

ITALIAN OPERA AFTER PUCCINI
THE CASE OF GIORGIO FEDERICO GHEDINI

by

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Abstract

Puccini's death in 1924 symbolically sealed an irreversible crisis for Italian opera and Italy at large. Woven into this crisis of opera are a series of complex historical narratives: the advent of mass society, the emergence of new media, and the ascent of totalitarianism and its demise in World War II. Spanning the second third of the twentieth century, the operas of the Italian composer Giorgio Federico Ghedini (1892-1965) offer a unique vantage point to trace what happened to opera and its discourses across these years. His works provide a compelling perspective on the fate of Italian opera amidst the intersections of tradition and innovation, nationalism and internationalism, politics and culture, fascism and antifascism, entertainment and art, elitism and popular appeal. Furthermore, they shed light on the relatively unexplored continuities—musical, political, cultural and economic—that span this turbulent period. This thesis examines both a composer and a pivotal era in opera history—from the interwar period through to the immediate aftermath of the Second World War—which have often been overlooked in academic studies. It investigates whether and how the genre of opera survived amidst economic crises and calls of its declining popularity. Through an in-depth analysis of Ghedini's operas, this study reveals that opera did not wane after Puccini, but rather continued to serve as a cornerstone of Italian cultural identity and as a platform for engaging with the highest stakes of the era. Ongoing state backing and ongoing debates about the genre's crisis underscore its persistent significance in Italy. The thesis employs musical analysis, critical reception studies, comparative methods and interdisciplinary approaches to explore the connections between Ghedini's eclectic output and the broader historical and cultural context in which his works were premiered. In bridging the gap between the first generation of modernist Italian musicians and the postwar avant-garde, Ghedini's case study illuminates continuities and controversies across pivotal moments in Italian history that are often studied in isolation. Through a reassessment of Ghedini's musical and historical significance, this study contributes significantly to our still fragmented understanding of Italian opera during the mid-twentieth

century, demonstrating how the genre navigated a perceived obsolescence couched in the terms of its utmost relevance.

Preface and Acknowledgments

From my experience teaching music in an Italian secondary school, opera is perceived as a rather odd and dull spectacle for today's teenagers. They are impatient towards what they perceive as yelling characters, incomprehensible dialogues, storylines reminiscent of outdated soap operas, and durations that feel unbearably long. Furthermore, as the wider media narrative goes, the audiences in opera houses are dwindling and grey-haired.¹ In a sense, we are witnessing the culmination of a century's long trend, where the once undeniable spectacularity of opera was first eclipsed by the grandeur of cinematic effects, then by the immediacy of television, and now by the immediate allure of smartphone technology and social media. Even in Italy, the homeland of the genre, opera appears to be definitively waning (or has it waned already?)—or so the story goes.

However, this story of decline is perhaps not so straightforward and teleological. Audiences do endure, and operatic events still garner national attention in Italy. Repertory operas such as *La traviata*, *Cavalleria Rusticana* and *Pagliacci* still top the bill for mass-marketised outdoor summer performances in towns across Italy, as well as prestigious venues like the Greek theatre of Taormina; international tourists flock to these performances as 'souvenir' experiences from their travels. The success of such stalwart operas remains virtually guaranteed for the organisers, as full houses savour the live enjoyment of their favourite beloved toasts and impassioned arias of jealousy. In Milan, perhaps the epicentre of operatic activity in Italy, the opening night of the annual season at La Scala in November each year continues to garner nationwide coverage. And this is not just a story of repertory stalwarts: as the revival of Ghedini's *Billy Budd* at the Conservatoire in 2018 demonstrated, more modern and obscure works can still achieve modest niche success.

¹ Francesca Sereno, 'Il (non) pubblico della lirica, questione centrale per il rilancio del settore', *Il Giornale delle Fondazioni*, 13 May 2016 <<http://www.ilgiornaledellefondazioni.com/content/il-non-pubblico-della-lirica-questione-centrale-il-rilancio-del-settore>> [accessed 1 February 2024]; Paolo Conti and Milena Gabanelli, 'Il mondo della lirica, sommerso dai debiti (Scala a parte)', *Corriere della Sera*, 6 December 2018 <<https://www.corriere.it/dataroom-milena-gabanelli/lirica-cultura-musica-teatri-dramma-debito-fondazioni/77df6d7a-f8ba-11e8-95fd-6a8b22868d97-va.shtml>> [accessed 18 June 2023].

I am intrigued by this combination of opera's enduring appeal—and of the high cultural, political and historical stakes that underpin this appeal—amid ongoing concerns of its decline. What intrigues me most is just how deeply historical this phenomenon is, shadowing opera's history in Italy for at least the last two hundred years—but gaining ever greater momentum with the crises of the twentieth century. It is from this starting point of enquiry that I launched this project, an exploration into opera's crisis as both a musical and social phenomenon, as told through the case study of Giorgio Federico Ghedini. This crisis still permeates our experience of opera today.

Addressing this project and the new lines of enquiry it has opened up has brought me in to contact with a number of individuals and institutions to whom I am deeply grateful. First and foremost, I am deeply grateful to my research supervisors, Ben Earle and Harriet Boyd-Bennett, for their unwavering guidance, patience and encouragement throughout the research and writing phases. Their generous investment of time has been invaluable, and their expertise and complementary advice were indispensable to the success of this work. Their valuable insights and suggestions significantly enhanced both the quality of my English and the depth of my research.

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Note on Translations

All the translations are my own unless otherwise stated.

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*Cari miei il melodramma...
...ha finito la sua storia.
Di museo è una memoria.¹*

¹ A quote from the dialogue among scientists facing the priests in Giulio Viozzi's opera, *Allamistakeo* (1954), inspired by Edgar Allan Poe's tale, *Some Words with a Mummy* (1845). Giulio Viozzi, *Allamistakeo. Opera in un Atto* (Milan: Ricordi, 1956), p. 28.

INTRODUCTION

Premises

This thesis takes as a case study the six complete operas by the Italian composer Giorgio Federico Ghedini (1892-1965), premiered from the 1930s to the 1950s, to ask what was happening to opera in Italy in the middle third of the century. This has been a much-overlooked period in the history of the genre, a transitional phase where supposedly pivotal historical events drowned out operatic endeavours. The emergence of mass society and the encroachment of new media defied the popular appeal of opera and its capacity to address the demands of a new, burgeoning public. The reproducibility of art and its widening gap vis-à-vis entertainment, along with advances in musical language and the gradual estrangement of musicians from their audience, all contributed to initiating an inexorable crisis within the genre and fuelling ongoing debates over it. Moreover, the profound historical upheavals of the twentieth century, epitomised by the two world wars and the advent of totalitarianism, undoubtedly intersected with and impacted the fate of opera. It was against this tumultuous backdrop that Ghedini's operas emerged, spanning the years from the zenith of consensus during the fascist regime to post-war reconstruction in republican Italy. The circumstances surrounding the production and reception of Ghedini's works were fundamentally intertwined with the most pressing cultural and political discourses of the era. The case of Ghedini vividly illustrates the complex dynamics within Italian opera during the twentieth century, navigating between an increasing sense of anachronism as a form of spectacle and the distinct relevance of artistic and institutional efforts aimed at ensuring its survival.²

² According to many, a certain sense of obsolescence is inherent in opera from its very beginnings, as a novel genre born from the misunderstood revival of ancient theatre. Slavoj Žižek and Mladen Dolar, *Opera's Second Death* (New York: Routledge, 2001); Vlado Kotnik, "The Adaptability of Opera: When Different Social Agents Come to

In turning to opera, Ghedini was engaging with a complex legacy. Over its four centuries of history, the genre has always been intricately interwoven with the fabric of its surroundings, perhaps nowhere more so than Italy, where the artistic medium has always resided at the heart of questions of national identity and culture.³ Its nature as a costly public spectacle alone enmeshes it with politics, society and economics, as well as culture writ large.⁴ This was even more pronounced during the genre's most critical junctures in the twentieth century, when investing in opera could seem utterly illogical and economically futile, yet important for legitimising socio-political power. Commencing with the symbolic coincidence of Puccini's demise and the ascent of the fascist regime, several initiatives and economic endeavours aimed not only at preserving the repertoire, but also at revitalising it with new works. Operatic production, in fact, persisted, despite these ongoing cries of crisis. Economic support and pursuit of renewal moved in tandem, striving to attain a novel social and artistic relevance for the genre. Italian opera, originating in the late sixteenth century as a form of aristocratic and cultured entertainment, had swiftly evolved into a market-driven industry, initially governed by impresarios and later by publishers.⁵

Puccini marked the culmination of Italian opera's economic and popular success, with no successor forthcoming. The first cohort of Italian modernist musicians commonly labelled the *generazione dell'80* ('generation of the 1880s'), and including Franco Alfano, Ottorino Respighi, Ildebrando Pizzetti, Gian Francesco Malipiero and Alfredo Casella, rebelled against what they

Common Ground', *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music*, 44.2 (2013), 303–42; *Opera and Society in Italy and France from Monteverdi to Bourdieu*, ed. by Victoria Johnson, Jane F. Fulcher and Thomas Ertman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

³ See the Introduction to Donald Jay Grout and Hermine Weigel Williams, *A Short History of Opera* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003); Herbert Lindenberger, 'On Opera and Society (Assuming a Relationship)', in *Opera and Society in Italy and France from Monteverdi to Bourdieu*, pp. 294–311.

⁴ Grout and Williams, *A Short History of Opera*, p. 577.

⁵ The inaugural public and commercial opera house was established in Venice as early as 1637. Henceforth, the Italian opera scene markedly diverged from the model of the Opéra, which stood at the core of French nationalism and state patronage. See Thomas Ertman, 'Conclusion: Towards a new understanding of the history of opera?', in *Opera and Society in Italy and France from Monteverdi to Bourdieu*, pp. 351–63.

perceived as the commercial deterioration of the genre.⁶ They embraced the ideal of art for art's sake, a concept personified during that era by the influential figure of Gabriele D'Annunzio, and advocated for the state's intervention to free art from the dictates of the market and the shifting tastes of the public.⁷ The young Italian unified state increasingly assumed responsibility for the upkeep of opera houses, fostering an attitude of state interventionism and patronage, which flourished during the fascist regime and endured well beyond its aftermath.⁸

The tight bond between politics and culture, as demonstrated in Italian opera, unfolded against an evolving ideological framework during the twentieth century. The contrasting currents of D'Annunzianism and Croceanism set the stage for this intricate interplay in the early decades of the century, ultimately defining its contours during fascism. On the one hand, the D'Annunzian model, which seamlessly blended art, politics and religion, sparked a process of sacralisation and aestheticization of politics—something later embraced and fully enacted by the regime. On the other hand, Benedetto Croce's idealism advocated for the complete autonomy of art from politics and history, yielding a dual outcome: shielding culture from political manipulation while also legitimising the political disengagement of intellectuals, ensconced in their 'ivory tower'. These ideological frameworks persisted into the fascist years, where Italian intellectuals were collectively co-opted and financially backed by the regime in exchange for a degree of cultural and artistic independence. However, across the fascist *ventennio*, many of them moved from a general consensus—whether out of necessity or conformity—to a pervasive disillusionment.⁹

⁶ The term *generazione dell'80* was coined by the critic Massimo Mila, the label encompassing a diverse spectrum of musicians, each with distinct styles and artistic approaches, but united by their chronological age. Massimo Mila, *Breve storia della musica* (Turin: Einaudi, 1996), pp. 419-24.

⁷ This argument was championed by other notable composers of the time, including Giacomo Puccini and Pietro Mascagni.

⁸ Italian unification was only achieved in 1871. As we will see, in 1921, the major Italian opera houses were transformed into what were termed 'Enti autonomi', operating for educational purposes and as non-profit organisations.

⁹ Ruggero Zangrandi, *Il lungo viaggio attraverso il fascismo* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1962). Some would jest by interpreting PNF as the acronym for 'per necessità familiari' (out of family necessity).

World War II marked the definitive and traumatic awakening, propelling intellectuals towards a post-war political engagement with fascism's legacy. In the years following the regime's demise, the debate over the political responsibilities of culture became pervasive, and art underwent a process of overt politicisation within the rhetoric of *impegno*. Now to be relevant meant being as committed to the most avant-garde frontiers of one's art as to the most radical (leftwing) politics of the day.

If opera stands out amid this political, ideological and cultural landscape as a privileged vantage point from which to explore these complex transitions, then Ghedini's output epitomises this thorny narrative in both an idiosyncratic and typical manner. Ghedini occupied a distinctive position within twentieth-century Italian music, situated at an intermediary and somewhat marginalised juncture, which offers a novel perspective for delving into both the intricacies of opera and the historical context. The composer's relationship with his contemporary era was consistently nuanced, often appearing out of step with the prevailing currents of the time.

