenly assumes a more active role as, through a series of descending and then ascending scales over six bars, it marks out the beginning of an expanded cadential progression: I-vi-IV. The arrival on the cadential 6/4 and the convergence of the voices signal the beginning of the *felicità* progression, but its pleasures are deferred by a wholesale repetition of the scalar pattern (Example 4.11a). As much as the repetition sounds as if it is thwarting expectations, the proportions are such that it would transform convention into unbalanced musical nonsense if this passage were not repeated. Still, it is a relief when the *felicità* progression appears—leisurely, plainly, with none of the adornments we might expect from Rossini—which makes what follows all the more surprising. While the progression could have led to a satisfactory close, Bellini adds

AMINA

TERESA Ah mio

ELVINO

Ah! co - si ne - gli oc - chi vos - tri co - re a co - re o - gnor si

ALESSIO col Bassi Ah! co - si ne - gli oc - chi vos - tri co - re a co - re o - gnor si

ben! Spie - gar nol

(Il di - spet - to in sen - re - pres - so più non val - go a so - ste -

Tu m'a - do - ri?

mo - stri: leg - ga o - gnor qual leg - ge a - des - so l'un nel - l'al - tro un sol pen -

mo - stri: leg - ga o - gnor qual leg - ge a - des - so l'un nel - l'al - tro un sol pen -

Example 4.10: Bellini, *La sonnambula*, from Act I, no. 3 Scena e cavatina

a third iteration of the *felicità* pattern, though this time marked by uncharacteristic homophony: voices and accompaniment declaim the cadence in unison, with Bellini swapping an applied dominant for the cadential 6/4 (Example 4.11b). The

Più stretto

so, ah! nol so spie - gar,
 ner, ah! non val - go, oh Di - io!
 Nel tuo vez - - zo io lo
 sier, leg - - ga un sol pen - sie - ro,
 sier, leg - - ga un sol pen - sie - ro,
Più stretto
 ff
 spie - - - gar.
 a so - - ste - ner, a
 leg - go, nel tuo vez - - zo lu - - sin - ghier, ah
 leg - - ga sol un
 leg - - ga sol un

Example 4.10 *continued*

texture is thick, muddled even, and the touch of dissonance seems to remind us simply that all endings do not have to be the same.

More perplexing still is the *felicità* cadence in Amina and Elvino's other, proper duet in Act I ("Son geloso del zefiro errante"). The lovers have quarreled, but the

so - ste - ner, a so - ste - ner,
 nel tuo vez - zo lu - sin - ghier,
 sol pen - sier, un sol pen - sier,
 sol pen - seri, un sol pen - sier,
 a so - ste - ner.)
 nel tuo vez - zo lu - sin ghier.
 un sol pen - sier.
 un sol pen - sier.

The musical score consists of three systems. Each system includes vocal staves (Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Bass) and piano accompaniment (Right and Left Hand). The key signature is B-flat major (two flats). The first system shows the vocalists singing in parallel motion, with the piano accompaniment providing harmonic support. The second system continues the vocal lines, with the piano accompaniment featuring more complex textures, including trills and scales. The third system concludes the passage with a final cadence.

Example 4.10 *continued*

reconciliation is so swift that the duet again feels like an excuse for more singing. The vocal pattern follows standard procedure for such moments, the shepherds singing independently until their dispute is resolved, which prompts a good deal of parallel sixths and some virtuosic coordination of trills and scales and roulades that

Più mosso
LISA
(El - la so - - la è va - gheg - gia - ta, so - - lo el - la,

TERESA
(Son cor - te - - si, son ga - lan - ti, son quei di cit -

ELVINO
(Da quel det - ti è lu - sin - ga - ta!

RODOLFO
E - ra des - sa, qual tu

(Son corte - si, son ga - lan - ti, son quei di cit -

Più mosso (Son cor - te - si, son ga - lan - ti gli a - bi - tan - ti di cit -

ff

I vi

sol, el - - la sol! El - la so -

tà, di cit - - tà! Son cor - te -

è lu - sin - ga - - - ta! Da quel det -

se - i, sul mat - ti - no del - l'e - tà del l'e - tà.

tà, di cit - - tà, son cor - te -

tà, sì, gli a - bi - tan - ti di cit - tà, di cit - tà, son cor

IV 4 [repetition]