Straddling the transition from the humanistic attitude of the *generazione dell'80* to the linguistic and technical research of the post-war avant-gardes, Ghedini epitomised the complexity inherent in such a transitional epoch. The pronounced eclecticism found in his operatic output encapsulated the multifaceted journey undertaken by opera in its struggle for survival. Furthermore, the institutional support and the divided reception of Ghedini's works also reflected the genre's own ambiguous position, suspended between relevance and anachronism. Although his operas were often seen as slightly out of step with the moments in which they were premiered, from the vantage of a new historical and contextual reappraisal, the composer's seemingly abrupt and incongruous stylistic shifts can be seen to parallel the most crucial turning points in modern Italian history. Reassessing the relevance of Ghedini's works within their context enriches our understanding of the terms of continuity and discontinuity usually employed to interpret these

transformations, above all that of the messy transition from the fascist regime to the post-war republic.

What happened to Italian opera in the decades following Puccini's death has still received remarkably little scholarly attention, with the gap only partially filled by fragmented contributions. This thesis endeavours to offer an additional perspective, deepening our understanding of this intriguing yet frequently overlooked phase in opera's history. The case of Ghedini provides a compelling illustration of why a twentieth-century Italian composer would continue to engage with a genre in such decline, while also showcasing the enduring and intricate relationship between opera and Italian history. In my exploration of Ghedini's works, I demonstrate their contemporary relevance, as well as their ability to preserve threads of continuity amidst their diverse and eclectic nature. More broadly, I excavate how his operas reveal larger-scale continuities across supposedly watershed historical moments, with the genre emerging as a valuable witness to those troubling times. In other words, the thesis intertwines Ghedini's operatic trajectory, the history of opera and the broader history of Italy—indeed, it argues that they are inextricably linked. In the rest of this introduction, I will further outline these discourses of operatic crisis within the distinctive historical and cultural landscape of Italy and set Ghedini's career and biography against these. I will briefly introduce each of the works that will subsequently be discussed in depth and present the various methodologies that I will be deploying in my analysis of them.

Opera in Times of Crisis

In 1930 the music critic Gaetano Cesari eloquently encapsulated the state of Italian opera: 'the crisis in lyrical theatre concerns authors, artists and public tastes. Opera is grappling with a

profound economic crisis, being overshadowed and outpaced by a surge of new competitors'.¹⁰ According to a subsequent commentator, the German cultural theorist Theodor W. Adorno, transnationally, the genre began to lose its societal standing and relevance in the wake of the 1929 economic crisis, profoundly impacting its affluent bourgeois audience.¹¹ The delicate equilibrium between artistic prestige and public appeal started to unravel. Undoubtedly, the broadening and evolving composition of the audience, along with the rapid rise of new mass media, affected the economic viability and success of opera as much in Italy as elsewhere. The radio was opening up new ways of listening music, and the introduction of long-playing records revolutionised the experience of opera, fundamentally questioning its traditional theatrical essence. Even more dramatically, cinema was seen as eclipsing opera in terms of realism and sensationalism. No longer perceived as living entertainment but more revered as an object of art, opera withdrew into the museum-like realm of its well-established repertoire. Caught between epigonism and a pioneering spirit, the genre seemed increasingly incapable of forging a new meaningful connection with the present moment.¹² Yet, in some ways, more was at stake with this decline in Italy than elsewhere: opera had long been at the heart of national identity and a signifier of national prestige on the global stage. Confronted by an audience rooted in tradition or captivated by emerging forms of entertainment, Italian composers found themselves increasingly isolated in their artistic pursuits. Individualism was the flip side of massification.

In Italy, therefore, the crisis of opera carried implications that transcended mere artistic and economic concerns. The writer Massimo Bontempelli traced the decline of the genre further back than the death of Puccini, to the demise of Giuseppe Verdi at the dawn of the century.

¹⁰ Quoted in Guido Salvetti, 'L'opera nella prima metà del secolo', in *Musica in scena. Storia dello spettacolo musicale*, 6 vols, ed. by Alberto Basso (Turin: UTET, 1995), II, pp. 435-86 (p. 448). The discourse on crisis was a pervasive and well-worn theme at the time, illustrated by the satire found in Rodolfo De Angeli's song, *Ma cos'è questa crisi* (1933).

¹¹ Theodor W. Adorno, 'Bourgeois Opera', in *Sound Figures*, trans. by Rodney Livingstone (Redwood City CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), pp. 15-28.

¹² Emanuele Franceschetti, '«Un senso d'eccitato tramonto». Il teatro musicale in Italia nel secondo dopoguerra (1945-1961)' (doctoral thesis, Sapienza Università di Roma, 2021).

Bontempelli portrayed all subsequent composers as mere imitators in the shadow of Verdi's last opera, *Falstaff*.¹³ As the Risorgimento sanctioned the birth of the Italian unified state and catalysed the emergence of a national consciousness, Verdi's operas had served as significant markers of this process. Verdi had long been celebrated as a founding father of the nation, the epitome of *italianità*. This vague concept referred to the cultural and artistic essence of Italian identity long before its political consolidation, rooted in the legacies of prominent figures of Italian tradition. Claudio Monteverdi stood as one of the primary reference models within this rich heritage and opera thus emerged as a quintessential bulwark of Italian identity. This underscores how, following Verdi, the decline of the genre was deemed unacceptable, sparking a messianic anticipation for someone who could reignite the operatic tradition. Though Puccini was seen as the final successful bridge between opera and its audience, he was not regarded as the inheritor of Italian opera by many of his contemporaries. Indeed, critics like Fausto Torrefranca accused him of embracing internationalism and embodying the extreme commercial degeneration of the operatic genre that started with *verismo*.¹⁴

The calls for operatic reform in the first decades of the twentieth century originated from such anti-bourgeois and anti-melodramatic polemics, imbued with a certain elitist pretentiousness. Here, 'melodramma' denoted the commercially successful operas of the nineteenth century, and 'melodramatic taste' was equated with sentimentality and bombastic grandeur, with easy 'rhyme and clamour' in the words of Antonio Gramsci.¹⁵ At the helm of calls for the renewal of opera stood the poet Gabriele D'Annunzio, the 'poeta vate', renowned as a pivotal figure not just in the cultural sphere but also in the broader narrative of Italian history during the first half of the century. Cultural and political nationalism seamlessly converged within the current of

¹³ Massimo Bontempelli, *Passione incompiuta. Scritti sulla musica, 1910–1950* (Milan: Mondadori, 1958), p. 203.

¹⁴ Fausto Torrefranca, *Giacomo Puccini e l'opera internazionale* (Turin: Fratelli Bocca, 1912).

¹⁵ Antonio Gramsci, *Letteratura e vita nazionale*, ed. by Valentino Gerratana (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1996).

D'Annunzianism, in which were located the roots of several national myths, such as that of *mediterraneità*. In D'Annunzio's aestheticist fusion of art and life, theatre was reinstated as a sacred ritual and potent political metaphor, symbolising the allure and authoritative dominion over the masses by the strongman artist.¹⁶ This ideal was articulated in his novel *Il fuoco* (1900) and enacted by D'Annunzio himself during his instigation of an 'operatic dictatorship' in Fiume—an act widely recognised as a harbinger of fascism, distinguished by the blend of rhetoric and bravado.¹⁷ In D'Annunzio's theatrical works, themes of decadence and neomedievalism intertwined. The ancient medieval *misteri* were reimagined as a model for a static and anti-naturalistic spectacle, suffused with mysticism. D'Annunzio's poetry served as a beacon for contemporary Italian musicians striving to ennoble their compositions, although its verbosity proved to be generally incompatible with music.¹⁸

However, the spell cast by the poet on Italian musicians in the early twentieth century and beyond shed light on a key concern entwined with opera's crisis: the problem of the libretto, encompassing both the choice of subject and the quality of the text. The necessity to reform it beyond any commercial standardisation was again something discussed across ideological divides in the early decades of the century. A D'Annunzian response was to elevate the text with profound themes and a refined literary style.¹⁹ Within the framework of Croce's aesthetics, by

¹⁶ Gherardo Ugolini, 'D'Annunzio e il dionisiaco', *ITALIENISCH*, 36.2 (2014), 33–51; *Teatro e teatralità in Gabriele D'Annunzio*, ed. by Livia Draghici, Tiziana Becheri and Mariella Rosa (Prato: Biblioteca comunale Alessandro Lazzerini, 1991).

¹⁷ Discontented with the Treaty of Versailles and with what they perceived as Italy's 'mutilated victory' after World War I, Gabriele D'Annunzio and a group of irredentists undertook the invasion of the city of Fiume, situated on the border with Croatia, between 1919 and 1920. The poet assumed leadership of the city's government, proclaiming himself as the Duce. Rubens Tedeschi, *D'Annunzio e la musica* (Florence: Nuova Italia, 1988); Nino Valeri, *D'Annunzio davanti al fascismo* (Florence: F. Le Monnier, 1963); Michael A. Ledeen, *D'Annunzio. The First Duce* (New Brunswick and London: Transaction, 2000).

¹⁸ Guido Gatti, 'Gabriele D'Annunzio and the Italian Opera Composers', *Musical Quarterly*, 10 (1924), 263–88.

¹⁹ The expression 'mucche da latte poetiche' alludes to the nineteenth-century librettists and their assembly-line approach to crafting operatic texts, saturated with trite poetic clichés. Ulderico Rolandi quoted in Adriana Guarnieri Corazzol, 'Poeta e compositore nella produzione lirica italiana del primo Novecento', in *Finché non splende in ciel notturna face. Studi in memoria di Francesco Degradà*, ed. by Cesare Fertonani, Emilio Sala and Claudio Toscani (Milan: Led, 2009), pp. 203–23 (p. 205).

contrast, the libretto had to meet the demands of poetry (*poesia*) and lyrical sincerity (*autenticità*). Many composers thus opted to write their own librettos, envisioning them as genuine expressions of their own artistic intuition. These debates reemerged in the post-war period, albeit with a more marked societal focus. According to many critics, reevaluating their Croceanism in the light of the changed historical context, the choice of libretto should reflect the composer's commitment (*impegno*), in place of the earlier emphasis solely on aesthetic sincerity. The critic Ferdinando Ballo considered the choice of the text a matter of 'conscience', while his colleague Massimo Mila went so far as to liken it to childbirth, underscoring the significant commitment demanded of the musician.²⁰

There were also transnational and properly musical factors at play in opera's crisis, such as the dissolution of tonality and its potential for dramatic narratives. According to the critic Fedele D'Amico, the waning social grip of art music led modern composers to regard musical language purely as a ground for experimentation and research, disconnected from any communicative purpose. Compositional refinement was applied to quartets and operas alike, suggesting that the demise of genres was merely a byproduct of the diminishing role of music as applied art.²¹ Coherence no longer resided within a common code shared with the audience, but rather emerged from the unique stylistic and linguistic exploration pursued by each composer in each work. This growing disconnect between composers and the public, evolving gradually during the first half of the century, was further intensified by the post-war avant-gardes, who considered the advance of musical language as another facet of commitment. In the words of the conductor

²⁰ Ferdinando Ballo, 'La stagione di opere contemporanee a Milano', *Musica*, 2 (1943), 220–35; Massimo Mila, 'Il libertino allegorico di Federico Ghedini', *L'Espresso*, 25 March 1956.

²¹ Fedele D'Amico, 'Il compositore moderno e il linguaggio musicale', in *Atti del Quinto Congresso di Musica* (Florence: Barbèra, 1948), pp. 11–24.

Fernando Previtali, musicians' pursuit of innovation had become akin to a chronic malaise, seemingly directing their efforts more towards posterity than contemporaries.²²

This contentious interplay between tradition and innovation, emblematic of the broader narrative of the twentieth century, was particularly heightened in opera. Beyond the perceived primacy of repertoire works from the past, operatic heritage remained a palpable presence in new operas, either revered or targeted with irony and subversion. Efforts to reconcile tradition and innovation led to diverse outcomes, notably within neoclassical trends, which transcended national boundaries. This dynamic was best exemplified by the works of Igor Stravinsky, who in no coincidence emerged as one of the most successful composers in interwar Italy. Beyond merely embedding diverse forms and stylistic elements from the past into modern frameworks, the hallmark of neoclassicism lay in the deliberate disruption of stylistic unity and the composer's overt detachment from these traditional materials and their original meanings. This pursuit of objectivism led to a paradoxical endeavour to reconcile the operatic genre with an antithetical lack of expressiveness—something that met with reluctance in the Italian context.²³

Indeed, neoclassicism took on a distinctive flavour in Italy. Unified by the repeated calls for a 'return to order', the resurgence of classical values of form and equilibrium in music resonated with the rise of reactionary political movements such as fascism, marked by elements of both nationalism and elitism. Moreover, lacking a singular historical benchmark for what constituted 'classical' music, the neo-classical movement returned to and revisited diverse past traditions—from Pizzetti's neo-Gregorian style to Ferruccio Busoni's *Junge Klassizität*.²⁴ In Italy, the

²² Fernando Previtali, 'Sulla crisi del teatro d'opera', *La Rassegna Musicale*, XX.1 (1950), 23–31.

²³ Regarding the contentious reception of neoclassicism in Italy, see Anna Quaranta, 'Neoclassicismo musicale. Termini del dibattito italiano ed europeo', in *Alfredo Casella e l'Europa. Atti del convegno internazionale di studi, Siena, 7-9 giugno 2001*, ed. by Mila De Santis (Florence: Olschki, 2003), pp. 93–145; Franco Piperno, 'Neoclassicismi italiani di primo Novecento', in *L'eredità classica nella cultura italiana e ungherese del Novecento dalle Avanguardie al Postmoderno*, ed. by Péter Sárközy (Rome: Sapienza Università Editrice, 2014), pp. 160–83.

²⁴ For an overarching discussion on Neoclassicism, see Scott Messing, *Neoclassicism in Music: From the Genesis of the Concept through the Schoenberg/Stravinsky Polemic* (London: UMI Research Press, 1988); Richard Taruskin, 'Back to

Renaissance and Baroque periods of Monteverdi, the Gabrielis and Frescobaldi served as key reference points for music, while themes and subjects of compositions stretched back to the medieval era, influenced by D'Annunzian neomedievalism. The term 'neoclassical', used with reluctance and ambiguity in contemporary Italian discourse, encompassed a spectrum from a generic definition of anti-romanticism to a revival of a distinctly Italian identity—the aforementioned *italianità*. However it was constituted in practice, as we shall see, Italian neoclassicism overlapped with fascism in its pursuit of a compromise between innovation and tradition, past and present.²⁵

In this lack of established conventions, opera underwent a profound revaluation of its aesthetic status from the ground up. The genre was dissected and reassembled, shedding its once harmonious balance and multi-artistic unity. From the early years of the century, for instance, challenging the romantic ideal epitomised by Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk*, the composer Ferruccio Busoni championed a dynamic interplay of dissociation, mutual autonomy and complementarity between visual and auditory elements in opera. The deliberate misalignment of music, text and stage action endured as a prevalent trait in numerous twentieth-century operas, eliciting a sense of estrangement and objectivity in line with the broader anti-theatrical tendencies of modernism.²⁶

In this reconsideration of opera's theatricality, the question of realism and singing also became

Whom? Neoclassicism as Ideology', *19th-Century Music*, 3 (1993), 286–302; Martha M. Hyde, 'Stravinsky's Neoclassicism', in *The Cambridge Companion to Stravinsky*, ed. by Jonathan Cross (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 98–136; Martha M. Hyde, 'Neoclassic and Anachronistic Impulses in Twentieth-Century Music', *Music Theory Spectrum*, 18.2 (1996), 200–235.

²⁵ For broader information on Italian neoclassicism, see also Gianfranco Vinay, *Stravinsky neoclassico. L'invenzione della memoria nel '900 musicale* (Venice: Marsilio, 1987); *Il Novecento musicale italiano tra neoclassicismo e neogoticismo. Atti del Convegno di studi (Venezia, 10-12 ottobre 1986)*, ed. by David Bryant (Florence: Olschki, 1988).

²⁶ See the chapter 'L'opera teatrale, come rito politico e forma del molteplice', in Andrea Lanza, *Il secondo Novecento* (Turin: EDT, 1991), pp. 168–189. From the 'anti-theatrical prejudice' inherent in modernism, opera was often perceived as the epitome of excessive artifice, heightened expressiveness and reliance on public approval. Jonas A. Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985); Alan Ackerman, 'Introduction: Modernism and Anti-Theatricality', *Modern Drama*, 44.3 (2001), 275–83; Herbert Lindenberger, 'Anti-Theatricality in Twentieth-Century Opera', *Modern Drama*, 44.3 (2001), 300–317; Martin Puchner, 'Modernism and Anti-Theatricality: An Afterword', *Modern Drama*, 44.3 (2001), 355–61; Richard Begam and Matthew Wilson Smith, *Modernism and Opera* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016).

prominent. As we will observe in some of Ghedini's operas, the incorporation of fairy tale and grotesque elements, along with the employment of narration and metatheatrical framing, proved to be effective strategies for disrupting theatrical illusion and preventing identification with the stage.²⁷

Singing—a cornerstone of the genre—emerged as a paradoxical element in this tension between theatricality and anti-theatricality. On the one hand, its very presence rendered opera inherently unbelievable. Yet, on the other hand, it served as the most powerful tool to evoke an emotional response in the audience. According to Adorno, the modern opera composer thus grappled with singing uneasily, regarding it as a medium to either sidestep or somehow mitigate in its immediacy.²⁸ New operas embraced and contrasted a wide spectrum of vocal approaches, ranging from parodic virtuosity to chanting recitative, from speech to amplified voices. Singing was frequently divorced from characters on stage, with the use of disembodied voices recurring as a prominent feature, as we will see in Ghedini's operas. Once again, the stakes were notably high in Italy, where singing and its *cantabilità* did not just identify the operatic genre, but were hallmarks of *italianità*. Nevertheless, new solutions were explored and included, for instance, a revival of Gregorian style in Ildebrando Pizzetti's recitative, the incorporation of dodecaphony seen in Luigi Dallapiccola's operas, and hybrid forms combining singing with recitation, as in Ghedini's final works in the genre. Each musician embraced the captivating challenge of opera in a distinct manner, leaving critics disoriented and fundamentally divided in assessing new works, torn between nostalgia and anticipation. As ever since the dispute between Monteverdi and Artusi, the relationship between music and text remained a paramount concern for Italian critics, deeply

²⁷ Regarding opera and epic theatre, see 'Il teatro epico di Igor Stravinskij' in Carl Dahlhaus, *Dal dramma musicale alla Letteraturoper* (Rome: Astrolabio Ubaldini, 2014), pp. 173-208.

²⁸ Adorno, 'Bourgeois Opera'.

infused with idealism.²⁹ However, this yardstick proved either incomplete or entirely inadequate for evaluating twentieth-century works, where form and content merged to forge ever-evolving paradigms. Pushing back against any established conventions, each opera stood alone, conceived as a unique undertaking, and ‘the genre itself remained void’.³⁰

State-funded Opera

If aesthetic developments of the genre in the twentieth century extended beyond the case of Italian opera, Italy provides a particularly compelling scenario for addressing the economic crisis of opera. As previously mentioned, the attainment of national unity coincided with the perceived pinnacle of nineteenth-century opera. The ongoing systematic state support offered to the genre intertwined the destiny of Italian opera with the history of the country. The crisis of one intersected and compounded the crisis of the other, along a trajectory of continuity linking liberal Italy, fascism and the Italian Republic. In 1921, as the National Fascist Party (PNF) was being formally established, Italy’s major opera houses were transformed into Enti Autonomi, entities supported by the state, devoted to promoting cultural and educational pursuits. A few years later, in 1924, while the opera world mourned the loss of Puccini, the murder of the antifascist Giacomo Matteotti would serve as the definitive moment in Italy’s modern political history, heralding fascism’s overt emergence as a dictatorial regime. As Suzanne Stewart-Steinberg and Michael P. Steinberg have remarked, ‘where opera ends, fascism begins’.³¹ Indeed, these temporal

²⁹ In the late sixteenth century, Gianmaria Artusi, a conservative music theorist, criticised Monteverdi’s groundbreaking use of dissonance and departure from traditional rules of counterpoint. Conversely, the composer advocated for this expressive compositional method, termed ‘seconda prattica’, asserting the primacy of text over music. Regarding Italian criticism see Marco Capra and Fiamma Nicolodi, *La critica musicale in Italia nella prima metà del Novecento* (Venice: Marsilio, 2011).

³⁰ Fedele D’Amico, ‘In che senso la crisi dell’opera’, *La Rassegna Musicale*, XXXII (1962), 111–16.

³¹ Michael P. Steinberg and Suzanne Stewart-Steinberg, ‘Fascism and the Operatic Unconscious’, in *Opera and Society in Italy and France from Monteverdi to Bourdieu*, pp. 267–88.

coincidences weave together the establishment of a new state patronage of opera with the ascent of fascism.³²

The new regime emerged against the backdrop of a profound national crisis following World War I and consolidated its power as a response to widespread calls for order across political, social and cultural spheres. Traditional forms of governance appeared inadequate to cope with the rise of the masses both in the political sphere—as the socialist-inspired unrests of the Biennio Rosso exemplified—and in the realm of art and culture.³³ Fascism implemented a model marked by centralised control and protectionism, a model that persisted long after the regime’s demise.³⁴ Within this paradigm, the state—characterised as the *padre-padrone* by Luigi Pestalozza—assumed multifaceted and overarching roles in Italian culture as organiser, financier, manager and social mediator.³⁵ As we will explore in the field of music, Italian artists and intellectuals were entangled with and absorbed into a convoluted system of ‘labyrinthine corporate bureaucracy’.³⁶ The fascist Union of Musicians, the Corporation of Entertainment (*Corporazione degli industriali e dei lavoratori dello spettacolo*) and the Theatre Inspectorate were only a few of the institutions which employed Italian musicians.³⁷ The regime secured broad consensus by adeptly balancing occasional repression with systematic promotion. Subsidies and grants proved to be the most effective means of exerting control.

³² Luigi Pestalozza, ‘Lo Stato dell’organizzazione musicale: la svolta del fascismo e la sua lunga durata’, *Musica/Realtà*, 2.5 (1981), 146–60.

³³ The so-called Biennio Rosso (1919-1920) was a period of intense social and political unrest in Italy, marked by widespread strikes and protests by workers and peasants, influenced by the Russian Revolution and post-war economic distress.

³⁴ Claudio Pavone, ‘La continuità dello stato: istituzioni e uomini’, in *Italia 1945-48: le origini della Repubblica*, ed. by Enzo Piscitelli (Turin: G. Giappichelli, 1974).

³⁵ Piero Santi, ‘La musica del fascismo’, *Musica/Realtà*, 2.4 (1981), 95–103; Pestalozza, ‘Lo Stato dell’organizzazione musicale’.

³⁶ Richard Taruskin, ‘The Dark Side of Modern Music’, *The New Republic*, 5 September 1988, pp. 28-34.

³⁷ Regarding the fascist institutions for music, see the contributions of Fiamma Nicolodi, *Musica e musicisti nel ventennio fascista* (Fiesole: Discanto, 1984); Harvey Sachs, *Music in Fascist Italy* (New York: Norton, 1988); *Italian Music during the Fascist Period*, ed. by Roberto Illiano (Turnhout: Brepols, 2004).

The effectiveness of this system stemmed from an intricate interplay of clientelism, factionalism and pluralism. Many Italian musicians demonstrated a willingness to align with the regime, exchanging their cooperation for economic aid and a degree of creative freedom. The 'peer competition for state subsidies' often operated outside the bounds of meritocracy, relying heavily on personal favouritism.³⁸ However, aside from economic advantages, competition also unfolded on a purely aesthetic level. Navigating careers within the fascist administration was the primary avenue for steering trends and wielding aesthetic influence. During fascism, Italian culture thrived amid pronounced factionalism, with each faction fiercely contending for hegemony. Two main factions, embodying different ideological strands within fascism, vied for cultural supremacy: the pro-modernists under the auspices of Giuseppe Bottai, who served as the Minister of Education from 1936 to 1943, and the conservatives who rallied behind Roberto Farinacci, one of the initial Secretaries of the PNF (1925-26). The pro-modernist faction championed internationalism, permanent revolution, an elitist cultural model and critical thinking; on the opposing conservative side, stood men of faith and action, proponents of parochialism and fanaticism.³⁹ Both sides vied for the claim to be the foremost expression of fascist culture and art.⁴⁰

Across these divides, it proves challenging to pinpoint the core principles that not only shaped fascist aesthetics but also informed its overarching ideology. Emerging from the myths and disillusionment of World War I, Mussolini presented fascism as an anti-ideological and pragmatic movement, a model of *realpolitik* adept at addressing the concrete demands of the nation. Prominent anti-fascist intellectuals of the time, such as the writer Ignazio Silone and the philosopher Norberto Bobbio, attested to the vacuity of the ideas propagated by fascism.⁴¹ They

³⁸ Ruth Ben-Ghiat, *Fascist Modernities: Italy, 1922-1945* (London: University of California Press, 2001), p. 22.

³⁹ These two factions also found expression through rival magazines and awards, exemplified by the contrast between *Novecento* and *Strapaese*, as well as Premio Bergamo and Premio Cremona.

⁴⁰ Ben-Ghiat, *Fascist Modernities*, pp. 20-29.