Example 4.11a: Bellini, *La sonnambula*, from Act I, no. 4 Scena e cavatina did not escape the notice of the opera's first reviewers—Pasta and Rubini were evidently in fine form at this moment.⁷⁴ The orchestra plays almost no role here, pulsing through a series of cadential progressions. It is difficult to imagine a more

el - - - la sol, ah el - la
di cit - - - tà, si gli a - bi -
ga - - - - - ta, ah da quel
tà - - - del l'e - tà, si del - l'e -
di cit - - - tà, si gli a - bi -
tà, - - - di cit - tà, si gli a - bi -
sol, ah el - la sol, ah el - la soll)
tan - ti di cit - tà lo son, lo son.)
det - ti è lu - sin - ga - ta ah si, ah si!)
tà, si del l'e - tà, del - l'e - tà.)
tan - ti di cit - tà lo son, lo son.)
tan - ti di cit - tà lo son, lo son.)

Example 4.11b: Bellini, *La sonnambula*, from Act I, no. 4 Scena e cavatina

fitting example of timelessness and the Italian pastoral than this. The challenge for such music—which feels as if it has neither beginning nor end—is to bring it to a close. One solution is to initiate a *felicità* cadence out of nothing, one that,

⁷⁴ See the review in *L'Eco* 29 (March 9, 1831): 116.

AMINA
E sem-bian - te a se-re - no mat - ti - no per noi sem - pre. la vi - ta sa -

ELVINO
E sem-bian - te a se-re - no mat - ti - no per noi sem - pre. la vi - ta sa -

pp

rà, per noi sa - rà, per noi sa - rà, per noi sa - rà, per noi sa -

ppp

sem - pre sa - rà, sa - rà, per noi sa -

pp

Example 4.12: Bellini, *La sonnambula*, from Act I, no. 6 Scena e duetto

moreover, departs from all precedent (Example 4.12). The pattern is familiar—tremolo strings; a declamatory vocal line; one syllable for each harmony—but the setting is unfamiliar, in this moment of such tenderness. The vocal parts sit unusually low (the singers simply do not sing in many performances), and the harmonies diverge from the expected pattern: the feint to the submediant makes this moment less an example of “one more time” repetition than a genuine deceptive

Allegro

rà, per noi sa - rà, per noi sem - -

Allegro

ff

pre - sa - rà, per noi sa - rà, per

noi sa - rà, per noi sa - rà.

Example 4.12 *continued*

cadence. But unlike in the first aria-cum-duet, when the sudden *felicità* progression was the means to force a conclusion, here the cadence is an interruption: there is still plenty of singing to be had, though now the orchestra is all but absent until the very end. There can be no cadence here, however; the musical energy so far accumulated has already been spent. Amina and Elvino are left to suggest the

AMINA
Pur nel son-no il mio cor ti ve - drà. Pur nel son - no, pur nel son-no il mio cor ti ve -

ELVINO
Pur nel son-no il mio cor ti ve - drà. Pur nel son - no, pur nel son-no il mio cor ti ve -

drà. Ad - di - o! ad - di - o!

drà. Ad - dio - o! ad - di - o!

p *ff* Allegro

p *ff* Allegro

ff Allegro

Example 4.13: Bellini, *La sonnambula*, from Act I, no. 6 Scena e duetto

dominant, and the orchestra can only respond by confirming the tonic (Example 4.13).

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Bellini would not wholly abandon the convention after *La sonnambula*—it is dispersed throughout his last three operas—but neither would he test the pattern quite the same way again. The truly radical gesture would have been to dispense with such cadences all together, as he did when he was at his most original: there is nothing even close to a *felicità* cadence in the second act of *Norma*. As Mary Ann Smart has observed, however, anyone who wishes to account for the effects of experiment and innovation must be willing to embrace convention and repetition.⁷⁵

The confluence of musical and literary convention in *La sonnambula* alerts us to the challenges of writing about familiar pleasures. The fact that the cadences operate differently in this opera allows us to see how they had been operating

⁷⁵ See again Smart, “In Praise of Convention.”

without our notice all along. And while descriptions of musical effects often privilege originality (either explicitly or implicitly), Bellini's treatment of cadences here reminds us that some things are successful precisely because they work with the stuff of everyday life. As Carpani said about Rossini's handling of cadences, "not everything is new, it is the whole that is new."⁷⁶ This is the lesson of the pastoral, which relies on a stock of conventions and evolves through constant reference to previous iterations of itself. One instance is only intelligible within a tradition, and the pastoral's central conceit is that the community of shepherds might tell us something about what we share amongst ourselves. Perhaps it is for that reason that *La sonnambula* is a pastoral opera: neither for its melodic serenity, nor for its horn calls and compound meters, nor for its echoes of Virgil, but rather for the simple opportunity it gives us to reflect on why we return to some music over and over again.