⁴¹ While Silone's reflections primarily evolved during his exile in the 1930s, Bobbio had the opportunity to thoroughly refine his theories in post-war Republican Italy. Ignazio Silone, *La scuola dei dittatori* [1938] (Milan: Mondadori, 1994); 'Se sia esistita una cultura fascista', in Norberto Bobbio, *Il dubbio e la scelta* (Rome: NIS, 1993), pp.

explained the regime's success through a politics rooted in charisma, sly cunning and a chameleon-like strategy. Consequently, in the cultural sphere, fascist directives leaned on vague watchwords, like *italianità*, defined more by what they rejected rather than what they promoted.⁴² According to Mila, the fascists 'had no real awareness of or competence in the matter' of music.⁴³ Within the sphere of opera, clearer influences of the regime's rhetoric surfaced most prominently through the themes selected. Fascist rhetoric amalgamated myths and models drawn from diverse early twentieth-century movements, incorporating elements from futurism, D'Annunzianism and neoclassical returns to order. The cult of youth intertwined with ideals of masculinity, a propensity for violence and a martial mindset. The rhetoric of *romanità* did not preclude the futuristic ideal of technology and merged with both nationalism and imperialist ambition within the ideal of *mediterraneità*.⁴⁴ While the regime thrived on propaganda and mass rituals, official fascist art championed an anti-rhetorical pursuit of rationality and sobriety. This vagueness of intentions was inevitably heightened when it came to music and the even more intricate realm of opera.⁴⁵

While for some, such pronounced ambiguity underscored the ideological and cultural inconsistency of fascism, for others, it functioned as a totalitarian strategy of consent.⁴⁶ As mentioned earlier, through the seemingly liberal granting of artistic autonomy and tolerance,

101–12; Norberto Bobbio and Luisa Mangoni, 'La cultura e il fascismo: un breve carteggio (1976)', *Studi Storici*, 56.3 (2015), 739–45; Norberto Bobbio, *L'ideologia del fascismo* (Milan: Bilibon, 2023).

⁴² In the realm of music, the vagueness of intentions was further exacerbated: sobriety, dynamism, audacity, architectural sense and the absence of rhetoric were touted as the attributes of an elusive fascist musical style. Casella's quote in Salvetti, 'L'opera nella prima metà del secolo', p. 448.

⁴³ Sachs, *Music in Fascist Italy*, p. 53.

⁴⁴ Consider Casella's *Il deserto tentato* (1937) as an example of opera imbued with both futuristic and imperialistic undertones.

⁴⁵ In certain operas from the fascist era, the themes of fascist rhetoric are often juxtaposed with contrasting musical qualities: sobriety, dynamism, audacity, architectural sense and the absence of rhetoric were touted as the attributes of an elusive fascist musical style. See the words of Casella quoted in Salvetti, 'L'opera nella prima metà del secolo', p. 448.

⁴⁶ Nicolodi, *Musica e musicisti*; Anna Maria Torriglia, *Broken Time, Fragmented Space: A Cultural Map of Postwar Italy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002); *Italian Music during the Fascist Period*; Nicolò Palazzetti, *Béla Bartók in Italy: The Politics of Myth-Making* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2021).

fascism managed to reconcile opposing tendencies within its ranks, even assimilating dissenting voices. The cultural and aesthetic pluralism embraced by fascism did not contradict totalitarian control and propaganda; rather, what Nicolodi terms as fascist *cerchiobottismo* functioned as a sophisticated means to secure all-encompassing consensus.⁴⁷ Recent studies have pushed further by recognising a proactive role of fascism in engaging with and shaping culture. According to these readings, fascism was not merely an empty and reactionary movement, as intellectuals like Bobbio had argued; rather, it emerged and aligned with the tenets of modernism. Along these lines, Taruskin explains the allure and remarkable affinity between fascism and Stravinsky's neoclassicism, stemming from their common commitment to ideals of order, aristocratic art and defence of tradition, and as a reaction against the nineteenth-century 'Dionysian' spirit.⁴⁸ In a broader inquiry into the modernist roots and inclinations of fascism, Roger Griffin interprets the fascist ambition to forge the 'new man' as embodying a utopian notion of palingenetic regeneration.⁴⁹ As Gaborik also suggests, culture and art were pivotal means for enacting and perpetuating such a revolution. From this standpoint, fascism was not solely about aestheticizing politics, as Walter Benjamin famously declared; it also entailed a significant politicisation of aesthetics, intricately intertwining the spheres of art and governance.⁵⁰

In fascist Italy, culture thus stood as a formidable political instrument for legitimising and perpetuating its power. Italian cultural heritage symbolised identity and prestige, whereas modernism served as a vehicle for international competitiveness.⁵¹ Music—'one of the main

⁴⁷ Fiamma Nicolodi, 'Aspetti di politica culturale nel Ventennio fascista', in *Italian Music during the Fascist Period*, pp. 97–122.

⁴⁸ Taruskin, 'The Dark Side of Modern Music'. The interpretation of Romanticism as a resurgence of the Dionysian spirit comes from Giannotto Bastianelli, *Il nuovo dio della musica*, ed. by Marcello De Angelis (Turin: Einaudi, 1978).

⁴⁹ Roger Griffin, *Modernism and Fascism: The Sense of a Beginning under Mussolini and Hitler* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Roger Griffin, 'Modernity, Modernism, and Fascism. A "Mazeway Resynthesis"', *Modernism/Modernity*, 15.1 (2008), 9–24; Mark Antliff, 'Fascism, Modernism, and Modernity', *The Art Bulletin*, 84.1 (2002), 148–69.

⁵⁰ Patricia Gaborik, *Mussolini's Theatre. Fascist Experiments in Art and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

⁵¹ Ben-Ghiat, *Fascist Modernities*, pp. 18–28; Palazzetti, *Béla Bartók in Italy*, pp. 12–14.

attributes of Italy’— thus emerged as a crucial political platform, with opera in particular firmly entrenched at the core of fascism.⁵² Beyond the hackneyed metaphor of operatic dictatorship,⁵³ the regime’s agenda deemed it ‘necessary to let the lyric theatre be fascist, to return it to the level of importance from which it had fallen under the impact of the *mediatorato*, so as to bring it into contact with the public’.⁵⁴ In addressing this issue, it is compelling to note how Mussolini himself not only encouraged the public to engage with new music,⁵⁵ but also urged contemporary composers to ‘go towards the people’ (*andare verso il popolo*).⁵⁶ In reality, in dealing with class conflict, the regime’s actions moved along entirely separate paths, as operatic initiatives proved: on the one hand, traditional repertoire operas were aimed at mass dissemination and entertainment, while on the other, avant-garde experimentation in new works catered and remained confined to the elites and their ‘festival-ghettos’.⁵⁷ Popular initiatives, such as the travelling Carro di Tespi by the Opera Nazionale del Dopolavoro, were juxtaposed with prestigious international festivals established by the regime in the 1930s, such as the Venice Festival Internazionale di Musica Contemporanea (1930) and the Maggio Musicale Fiorentino (1933).⁵⁸ Rather than narrowing the gap between musicians and their audience, it was instead exacerbated by the cultural policies of fascism.

⁵² Words from Nicola De Pirro, a prominent figure within fascist institutions dedicated to music and theatre, spoken in 1935 and referenced in Roberto Illiano and Massimiliano Sala, ‘The politics of spectacle: Italian music and Fascist propaganda’, *Muzikologija*, 13 (2012), 9–26 (p. 15) <<https://doi.org/10.2298/MUZ120325010I>> [accessed 19 January 2023].

⁵³ The metaphor of the Duce as an operatic divo, capable of mesmerising all, already emerged during fascism, predating scholarly investigations into the regime’s strategic use of spectacle and theatricality in politics.

⁵⁴ Quoted in *Italian Music during the Fascist Period*, p. 16.

⁵⁵ See Mussolini’s speech quoted in Adriano Lualdi, *Viaggio musicale in Italia* (Milan: Alpes, 1927), p. 206.

⁵⁶ From Mussolini’s address at the Congress of Dramatic Authors in 1934. See Nicolodi, ‘Aspetti di politica culturale’.

⁵⁷ Nicolodi coined the notion of ‘ghettos’ about the fascist festivals of contemporary music. *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ Regarding the regime’s initiatives in opera, see Nicolodi, *Musica e musicisti*; Sachs, *Music in Fascist Italy*; Serena Labruna, ‘Festival musicali nel Ventennio: dalla Biennale al Teatro delle Novità’, in *1919-1939, un Ventennio a Bergamo e nel suo territorio*, ed. by Maria Mencaroni Zoppetti and Monica Resmini (Bergamo: Sestante edizioni, 2018), pp. 823–48.

Within this framework of class division, fascist pluralism mainly played out in contemporary opera, promoting a multifaceted production of new works, as a key issue in addressing the genre's crisis. The regime commissioned and mandated a fixed quota of contemporary works for inclusion in the programmes of operatic seasons, as well as establishing specific initiatives—like the Teatro delle Novità (1937)—to foster Italian opera composers across different tendencies: followers of romanticism and *verismo*, advocates of D'Annunzianism, champions of comedic genre revivals, as well as modernists.⁵⁹ In Mila's words, 'the fascists gave a little bit of support to everybody, innovators and reactionaries alike', as reflected by the diverse roster of names involved as organisers or guests across the main festivals and opera houses of the time.⁶⁰ However, pluralism and factionalism were two sides of the same coin in fascist music culture, hinging on a precarious equilibrium. As the regime gradually moved away from mass consent during the 1930s and towards a tightening of policy, divergent ideological factions clashed with increasing intensity. The regime had thrived on fragmentation on every front, employing a *divide-et-impera* strategy to drive a wedge between the masses and the elites, the public and musicians, and the reactionary and modernist factions of Italian culture. In addressing opera's crisis as a mediator between production and consumption, the state further widened the gap between the genre and society. And this situation fundamentally persisted unchanged even after the regime's demise.

The extensive focus above on the fascist era is warranted not only because it encompasses a significant portion of the historical period of interest here, but also because its legacy would extend beyond those years, despite the transformation of ideological, political and aesthetic frameworks. Following the post-war national unity government, Italy made the transition to a

⁵⁹ Salvetti, 'L'opera nella prima metà del secolo'. For a more contemporary classification of operatic genres, see Ettore Desderi's 1930 summary, cited in Guarnieri Corazzol, 'Poeta e compositore', p. 221.

⁶⁰ Cit. in Sachs, *Music in Fascist Italy*, p. 53.

republic in 1948 under the leadership of the Christian Democrats (DC). With the official onset of the Cold War, the transnational political and cultural landscape grew ever more fractured, with Italy striving to achieve a compromise amid opposing forces. Italy entered NATO in 1947, leveraging the resources of the Marshall Plan for post-war reconstruction. Meanwhile, the PCI persisted as one of the most robust communist parties outside the Soviet sphere. Intellectuals and artists held a pivotal role in navigating these contradictions. The revival of Gramsci's thought not only contested Croce's paradigm of the disconnection between art and politics, but also assigned culture the role of igniting social revolution. *Impegno* emerged as the new rallying cry to reconcile artistic renewal with political commitment.

In the musical sphere, the compromise proposed by René Leibowitz, with his historical determinism merging engagement and modernism, proved insufficient in Italy.⁶¹ Many Italian critics and musicians were committed to synthesising the renewed emphasis on technique and language of the avant-garde movements with the quest for expressiveness and humanistic content in art, still under the enduring influence of Croce.⁶² In light of this profoundly different yet equally strongly politicised backdrop, we can see how institutions and initiatives established by the fascist regime for opera, as well as the economic backing it received, continued nearly without interruption into republican Italy. Opera emerges as an intriguing case in the revisionist historiography of continuity. Instead of viewing fascism as a temporary affliction, a feature of earlier histories of the regime, foregrounding the case study of opera delves into the deeper structural aspects of Italian history that lie across the pre-fascist, fascist and post-fascist years.⁶³ In

⁶¹ In his essays, such as *Schoenberg et son école* (1947) and *Le Musicien Engagé* (1949), René Leibowitz (1913-1972) aimed to reconcile twelve-tone technique with the principles of the Prague Manifesto, drawing on the Sartrean notion of commitment. He championed the convergence of artistic and human freedom, as well as historical and artistic progress, viewing musical history as a progression towards increasing complexity and systematisation. In the same vein, it is also worth considering Theodor W. Adorno's contemporary work, *Philosophy of Modern Music* (1949).

⁶² This was the case of both Massimo Mila and Fedele D'Amico, two prominent figures in post-war Italian criticism.

⁶³ The historiographical discourse about the *ventennio* has undergone a transformation, progressing from the post-war antifascist paradigm—characterised by Croce's portrayal of fascism as a parenthesis and the self-exculpatory myth of 'Italiani brava gente'—towards a nuanced investigation of institutional and chronic continuities embedded in the

the Republican era, Italian opera continued to survive as a state-funded endeavour. In the aftermath of the war, Italy's reconstruction started symbolically from the opera houses. The invocations of operatic crisis endured, now in response to the influx of mass entertainment coming from America. Critiques of opera were laden with discourses of post-war *impegno*, embroiled in ongoing debates on realism and formalism, tradition and the avant-garde, nationalism and internationalism. Nevertheless, even after the supposed 'year zero' of music, the dedication to upholding opera's tradition remained steadfast.⁶⁴

The Case of Giorgio Federico Ghedini

Ghedini's operatic output traversed the entirety of this historical trajectory from the interwar to the post-war periods, commencing with the debut of *Maria d'Alessandria* at the Teatro delle Novità in 1937 and culminating in his operatic farewell with *L'ipocrita felice* at the Piccola Scala in 1956. Drawing upon the words of Luciano Berio, one of his most renowned pupils, Ghedini could be regarded as a 'great solitary *Kapellmeister*' in the intricate tapestry of twentieth-century Italian music.⁶⁵ Berio's characterisation of his teacher encapsulates some of the contradictions inherent in defining Ghedini's persona. On one hand, his acclaimed technical mastery stands as a unifying thread through the ambivalent reception of his music. On the other, a sense of isolation arises from both the anachronism evoked by the term *Kapellmeister* and Ghedini's detachment from the clearly defined musical currents and aesthetics of his time. Ghedini's ambiguous positioning, both critically and historically, might stem from his generational in-betweenness. Born in 1892, Ghedini was part of the generation that scholars have variously attempted to

Italian national character itself. For a comprehensive view of the evolution and interpretative paradigms of fascism, consult Luca La Rovere, *L'eredità del fascismo. Gli intellettuali, i giovani e la transizione al postfascismo 1943-1948* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2008); Charles L. Leavitt, "'An entirely new land'? Italy's post-war culture and its Fascist past", *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 21.1 (2016), 4–18 <doi:10.1080/1354571X.2016.1112060> [accessed 7 September 2023].

⁶⁴ The term alludes to the commencement of the Darmstadt *Ferienkurse* in the 1950s.

⁶⁵ Luciano Berio and Giorgio Pestelli, *Scritti sulla musica*, ed. by Angela Ida De Benedictis (Turin: Einaudi, 2013), p. 344.

classify as an intermediary ('generazione di mezzo') or supportive cohort ('forze di rincalzo').⁶⁶

Sitting between the *generazione dell'80* and his later better-known colleagues Luigi Dallapiccola and Goffredo Petrassi, Ghedini was portrayed as 'the youngest of the old and the oldest of the young Italian musicians', as eloquently suggested by a critic in 1948.⁶⁷

Ghedini's artistic trajectory presents a further complex narrative, defying any straightforward categorisation. His musical oeuvre extends across a span of sixty years, stretching from 1905 to 1965. Within this timeframe, Ghedini—'a many-sided composer' in Castiglioni's words—explored a broad spectrum of genres, ranging from sacred to secular, vocal to instrumental, operatic to cinematic works.⁶⁸ However, as we will see, this breadth invited frequent criticisms of eclecticism and academicism, raising doubts about the consistency of a distinctly Ghedinian musical identity. Initially deemed an epigone, he later emerged as an innovative composer in the 1940s, only to be seen as a survivor and defector from progress in his later years. While a mentor to many celebrated musicians of the post-war period, such as the composers Niccolò Castiglioni and Berio, and the conductors Guido Cantelli and Claudio Abbado, he notably deviated from the avant-garde interests of this younger generation. Disadvantaged by historical categorisations and an evolutionary concept of art, Ghedini's engagement with his era remained consistently fraught and controversial, akin to the operatic genre's struggle between anachronism and contemporary relevance. Furthermore, the three phases commonly delineated in Ghedini's career not only reflect but also closely coincide with pivotal turning points of Italian history: the fascist era, World War II and the rise of Italian Republic. Two specific locales also provide the backdrop for Ghedini's activity: Turin in the interwar period and Milan during the reconstruction era.

⁶⁶ These two different expressions were employed by contemporary critics such as Mila, Gianandrea Gavazzeni and Ferdinando Ballo, as well as by subsequent scholars.

⁶⁷ [Review of the Premiere of *Le Baccanti*], *Gazzetta Sport*, 22 February 1948.

⁶⁸ Niccolò Castiglioni, 'Ghedini - A Many-sided Composer', *Ricordiana*, X.2 (1965), 4–7.

Ghedini started his career as an assistant and orchestral conductor. In this initial phase, extending into the 1930s and characterised musically by what Salvetti describes as *dépouillement*, Ghedini sought to shape his own voice, in part by delving into the heritage of earlier Italian music. This aligned with the wider trend of neoclassicism, outlined above. It was during this time that Ghedini composed works such as *Il pianto della Madonna* (1921), drawing from the writings of the medieval poet Jacopone da Todi, and the orchestral *Partita* (1926), which reimaged traditional concertante forms.⁶⁹ Yet, Ghedini's fascination with the classics of Italian music transcended mere neoclassical trends. Throughout his career, the musician engaged in transcribing Italian Renaissance music, including the *Quattro Pezzi* (1930) by Frescobaldi and Monteverdi's *L'Incoronazione di Poppea* (1953).⁷⁰ Such immersion in tradition also deeply influenced his compositional style, encompassing the linear and gestural essence of his music, the *concertante* interplay between vocal and instrumental elements, as well as a freely episodic approach to form, characterised by methods of analogy, juxtaposition and repetition, rather than thematic development.⁷¹

This initial stage of Ghedini's career unfolded within the context of interwar Turin, a city synonymous with renewal, as well as technological and industrial advance. Besides the presence of FIAT, the city was a pioneering centre for Italy's early ventures into the realm of new media, spanning from the burgeoning film industry to the inception of the first national broadcaster (URI). Turin was also a city of considerable political and social complexity. As the seat of the Savoy dynasty then reigning in Italy, Turin's social fabric, blending industrialists and a sizable

⁶⁹ For a chronological listing of Ghedini's works refer to Stefano Parise, *Giorgio Federico Ghedini: l'uomo, le opere attraverso le lettere* (Milan: Ricordi, 2003).

⁷⁰ Transcribing preclassical music was a widespread practice among Italian composers of the time, including figures like Gian Francesco Malipiero.

⁷¹ Carlo Mosso, 'Giorgio Federico Ghedini. Un itinerario stilistico', *La Musica Moderna*, II.69 (1967), 64–76; Angiola Maria Bonisconti, 'Il teatro musicale di Giorgio Federico Ghedini', *Musica d'oggi*, 4.5 (1961); Piero Santi, 'Ghedini', *L'approdo musicale*, 21 (1966), 163–66.

working class, presented persistent challenges for fascist rule.⁷² Providing a venue for the political activities of the Marxist Antonio Gramsci and the liberal Piero Gobetti, both staunch opponents of the regime, Turin later evolved into the quintessential city of anti-fascism and the Resistance.⁷³ Especially in terms of culture and the arts, the city boasted significant vibrancy. From the early decades of the century, the musical scene thrived with a rich tapestry of initiatives and institutions, such as the Teatro di Torino. Established by the entrepreneur and patron Riccardo Gualino, with the music critic Guido Maggiorino Gatti at the helm, the Teatro served as a pioneering platform for theatrical innovation, prefiguring the ethos and experimentalism of the Maggio Musicale.⁷⁴ Moreover, music criticism and scholarly discourse flourished in the city, thanks to the presence of two leading Italian music journals: *La Rassegna Musicale*, founded by Gatti with a multidisciplinary and idealistic imprint, and the *Rivista Musicale Italiana* (RMI), characterised by a positivist stance and a sharper focus on musicology.

This was the setting in which Ghedini developed his craft and aesthetic sensibilities, and established relationships that would leave a lasting imprint on the rest of his career. Most of his librettists, for instance, stemmed from this specific Turin milieu. While Gatti provided him with the libretto for *Gringoire* (1915), his first but never performed opera, Ghedini's second operatic endeavour, *L'intrusa* (1921), though similarly unrealised, was born from a single but significant collaboration, which left a lasting impact on the composer's aesthetic development. This was a collaboration with the librettist Romualdo Giani (1868-1931)—a cultured figure from another

⁷² Mussolini depicted Piedmont as the 'hub of the monarchist, reactionary and Bolshevik Vendee'.

⁷³ Both publications, Gramsci's *Ordine Nuovo* and Gobetti's *La Rivoluzione Liberale*, were based in Turin.

⁷⁴ Riccardo Gualino (1879-1964) was a passionate art lover and advocate for emerging means of communication, playing a founding role in both URI (1924) and LUX Film (1934). The Teatro di Torino, equipped with a dance school and a renowned resident orchestra led by the antifascist conductor Vittorio Gui, showcased works by contemporary Italian and foreign authors, as well as revivals of pre-Romantic operas and performances of Japanese Kabuki theatre. However, its existence was abruptly halted in 1930 when Gualino's assets were seized by the regime due to his covert antifascist stance. The theatre was then repurposed to host the EIAR Orchestra, the national broadcaster's ensemble at that time. Stefano Baldi and others, *Il Teatro di Torino di Riccardo Gualino (1925-1930): studi e documenti* (Lucca: Libreria Musicale Italiana, 2013).

influential circle in Turin, centred around the Fratelli Bocca publishing house—who played the role of a Pygmalion figure for the young Ghedini.⁷⁵ As co-founder and director of the RMI, Giani stood out for his daring polemics against prominent figures of the time, including D’Annunzio, Pizzetti and, most notably, Croce.⁷⁶ Giani was one of the rare dissenting voices against the fifty-year dominance of Italian idealism. His main critique focussed on Croce’s dismissal of artistic genres and his complete disregard for technique, which the philosopher relegated as subordinate and aesthetically irrelevant compared to inspiration.⁷⁷ Giani’s perspective resonated in both the words and works of Ghedini, perhaps partly affecting their reception, especially at a time when Italian criticism was overwhelmingly aligned with idealism. The collaboration on *L’Intrusa* (from Maurice Maeterlinck’s drama of the same name) was the occasion for the musician to fully embrace Giani’s aesthetic vision: ‘Recreate the mood (*stato d’animo*) within yourself, my dear Ghedini’, he prompted.⁷⁸ From a certain symbolist perspective, Giani envisioned art as an expression of the invisible (*figuratrice dell’invisibile*), a *mystic undercurrent*.⁷⁹ At the same time, embracing elements reminiscent of Wilde’s aestheticism, he advocated for the aristocratic essence of art and its historical journey towards autonomy and individuality, beyond mere social utility.⁸⁰ All of this left its mark on Ghedini’s career, as mirrored in critics’ depictions of his music: aristocratic, technically flawless and marked by a certain penchant for aestheticism.

Ghedini’s later collaborations in opera also unfolded within the vibrant Turinese context of the time. Notably, Ghedini’s enduring partnership with Tullio Pinelli and his brief involvement with

⁷⁵ Giani was a pioneer of phenomenology and among the first to engage and translate Nietzsche’s works in Italy. Romualdo Giani, *1868-1931: la vita, il fondo musicale, le collaborazioni musicologiche e gli interessi letterari*, ed. by Paolo Cavallo ([s.l.: s.n.], 2010).

⁷⁶ In the pamphlet, the librettist and musician Arrigo Boito is on the receiving end of another of Giani’s sharp polemics. Romualdo Giani, *La fionda di Davide. Saggi critici (Boito, Pizzetti, Croce)* (Turin: Fratelli Bocca, 1928).

⁷⁷ In the convergence of intuition and expression, as theorised by Croce’s aesthetics, there was no space for the artist’s will and choice of means. Benedetto Croce, *Breviario di estetica* (Bari: G. Laterza e figli, 1913).

⁷⁸ Andrea Della Corte, ‘Lettere di Giorgio Federico Ghedini ad amici’, in *Accademia di Santa Cecilia. Manifestazioni Culturali, Anno Accademico 1965-66* (Rome: Erosia, 1965), pp. 17–44 (p. 21).

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ Romualdo Giani, ‘Per l’arte aristocratica’, *Rivista Musicale Italiana*, III (1896), 92–127; 577; 756–769.

Franco Antonicelli—both serving as librettists for his operas—connect the musician to the antifascist intellectuals of Turin, rallied around the charismatic figure of Augusto Monti.⁸¹ The impact of the Turin context was thus far-reaching, extending beyond aesthetics and the composer's departure from the city, which dates, professionally, from the late 1930s.⁸² Following his eventual operatic debut in 1937, Ghedini's career seemed to accelerate, with his works now being staged in prestigious theatres such as La Scala and La Fenice. However, in the same period, his academic career experienced a significant setback. Beginning his teaching tenure as early as 1918 at the former Liceo Musicale, later transformed into the Turin Conservatoire, Ghedini's role as an educator held considerable importance and ran concurrently with his work as a composer. However, in 1938, Ghedini missed the chance to succeed Franco Alfano, the then-director who was nearing retirement. Accused of disseminating rumours concerning Alfano, Ghedini was dismissed from the Turin Conservatoire and initially commuted to serve as a composition professor in Parma (1938) and later in Milan (1941). This significant turning point in Ghedini's life coincided with major historical events, marking the onset of the second phase of his career.

In 1940, Italy entered World War II alongside Nazi Germany, the culmination of a gradual alignment between the two regimes from 1936 onwards. The implementation of racial laws in 1938 and the signing of the Pact of Steel in 1939 had sealed their alliance in both ideological and military terms. Fuelled by fervent wartime propaganda and the optimistic prospect of a swift triumph, Italy found itself militarily unready, ultimately leading to a protracted and agonising defeat. The downfall of the fascist regime in 1943 did not signal the end of war; rather, it sparked

⁸¹ As we will see later in more detail, Augusto Monti (1881-1966) was a scholar, writer and political dissident. While teaching classics at the Liceo 'Massimo D'Azeglio', Monti instilled ethical values and fostered a keen critical mindset in generations of students, including the writer Cesare Pavese, the music critic Massimo Mila and the publisher Luigi Einaudi.