⁷⁶ The comment—"tutto non è nouvo, ma nouvo n'è il Tutto"—was made about the integration of cadences into Rossini's style. See again Steffan, *Rossiniana*, 83.

Epilogue: In Search of Donizetti

Though the great song return no more
There's keen delight in what we have
Yeats

I have often wondered what a rewrite of *Fahrenheit 451* would look like if it were a musical, rather than a literary, culture being aggressively hunted down and destroyed. What would the iconoclasts heap upon their bonfires? And what would those who cling to the hope of a musical future hide in their homes at the risk of professional ruin, banishment, or even death? At the end of the novel we are left to imagine that, once the bombs have flattened the cities, the exiled academics with bits of Dante or the Bible hidden in the recesses of their minds will leave their itinerant camps and build a new society founded on a humane love of reading rather than tyrannical, benighted conformity. However improbable Bradbury's ending may seem, it is at least possible to believe that, yes, with a bit of paper, a bit of ink, and enough people whose memories can be excavated, libraries would rise from the ruins of the old fire stations and children could be taught to recognize their own language in writing. But what of the musicologist? His task is far more daunting. He may have smuggled a few scores out of the city, but with no musicians and no instruments, their powers to console and comfort are dim when compared with the poetry that survives.

I suspect that many musicologists have thought about the peripheral role they play in the production of music, though perhaps not in such dystopian terms. Even the most accomplished performer-scholar cannot mount *Figaro* by himself, which is why the voice summoned to write about musical performances can often have something elegiac about it. Carolyn Abbate's *In Search of Opera*, for example, is infused with a palpable fear of mortality, a sense that because the score is insufficient for even the most powerful of imaginations, there is always the danger that once we hear a work in performance we may never hear it again.¹ The ephemerality of music haunts us all. The perpetuation of our art is dependent on the labor of others, and because the product of that labor, sound, is fleeting, swift as a shadow, short as any dream, it is easy to look across the disciplinary divide with envy at the relative permanence of sculpture, painting, architecture, or literature.

It is true that when compared with the material forms of the other arts—ink and paper, stone and canvas—the material forms of musical works can appear exceptionally fragile. I am, however, unwilling to set music as embodied practice, dependent on years of expensive institutional training, alongside the solidity of a literary text and beat my chest in despair. We do not need the apocalyptic vision of

¹ In her preface she describes performance as “a spectacle of labor, marked by mortality: it sinks ‘into the past,’ from which it never returns.” A few pages later, performance is that “strange moment when music is realized, created, and at that instant dies away.” See *In Search of Opera* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), x and xii.

Fahrenheit 451 to know that all things, even books, are impermanent. The stones one kicks along the road will outlast Shakespeare. Music is not uniquely ephemeral, only more transparently dependent on people, memory, institutions, tradition, what for lack of better words might be described as a cultural infrastructure committed to its preservation. Yet this is true of all works of art, which require that a society set aside resources for their preservation. As soon as it no longer wishes to do so, those works will be shown to be as ephemeral as any musical performance. The beauty found in architecture may appear definite, especially when one thinks how the Parthenon has stood outside for centuries, but such beauty is only definite so long as the belief necessary to keep such monuments upright remains stronger than the forces of decay pushing down upon them. Palmyra was destroyed because of outright hostility; Notre-Dame de Paris nearly destroyed because of neglect. Musicologists might feel some discomfort about the fact that the museums housing musical works are imaginary, but surely there is consolation in knowing that no one can cut Mozart's operas from their frames and forever deny the world their pleasures.