⁸² The music critic Fedele D'Amico captured Ghedini's deep connection and resonance with Turin in the following words: the city was 'austere yet not solemn, cultured but unpretentious, unadorned and devoid of superficial allure yet inherently attractive, infused with a subtle warmth; as bare as Ghedini's renowned sound'. Fedele D'Amico, 'Intervento conclusivo', in Della Corte, 'Lettere di Giorgio Federico Ghedini ad amici', pp. 291-295 (p. 295).

a tumultuous two-year-long civil conflict. Italy was sharply divided in two: the Allies advanced from the south, while fierce resistance of partisans confronted the newly formed fascist Republic of Salò in the north. The intense bombardments compelled Ghedini to leave the city and find shelter as an evacuee in Borgosesia, a small town eighty kilometres to the north-east of Turin. Not only did his life undergo profound changes, but Ghedini's music also bore the imprint of the circumstances he faced. His musical language grew harsher and more dissonant, departing from neoclassical diatonicism towards a pronounced expressionistic atonality; he even ventured into the realm of serialism, which was quickly being established as the *lingua franca* of European musical modernism and post-war commitment. His musical sonorities became sparser and more austere, marked—his critics noted—by chilly timbres, something recognised as unique to Ghedini's style.

The tumultuous years of World War II served as the catalyst for the composer's artistic maturation. Inaugurated by *Architetture* in 1940, this central phase of Ghedini's artistic output was marked by the troubled composition of his fourth opera *Le Baccanti*, on which he had begun work in 1941, but which was premiered only in 1948, after considerable effort and delay. Despite the harsh conditions imposed by the war, the 1940s witnessed a flourishing of Ghedini's career. In the words of Goffredo Petrassi, a new generation of musicians found in Ghedini an older ally, who spoke their artistic language and empathised with the existentialist mode of their expression.⁸³ Works like the 1943 *Concerto spirituale* and *Sette ricercari* solidified Ghedini's standing as a modernist and timely composer. Vestiges of his earlier neoclassical style now converged with experiments in dodecaphony (such as in the 1946 *Canoni*). The *Concerto dell'Albatro* (1945), Ghedini's most celebrated composition to date, stood as the pinnacle of this phase of experimentation and personal redefinition. Here, the 'white' sparse instrumental sounds, scored

⁸³ Stefano Parise, 'Profilo di Giorgio Federico Ghedini' (dissertation, Università degli Studi di Milano, 1992), p. 555.

for piano trio and orchestra, set the stage for the unexpected entrance of a speaking voice, delivering an excerpt from Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* that resonated deeply amidst the surrounding bleakness of war.

In the wake of the Liberation in 1945, Ghedini made one of his more explicitly topical and political statements, condemning tyranny and war in his *Concerto funebre per Duccio Galimberti*, a tribute in memory of a partisan martyr. Despite not actively participating in the Resistance himself, unlike many of his acquaintances, Ghedini was ideally coopted into the movement. In the early post-war period, Ghedini was acclaimed as something like an official composer of the Resistance, with his music earning praise in *Rinascita*, a publication of the Italian Communist Party (PCI). The critic Sergio Lauricella commended the composer for his pursuit of humanity, emphasising a direct emotional connection with the audience over intellectual or aesthetic complexities.⁸⁴ Such praise took on a specific significance within the post-war context. As previously mentioned, with the escalating geopolitical tensions of the Cold War, two contrasting aesthetic paradigms emerged in the realm of music and culture: the socialist realism of Moscow and the western formalism of Darmstadt. These paradigms encapsulated contrasting perspectives on the role of art, either as a socially engaged medium accessible to the public or as esoteric research into musical innovation for its own sake. As seen, the Italian response was intricately nuanced, striving to reconcile the two perspectives—a commitment to both social and artistic progress—into the notion of *impegno*, which revamped Croce's aesthetic principle of *poesia*. In the course of the 1940s, Ghedini's most successful period, his music seemed to please all expectations: some admired its daring artistic exploration, while others saw it as a manifestation of a 'new realism' or humanism, offering an alternative to supposedly sterile avant-garde trends.⁸⁵

⁸⁴ Sergio Lauricella, 'Valore di una posizione', *Rinascita*, III.5–6 (1946), 132–34.

⁸⁵ Peter O. Roderick, 'Rebuilding a Culture: Studies in Italian Music after Fascism, 1943-1953' (doctoral thesis, University of York, 2010) <<https://etheses.whiterose.ac.uk/997/>> [accessed 5 May 2023].

This fragile, ambiguous balance was shattered in 1948, a pivotal year that signalled a significant shift in both Ghedini's career and Italy's political climate, underscoring a connection that goes beyond mere coincidence. The first republican elections spelled the end of the national unity government, while the disappointing failure of *Le Baccanti* extinguished the once-unanimous critical acclaim for Ghedini's music. Ghedini appeared to reassess his artistic trajectory in the aftermath. Accused of coldness and excessive technicality in his latest opera, his music seemingly regressed, with his style and language retreating towards more conventional forms. The once harsh dissonances gradually softened into diatonicism, sparking a resurgence of tonality. Illustrative of this stylistic shift were the solo concertos composed in the run up to the 1950s, distinguished by descriptive titles and a display of virtuosity: *Il Belprato* (1947), *L'alderina* (1950) and *L'olmeneta* (1951). In the view of many critics, this turn towards forms of indulgent aestheticism and pandering to public taste betrayed the composer's earlier modernist pursuits.⁸⁶ In an era marked by ideological rigidity, where linguistic advance was synonymous with civic commitment, Ghedini's music stood out as a striking and inconsistent counterpoint. Not only did his works divert from a fixedly modernist perspective, but his own declarations also did little to bolster his critical reputation in the post-war musical arena. Following his earlier experimentation with dodecaphony, Ghedini grew disenchanted with the legacy of the Second Viennese School.⁸⁷ He became increasingly antagonistic towards the new generation who continued to pursue serialism: 'Oh, the sound aesthetic of a Mozart, who was content as long as the piece *sounded good*', he lamented.⁸⁸ 'Today, music—in its traditional sense—has come to an end'.⁸⁹

⁸⁶ These words were employed by a critic to convey a sense of longing for the former Ghedini at the premiere of his last opera. Bardolfo, "L'ipocrita Felice" e un De Falla felicissimo', *Candido*, 18 March 1956. 'I love to disdain the crowd', said the young Ghedini. Biblioteca del Conservatorio di musica 'Giuseppe Verdi', Milan, *Copia di un diario di Giorgio Federico Ghedini: 31 luglio 1926 - 19 aprile 1927*, B.v.d. 101, p. 9.

⁸⁷ Ghedini depicted the atmosphere surrounding Wozzeck as one of pervasive 'putrefaction'. See Ghedini's letter to Carlo Pinelli (22.06.1952) in Parise, *Giorgio Federico Ghedini*, p. 305.

⁸⁸ Ghedini's letter to Giorgio Negri (07.08.1956) in Parise, *Giorgio Federico Ghedini*, pp. 320–21.

⁸⁹ Ghedini's words in Della Corte, 'Lettere di Giorgio Federico Ghedini ad amici', p. 29.

However, while his critical standing as a more conservative figure led to a gradual isolation from the post-war scene, the concluding chapter of Ghedini's career coincided with the pinnacle of his institutional recognition. In post-war Milan, Ghedini came to hold influential positions within significant institutions. Appointed as artistic consultant for the renowned Teatro alla Scala and assuming the role of director at the Milan Conservatoire from 1951 to 1962, Ghedini left Turin and relocated to Milan, a city that had become the emblem of Italian Liberation and was the site of the post-war economic miracle.⁹⁰ The city also stood as the capital of cultural and artistic renewal, pulsating with initiatives and fostering the emergence of a new avant-garde in the musical sphere. From the concerts of the Pomeriggi Musicali to the establishment of the pioneering Studio di Fonologia (the birthplace of Italian electronic music), Ghedini was intricately woven into the fabric of this cultural resurgence in Milan. His exclusive connections with RAI and the publisher Ricordi played a pivotal role in promoting the dissemination of his music. The city also further fostered his mentorship of the younger generation, although their paths diverged ever more. Following his retirement, Ghedini found himself increasingly sidelined from the contemporary musical scene. His music was dismissed by the new avant-garde as 'outdated, traditional, hedonistic, decadent and bourgeois'.⁹¹ With a blend of bitterness and sarcasm, he placed himself among those who were then labelled as 'conformist composers of the right', a 'relic and a survivor'.⁹²

This retrospective of Ghedini's career highlights pronounced moments of discontinuity in his music and reception, with his works often seen to lack a sense of timeliness—save for the interlude of the 1940s. Upon deeper exploration, the reception of his oeuvre provides useful

⁹⁰ The term 'economic miracle' refers to the remarkable period of rapid industrial expansion and economic growth in Italy during the 1950s and 1960s.

⁹¹ D'Amico's words in defence of Ghedini's *Sonata da Concerto* (1958) in Mosso, 'Giorgio Federico Ghedini. Un itinerario stilistico', p. 74.

⁹² Ghedini quoted in Della Corte, 'Lettere di Giorgio Federico Ghedini ad amici', p. 29.

historically grounded viewpoints on Ghedini's contentious alignment with the evolving times. As we will observe in the chapters to come, there were recurring traits identified in his music that had dual, if not conflicting, implications. Critics' remarks on the composer's prowess, eclecticism and attentiveness to tradition were in fact double-edged, often insinuating a deeper lack of inspiration, expressiveness and topicality—a problem even more pronounced in the field of opera, with Ghedini's music often appearing detached from both the text and the surrounding context. The unanimous acknowledgement of his 'unsurpassed technical ability' indeed harboured a certain prejudice of inauthenticity from a Crocean standpoint.⁹³ The commendations for Ghedini's innate musical instinct subtly hinted at a degree of intellectual disengagement. His work was repeatedly called 'aristocratic', conveying both its musical refinement and its challenge in appealing to a broader audience. Widely perceived as cold, detached and difficult, Ghedini's music was consistently acknowledged for its impeccable craftsmanship, yet often criticised for its lack of emotion and conceptual depth. As the critic William Weaver put it in *The Musical Times*, 'his music is, one might say, more respectable than lovable'.⁹⁴ The problematic relationship with his critics only escalated after the 1950s, as Ghedini failed to meet the expectations of both progressives and conservatives across the political spectrum. A sense of neglect, frustration and unease marked the composer's final years. Following his death in 1965, there was only a partial reassessment of Ghedini's modernity and originality.

'Antipoetica' is how Guido Salvetti aptly labels Ghedini's rejection of formal theorising and programmes.⁹⁵ According to the composer, 'whether there is a system or not, what matters is having ideas and placing music foremost'.⁹⁶ Contrary to many of the musicians of the *generazione*

⁹³ Cit. from Castiglioni, 'Ghedini - A Many-sided Composer'.

⁹⁴ William Weaver, 'Ghedini. "La Pulce d'Oro"', *The Musical Times*, 104 (1963), 196–97.

⁹⁵ Guido Salvetti, 'L'«antipoetica» di G. F. Ghedini nella musica italiana tra le due guerre', *Studi musicali*, 1.2 (1972), 371–417.

⁹⁶ Angiola Maria Bonisconti, 'G. F. Ghedini: fatti e programmi', *Fiera Letteraria*, IV.3 (1949), 5.

dell'80, Ghedini had no interest in crafting and promoting his own manifesto. In his sparse statements, usually conveyed informally and often as guidance to his students, Ghedini seemingly strove for a haphazard reconciliation of the prevailing aesthetic trends of the time. In his concept of *sceneggiatura* as a preparatory phase to composition, Ghedini integrated both the quest for an expressive and poetic essence—‘il fattore poesia’—in Crocean terms, and a careful attention to technique, exploring its fertile boundaries, in a manner reminiscent of Stravinsky’s approach. As Ghedini wrote, ‘though inspiration is undoubtedly beautiful, I hold a profound belief in the intellect’.⁹⁷ The composer instructed his students to be proficient artisans before evolving into artists.⁹⁸ He encouraged them to seek inspiration not only in spiritual stimuli (what he termed the ideal ‘dramatic scenario’) but also in the material constraints they should establish from the outset (such as the choice of unusual combinations of instruments). Ghedini regarded music as encompassing both a form of ‘religious mysticism’ and the outcome of logical and cerebral research.⁹⁹ Across his output, one can discern echoes of themes and archaisms from neomedieval spiritualism, as well as parallels with Hindemith’s counterpoint and Bartók’s use of concertante forms—just to highlight a few resonances.

This ambiguity in theoretical terms and the cross-fertilisation of different musical materials in Ghedini’s works prompted recurring criticisms of epigonism, aestheticism and eclecticism. The critic Mila characterised this apparent embrace of various techniques and trends by Ghedini over time as a succession of different ‘masks’—an emblematic image for interpreting Ghedini’s operatic journey culminating, as we shall see, in *L’ipocrita felice* and its redemptive mask. In navigating the chameleonic nature of Ghedini’s music, his supporters put forward two key

⁹⁷ From Ghedini’s letter to his pupil Attila Poggi (01.08.1943), in Parise, *Giorgio Federico Ghedini*, p. 202.

⁹⁸ Nausicaa Poggi, ‘La figura di Ghedini attraverso le lettere ad attila poggi e ad altri amici’, in *Ghedini e l’attività musicale a Torino fra le due guerre. Atti del convegno in occasione dell’Anno Europeo della Musica (Torino, 14-15 gennaio 1986)*, ed. by Teatro Regio (Turin: Teatro Regio, 1986), pp. 58–75.

⁹⁹ This informal poetic statement can be found in Ghedini’s letter to his pupil Attila Poggi (01.08.1943) in Parise, *Giorgio Federico Ghedini*, pp. 202–4.

arguments to showcase its novelty, continuity and coherence throughout his career. On the one hand, despite the recurrent critiques of his music as emotionless, composers like Bruno Bettinelli, and notably scholars such as Salvetti, attributed Ghedini's extensive technical and stylistic palette to a multifaceted quest for expression. Salvetti suggested that Ghedini tailored his musical tools to effectively convey the underlying *Stimmung* of the composition, a concept rooted in Renaissance tradition and the so-called theory of affects. Linguistic choices were thus dictated by expressive intentions rather than conforming to any pre-established system. According to Salvetti, Ghedini incorporated even the most cutting-edge musical techniques and materials while remaining firmly committed to the traditional belief in the communicative power and duty of music.¹⁰⁰ Likewise, Berio maintained that even Ghedini's engagement with the twelve-tone series was thematic, reflecting his conception of music as a communicative language.¹⁰¹

On the other hand, the second interpretation—which surfaced almost immediately in his contemporary reception—identified Ghedini's novelty and modernity not in the creation of new musical elements, but rather in his innovative handling of existing materials.¹⁰² While unanimous consent was reached regarding the technical excellence of Ghedini's music, many credited its uniqueness and cohesive essence to its sound quality. Ghedini 'thinks instrumentally', said his pupil Carlo Pinelli, to emphasise how timbral choices served as the intrinsic foundation of the composer's ideas rather than a mere afterthought.¹⁰³ The auditory result—how it sounds to the ear—stood as Ghedini's primary concern, guiding his technical choices devoid of pregiven systems. According to many favourable observers, like the conductor Gianandrea Gavazzeni, timbre represented Ghedini's poetic and creative principle, serving as the common thread behind

¹⁰⁰ Bettinelli's interview in Stefano Parise, 'Profilo di Giorgio Federico Ghedini', pp. 543–46; Guido Salvetti, 'La presenza di Giorgio Federico Ghedini nella storia del primo Novecento italiano', in *Ghedini e l'attività musicale a Torino fra le due guerre*, pp. 7–14.

¹⁰¹ Berio's interview in Parise, 'Profilo di Giorgio Federico Ghedini', pp. 539–42.

¹⁰² Mosso, 'Giorgio Federico Ghedini. Un itinerario stilistico'.

¹⁰³ Carlo Pinelli, *Re Hassan, di Giorgio Ghedini* (Milan: La lampada, 1942).

his seemingly eclectic output.¹⁰⁴ As further suggested by Santi, who introduced the concept of ‘timbral theatre’ in regard to Ghedini’s operas, sound can appropriate dramatic situations, thus reversing the traditional relationship between music and drama.¹⁰⁵ Ghedini’s identity thus seemingly resided in the distinctive sonority of his music, his steadfast dedication to sound serving as an antidote to the radical fluctuations of stylistic trends. Ghedini’s music sounded recognisably stark and devoid of any rhetoric, hovering on the edge of the ‘metaphysical’.¹⁰⁶

This second reading aligned Ghedini’s music with a more distinctly twentieth-century objectivity, a dimension emphasising sound exploration and materiality, craftsmanship and purely musical values. At the same time, the celebration of Ghedini as an ‘all-music’ composer, his ‘sonic demon’ and his ‘timbral libido’ (Gavazzeni) and, in a broader sense, his exceptional musical instinct, implied a certain undervaluing of the artist’s intellectual awareness.¹⁰⁷ Ghedini’s attention to technique and pure musical values—possibly stemming from his encounter with Giani—not only diverged from the ideals of Crocean aesthetics but also dissatisfied the intellectual and ethical demands of the new post-war avant-garde. It was commonly held that Ghedini was an outstanding musician—both instinctive and technically sophisticated, even cerebral—but not an intellectual.¹⁰⁸ He seemingly lacked the crucial conceptual depth demanded by twentieth-century art to remain relevant and forward-thinking. According to Berio, Ghedini’s exclusive reliance on auditory judgment had limited his comprehension and capacity to keep pace with the developments of the post-war era.¹⁰⁹ And yet, despite these accusations, his innovative sounds continued to resonate into the post-war era as a significant legacy, highlighting the continuity

¹⁰⁴ Gianandrea Gavazzeni, ‘La musica di Ghedini’, *Letteratura*, 33 (1947), 152-7.

¹⁰⁵ Piero Santi, ‘Ghedini e il suo teatro timbrico’, in *Ghedini e l’attività musicale a Torino fra le due guerre*, pp. 15-26.

¹⁰⁶ See Goffredo Petrassi’s comment in [Ricordo e testimonianze su G. F. Ghedini], in Conservatorio di musica ‘Giuseppe Verdi’ di Milano, *Annuario dell’anno accademico 1964-65*, ed. by Guglielmo Barblan (Milan: Conservatorio di musica ‘Giuseppe Verdi’, 1965), pp. 205-40 (239-40).

¹⁰⁷ Gavazzeni, ‘La musica di Ghedini’.

¹⁰⁸ See the critics’ opinion in Della Corte, ‘Lettere di Giorgio Federico Ghedini ad amici’; Mila’s intervention in *Annuario dell’anno accademico 1964-65*, pp. 234-8.

¹⁰⁹ See Berio’s interview in Parise, ‘Profilo di Giorgio Federico Ghedini’.

between modernism and the avant-garde, contrary to the notion of a complete *tabula rasa* in the 1950s.

The Operas

After his belated operatic debut in 1937, Ghedini went on to complete a further five operas in just two decades of his lengthy and multifaceted career. Returning to a pivotal question of this thesis—why a twentieth-century musician would engage with opera amidst its escalating crisis—the responses provided by Ghedini’s operas are diverse and are reflected in the mixed reception of his works. According to some, Ghedini’s engagement with opera was primarily driven by a sense of duty rather than a natural inclination.¹¹⁰ Others contended, however, that Ghedini possessed a strong dramatic instinct and, musically, opera emerged as the natural culmination of his experiences across diverse domains, merging all acquired expressive means into characters and situations on the stage.¹¹¹ From his perspective, the composer maintained that he could not imagine crafting ‘even a brief lyrical piece devoid of drama’, that is, without an ideal interplay of musical characters.¹¹² Unlike many twentieth-century musicians who penned their own librettos, Ghedini consistently relied on literary collaborators to draft the librettos for his operas. In accordance with a conventional division of roles, Ghedini held that the librettist’s task was to capture the exact ‘tone’, while the composer was responsible for bringing it to life with coherence.¹¹³ The libretto was envisioned as a preliminary sketch, akin to a ‘skeletal scaffold’ upon which to build the musical content.¹¹⁴

The young Ghedini’s initial ventures into opera drew from different wellsprings of inspiration: the Parnassian subject of *Gringoire* (1915) by Théodore de Banville, adapted into libretto by Gatti;

¹¹⁰ See Riccardo Allorto and Dario De Rosa’s interviews in *ibid.*

¹¹¹ Giovanni Ugolini, ‘Dramma e spiritualità di Ghedini’, *La Scala*, 159 (1963), 7–15; Gianandrea Gavazzeni, ‘La musica di Ghedini’, *Letteratura*, 33 (1947), 152–7.

¹¹² From Ghedini’s letter to Attila Poggi (25.10.1944) in Parise, *Giorgio Federico Ghedini*, p. 232.

¹¹³ See Ghedini’s letter to Carlo Pinelli (19.09.1944) in *ibid.*, pp. 218–19.

¹¹⁴ Giorgio Federico Ghedini, ‘Note su «Le Baccanti» e su altri lavori’, *Agorà*, II.1 (1946), 23–25.

and the Symbolism resonating from *L'intrusa* (1921) in Giani's reinterpretation of Maurice Maeterlinck's play. As seen, both endeavours languished unperformed, akin to dead ends, and Ghedini refrained from attempting opera again for over a decade. According to Salvetti, the delay in Ghedini's operatic debut was down to the composer striving to find his own path far from the supposed superficiality of the prevailing *verismo* and the emptiness that lay within Symbolism's introspection.¹¹⁵ The succession of operas he did then go on to complete each represented a different foray into new territory, each an attempt to forge a path for new opera, and each responding to their contemporary moments in a variety of ways. By drawing on entirely disparate subjects, Ghedini's operas intertwined diverse aesthetic currents and institutional efforts, all directed towards the preservation and renewal of the operatic genre during its perceived moment of utmost crisis.

The chapters that follow will take these operas in turn, exploring the intricate interplay between music and text and re-situating them in the periods in which they were written and first performed. Some chapters will be shorter, focussing on a specific opera and its relevant thematic threads; others will be broader in scope, setting the operas in relation to a wider range of contextual factors. The first chapter is notably more comprehensive in scope: its case study, Ghedini's first performed opera—*Maria d'Alessandria* in 1937—serves not only to introduce Ghedini's operatic oeuvre, but also to provide further contextualization for the thesis as a whole. The chapter explores the cultural influences at work in the opera, revealing in turn the intricate nuances of fascist music culture. The opera's debut at the Teatro delle Novità, in fact, offers a compelling example of the implementation of fascist cultural policies. The convergence of Ghedini's distinctive music with a seemingly old-fashioned subject, entrenched in the

¹¹⁵ Salvetti, 'L'«antipoetica» di G. F. Ghedini'. As the composer himself asserted, the prevalence of forms of 'Mascagnism, Giordanism and other melodramatic and pedestrian isms' left him feeling profoundly nauseated. From Ghedini's letter to Attila Poggi (20.08.1945) in Parise, *Giorgio Federico Ghedini*, p. 255.

D'Annunzian-Pizzettian current and resonating with the rhetoric of *mediterraneità*, meant the opera seemingly embodied the fascist formula of blending past and present. Drawing on Monteverdi as an icon of *italianità*, Ghedini's musical eclecticism navigated the contemporary Italian musical scene, maintaining an impartial stance between the conservative and modernist factions. In doing so, the opera mirrored the idiosyncratic pluralism embraced by the regime in the realm of art and culture.

The ensuing opera, *Re Hassan* (1939), explored in the second chapter, marked a crucial early turning point in Ghedini's oeuvre. In pursuit of a more contemporary expression, Ghedini crafted a multifaceted work that resonated deeply with the ominous atmosphere of the late 1930s. The looming tragedy of King Hassan and his people was matched by a harsh and static music, encapsulating the pervasive disillusionment and the sense of impending doom of late-fascist Italy on the brink of war. Performed as part of the regime's promotional efforts for opera, *Re Hassan* clashed with the triumphalist rhetoric of fascism in its death throes, subtly yet unmistakably positioning itself against militarism and tyranny. Despite its contrasting comic stance, the third chapter's case study, *La pulce d'oro* (1940), emerged not only as both a form of escapism, but also as a sharp critique of the prevailing historical moment. By employing parody as both a musical technique and an allegory of the uncertain boundary between fiction and reality, the opera served as a metaphorical reflection on the regime's propaganda strategies, obliquely portraying fascism as a grotesque *opera buffa*. Furthermore, with its unique fusion of magic realist themes and Ghedini's idiosyncratic neoclassicism, *La pulce d'oro* holds an intriguing position within the realm of twentieth-century comic opera.

Le Baccanti marked a watershed moment in Ghedini's artistic output, as the pinnacle and definitive endpoint of the composer's most modernist phase. The fourth chapter explores how, emerging from a protracted compositional process stretching back through the war years and

beyond, the opera's delayed and unsuccessful premiere in 1948 left Ghedini disillusioned. A distinctive Italian incarnation of the *Bacchae*, which takes its place alongside other twentieth-century operas inspired by Euripides' tragedy, Ghedini's work offers manifold paths for interpretation. The 'primitive grandeur' of the music, as described by Castiglioni, seems to transcend the Nietzschean dichotomy between the Apollonian and Dionysian, embodying the ideal of twentieth-century art epitomised by Hermes—an art cerebral in form yet irrational in essence.¹¹⁶ Concurrently, Euripides' subject unavoidably reverberated with the intricacies of the contemporary situation in Italy: the enduring significance of classical culture, the generational tensions in the final years of the regime and the consuming Dionysian power of fascism, interpreted as both a force of invasion and repression (in Carlo Emilio Gadda's reading). After the experience of *Le Baccanti*, Ghedini revised his understanding of the traditional operatic format. This entailed streamlining and a move towards 'piccola opera', reducing the prominence of singing in favour of recitation, and departing from dynamic staging to embrace oratorical forms or even radio opera.