Statistically, the continued existence of a great deal of art seems rather unlikely. What are the odds, really, that the Ghent Altarpiece should have survived six centuries, numerous fires and bouts of iconoclasm, two world wars, and a trip down a salt mine? Many of the operas discussed in this dissertation arouse in me similar feelings of astonishment and gratitude. We are a long way from 1830s Italy, and we no longer train singers exclusively to sing dramatic coloratura roles. Small wonder that so much recent musicological writing has sought to celebrate the labor of performers—how miraculous it is that anyone can sing *Lucia di Lammermoor* at all. Even granting natural ability and decades of conservatory training, a singer must make a choice to sing this repertoire, and thus it should surprise no one that, since this thoroughly unnatural tradition was revived in the 1950s, we have had only a handful of great Donizetti sopranos. More than many other repertoires, these *bel canto* operas are, as Rodolfo Celletti has it, “rendered virtually unintelligible by poor vocal execution.”² He goes on to speculate, however, that the difference between the truly great prima donnas and more workaday talents was less marked than we might imagine. Composers could expect a certain level of competence from all of their singers, he suggests, so it is possible to speak of operatic texts independent of their instantiations in performance. Whether this is true or not, we do not have that luxury. Even if lightning should strike and give us another Callas or Sutherland or Caballé, the work—at least in the case of Donizetti—cannot exist without performers and performances.

Despite the many persuasive reasons to treat *Anna Bolena* or *Lucrezia Borgia* or *Parisina* as events more than texts, I struggle to situate them within our current understanding of performance. For the past several decades, opera studies has celebrated the live experience of opera, both in the past and in the present, as the site where opera is most real. It is hard not to sympathize with this impulse, at least to the extent that it allows us to articulate something about why we are all drawn

² Celletti, *A History of Bel Canto*, trans. Frederick Fuller (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 179.

to opera in the first place—those pin-you-to-the-back-of-your-seat moments that, if the right conditions are met, live on in our memories long after we have left the theater. But who could ever claim to have had that experience with Donizetti with any regularity?

When Abbate went in search of opera, she did not have to go very far: her insights were based on “a small number of unforgettable live performances.”³ A small cache of unforgettable performances is likely the product of dozens of forgettable ones, of course. It is worth questioning whether we want the foundation of our discipline to depend upon regular access to orchestra seats at the Metropolitan Opera and a lifetime of visiting European capital cities. A representative example of “drastic” knowledge, she relates, is the experience of attending two consecutive performances of *Meistersinger* at the Met in 2001.⁴ To celebrate this knowledge is to make opera even more elitist than it already is. It is to confine the works that we can reasonably claim to “know” to those few warhorses that are mounted with any regularity.

It is also, importantly, to ignore the fact that many people’s love of opera is cultivated through recordings. In the case of Donizetti, it could hardly be otherwise. True, the fathers to whom we owe so much—the Ashbrooks, the Gossetts, the Weinstocks and Lippmänner—had to get by with a vocal score and a great deal of imagination, but we would be fools not to take advantage of Opera Rara’s catalogue and the innumerable festival performances captured by Naxos. Yet the personal experience of opera at home, though a natural complement to the live operatic experience, is seldom celebrated to the same degree as opera in the theater, a few notable exceptions (Terry Castle and Wayne Koestenbaum) aside. Perhaps we fear that to admit a reliance on recordings would betray the inadequacy of our minds’ ears. Or, perhaps we fear that to praise listening at home would encourage the kind of romantic devotion to the autonomous work that musicology today seeks to suppress. Here is Kierkegaard describing his operatic experience:

I have sat close to the front; I have moved back more and more; I have sought a remote corner in the theater in order to be able to hide myself completely in this music. The better I understood it or thought I understood it, the further I moved away from it—not out of coldness but out of love, for it wants to be understood at a distance. There has been something strangely enigmatic about this in my life. There have been times when I would have given everything for a ticket; now I do not even need to pay one rix-dollar for a ticket. I stand outside in the corridor; I lean against the partition that shuts me off from the spectators’ seats. Then it affects me most powerfully; it is a world by itself, separated from me; I can see nothing but am close enough to hear and yet so infinitely far away.⁵

I confess that many of the interpretive readings in this dissertation were the products of an operatic experience that more closely resembled Kierkegaard’s than

³ Abbate, *In Search of Opera*, xv.

⁴ Abbate, “Music—Drastic or Gnostic?” *Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 3 (Spring 2004): 535–36.

⁵ Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), 120.

Abbate's. At the same time, given the relatively poor quality of the one recording of *Torquato Tasso* that exists, it is impossible to ignore the labor of the singers as they are heard shuffling about between tracks.

To study Donizetti's operas, then, is to study something that is both embodied and disembodied. It is to study works and events, performances and scores. It is, in short, to study opera as it exists now, widely available through online streaming services, on rare occasions available in the theater. There may be comfort in giving our attention only to performances in the past. We do not have to confront the fear of losing them, for they are already lost. And yet if this dissertation accomplishes anything, it will encourage some readers to speak more openly about the love they feel for music that remains with us in the present.