Drawing inspiration from Anglo-American culture, Ghedini's final operas showed how the genre could serve as a privileged platform for post-war internationalism. *Billy Budd* (1949), an operatic rendition of Melville's novel—earlier and distinct from Benjamin Britten's—stood as something of a borderline opera. The cross-cultural encounter between American literature and Italian opera exposed the ambivalent reception of America and its cultural products in post-war Italy. The hybrid form of the opera, blending recitation and singing, provided a platform for contemplating the crisis of both the genre and Italian history. The fate of Billy, the stuttering sailor, served as a metaphor for both operatic and human failure. However, in the end, the redemptive story of *Lord Inferno* would bring a happy ending to Ghedini's operatic journey. In the concluding chapter of

¹¹⁶ Castiglioni, 'Ghedini - A Many-sided Composer'.

this thesis, the comparison between the two versions of the work—the radio opera *Lord Inferno* (1952) and its staging as *L'ipocrita felice* (1956)—deepens the reflection on the state of opera and its evolution in the post-war period. Moreover, as aptly suggested by its subtitle, ‘a fairy tale for tired men’, the work reverberated with the historical circumstances of its inception. Beneath Beerbohm’s pure aestheticism, the opera espoused an alternative notion of commitment—one grounded in the transformative and cathartic power of supposedly good art, as epitomised by the mask of Lord Inferno.

Methodology

In the discussion of each opera that follows, historical, aesthetic and analytical threads will intersect and complement each other. The foundational theoretical framework underpinning this study is rooted in semiotic theories concerning the textuality of culture, as articulated by scholars such as Umberto Eco and Jurij Lotman.¹¹⁷ Within this framework, the meaning of a work is explored in its dynamic interplay with the evolving context and other works within it. Concurrently, each work is viewed as a nuanced reflection of the broader context in which it exists. My research thus follows a dual pathway, navigating through Ghedini’s operas from the composer’s specificities to the broader context, and vice versa. The following chapters reveal not just the course of opera’s history across this much neglected period, but also the long-forgotten significance the operas had at the time. Via a careful reconsideration of the works, the objective is to grasp the complex circumstances that led to their emergence and in turn their relationship to such a context. The peril of simplistic or contrived overinterpretations looms large in any historicised readings. Nevertheless, the intersections and linkages between music and history that surface in these chapters, whether deliberate or incidental, were inevitably prominent in contexts as deeply symbolic and politicised as the overarching dictatorship of fascism, the experience of a

¹¹⁷ Umberto Eco, *Le forme del contenuto* (Milan: Bompiani, 1971); Ūrij Mihajlovič Lotman, *Testo e contesto: semiotica dell'arte e della cultura* (Bari: Laterza, 1980).

world war and the pervasive politicisation of the post-war era. The history in question stood as a compelling and all-compassing narrative that emerged within culture and art, independent of the conscious intentions of creators. This is particularly evident in a genre such as opera, as we have noted, given its inherent susceptibility to contextual influences and its constant reliance on economic and political support.

The consulted sources are extensive and diverse, reflecting a multidisciplinary approach necessary for understanding complex texts such as operatic works, as well as for integrating them into equally intricate contexts. This research thus encompasses primary sources (including musical scores and librettos, press reviews and contemporary essays, and composers' diary entries and correspondence), as well as extensive secondary literature across a variety of fields—not limited to musicology, history and historiography, philosophy and Italian studies.¹¹⁸ Due to the relative neglect of Ghedini's operas after his death, recordings of Ghedini's operas are rare and often of low quality.¹¹⁹ More generally, the bibliography on Ghedini is notably sparse and fragmented, primarily composed of scattered articles, essays, unpublished theses and conference papers (i.e. *Ghedini e l'attività musicale a Torino tra le due guerre* (1986) and *Giorgio Federico Ghedini. Dallo spirito torinese alle suggestioni europee* (2017)).¹²⁰ Contemporary critics like Gianandrea Gavazzeni and Piero Santi were among the earliest to recognise the significance of Ghedini's operas, providing insightful and stylistically nuanced analyses of his output. Later, scholars like Guido Salvetti and

¹¹⁸ A considerable portion of the press reviews referenced here has been generously supplied by theatre archives. Consequently, the bibliographic references for these press clippings may be incomplete, frequently missing key details such as title, author and page number.

¹¹⁹ The recordings currently available include: *La pulce d'oro* (1950), *Le Baccanti* (1955) and *Lord Inferno* (1952) from RAI; an amateur recording of *Maria d'Alessandria* from Turin (1984) and *Billy Budd* from Milan (2018). To date, no recording of *Re Hassan* has been located.

¹²⁰ *Ghedini e l'attività musicale a Torino fra le due guerre; Giorgio Federico Ghedini: dallo spirito torinese alle suggestioni europee. Atti del convegno, Torino, 22 gennaio 2016*, ed. by Giulia Giachin (Turin: Edizioni del Conservatorio, 2017).

Andrea Lanza offered compelling and updated contributions, while Stefano Parise is notable for authoring the primary monographs on the composer.¹²¹

Regarding the wider scene of Italian music in the twentieth century, the contributions of Roberto Zanetti (1985), as well as Nicolodi (1982), Salvetti and Lanza (1991), offer substantial overviews.¹²² Meanwhile, Alberto Basso's encyclopaedic work, *Musica in scena* (1995), delves specifically into the history of opera, providing an extensive exploration of the genre.¹²³

Conference proceedings, like *La musica italiana nel primo Novecento. "La generazione dell'80"* (1981), *Il Novecento musicale italiano tra neoclassicismo e neogoticismo* (1988), *Alfredo Casella e l'Europa* (2003), serve as invaluable resources for gaining a comprehensive understanding of the trends and influential figures of Italian music in the first half of the twentieth century. From a closer perspective, the records of the diverse International Music Congresses held in Florence offer a gauge of contemporary musical discourse, highlighting key themes and debates during the years in focus in this thesis. In delving into the intricate relationship between music and historical-political context, further bibliographic references provide valuable insights. The scholarly contributions of Fiamma Nicolodi (1984), Harvey Sachs (1988), Roberto Illiano (2004) and Ben Earle (2013) offer nuanced perspectives on the intricate connections between music and the fascist regime.¹²⁴ Their studies delve into various aspects, including institutional frameworks, socio-political circumstances and aesthetic principles.

¹²¹ Stefano Parise, *Giorgio Federico Ghedini: l'uomo, le opere attraverso le lettere*. The contributions by Lanza and Salvetti consist of articles, book chapters and conference papers.

¹²² Fiamma Nicolodi, *Gusti e tendenze del Novecento musicale in Italia* (Florence: Sansoni, 1982); Roberto Zanetti, *La musica italiana nel Novecento*, 3 vols. (Busto Arsizio: Bramante, 1985); Guido Salvetti, *La nascita del Novecento* (Turin: EDT, 1991); Lanza, *Il secondo Novecento*. See also *La cultura dei musicisti italiani nel Novecento*, ed. by Guido Salvetti and Maria Grazia Sità, (Milan: Guerini studio, 2004).

¹²³ *Musica in scena. Storia dello spettacolo musicale*, 6 vols, ed. by Alberto Basso (Turin: UTET, 1995).

¹²⁴ Nicolodi, *Musica e musicisti*; Sachs, *Music in Fascist Italy; Italian Music during the Fascist Period*; Ben Earle, *Luigi Dallapiccola and Musical Modernism in Fascist Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

In a broader discourse on the interplay of culture, aesthetics and fascism, notable points of reference include Marla Stone's analysis of regime patronage (1998); Emilio Gentile (1996), Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi (1997) and Patricia Gaborik's studies (2021) on the spectacle and aestheticization of political power; and Roger Griffin (2007) and Ruth Ben-Ghiat's (2001) scholarly inquiries on the modernist facets of fascist culture.¹²⁵ Concerning the post-war period, Salvetti's *Italia Millenovecentocinquanta* (1999) offers an expansive survey of the diverse trajectories pursued by Italian music during this transformative period. Additionally, Raymond Fearn's *Italian opera since 1945* (1998) and Harriet Boyd-Bennett's *Opera in Postwar Venice* (2018) delve into the developments of opera during this time.¹²⁶ Throughout the chapters of this thesis, numerous additional references emerge as pivotal for exploring the overarching themes intersecting with the study of Ghedini's operas. These encompass a wide array of topics, from the influence of D'Annunzio to the role of satire during the fascist era, or from the exploration of twentieth-century Dionysianism to the impact of Anglo-American culture on Italy.

Indeed, the eclecticism of Ghedini's operatic output offsets the constraints of a monographic approach and elevates his somewhat peripheral standing within the historiography of twentieth-century Italian music. Given the intricate web of inputs and interconnections woven within each opera, the comparative method is extensively employed. It embraces a diverse spectrum of authors, works and other genres, whether Italian or non-Italian, contemporary with Ghedini or not. This process plays a crucial role in assessing the composer's originality and legacy, as well as in redressing any unbalanced appreciation of his work. The research focus extends in this regard

¹²⁵ Marla Stone, *Patron State: Culture and Politics in Fascist Italy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1998); Emilio Gentile, *The Sacralization of Politics in Fascist Italy*, trans. by Keith Botsford (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996); Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi, *Fascist Spectacle. The Aesthetics of Power in Mussolini's Italy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); Gaborik, *Mussolini's Theatre*; Griffin, *Modernism and Fascism*; Ben-Ghiat, *Fascist Modernities*.

¹²⁶ *Italia Millenovecentocinquanta*, ed. by Guido Salvetti, Bianca Maria Antolini and Società Italiana di Musicologia (Milan: Guerini, 1999); Raymond Fearn, *Italian Opera since 1945* (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic, 1998); Harriet Boyd-Bennett, *Opera in Postwar Venice: Cultural Politics and the Avant-Garde* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

beyond music, exploring diverse facets of contemporary culture, with a particular emphasis on literature. Undoubtedly, given the enduring significance of the relationship between music and text within the Italian operatic tradition, right back to Monteverdi, and the continual scrutiny of this aspect in critical discourse, the investigation of Ghedini's works revolves prominently around the interplay between the two. The analysis of the scores is geared towards fostering and enacting a broader discourse of both historical and aesthetic significance. The examinations of the operas that follow delve into the music, navigating its technical and historical concreteness, as well as its elusive ambiguity, challenging easy aesthetic classifications.

The dimension of staging, integral to an art form as complex as opera, is somewhat marginalised, despite its growing significance from the late 1920s.¹²⁷ In comparison to the directorial experimentalism observed in venues like the Maggio Fiorentino, Ghedini's operas were usually performed in more conventional settings, where the primary focus was on the novelty of the musical composition rather than on its theatrical presentation.¹²⁸ Furthermore, the scarcity of primary sources relating to the staging of Ghedini's operas remains a challenge, compounded by the minimal attention given to the topic in contemporary press reviews. However, the perspective of staging presents another intriguing narrative worthy of further exploration in a different context. Within the scope of this thesis, the aim is to showcase the relevance of Ghedini's works and the genre of opera more broadly in a moment of heightened crisis, amid some of the greatest upheavals of the twentieth century. From this perspective, my research on Ghedini's output serves as a pivotal entry point into the somewhat fragmented scholarship on Italian opera during the transitional period between the first and second halves of twentieth century.

¹²⁷ The period of Ghedini's output saw a revaluation of the director's role and a surge in the revival of repertoire operas through innovative staging approaches. This trend was particularly evident in venues such as the Teatro di Torino and the Maggio Fiorentino.

¹²⁸ The only partial exceptions could be found in the staging of *Re Hassan* during the 1942 *Cicli di opere contemporanee* and the premiere of *Billy Budd* at the Venice Festival in 1949, distinguished by Renato Guttuso's set design.

CHAPTER 1

MARIA D'ALESSANDRIA: A DOUBLE DEBUT IN 1937

Opening Night

On the evening of 9 September 1937, the Donizetti theatre in Bergamo drew in a large and diverse audience. Among the attendees were local authorities and prominent members of the fascist party, esteemed personalities from the worlds of art and music and critics from across Italy. They had gathered to witness the debut of a new opera. The curtain opened onto an excited and crowded harbour scene in Alexandria, with voices scattered across the stage and beyond. The curses of jailors and the choral complaints of slaves toiling at the lighthouse onstage intertwined with pleasure-loving songs from afar. Music and action launched from the off, without any preamble. Everyone was waiting for Maria, the *femme fatale*, whose bewitching voice entered from offstage. Thus began *Maria d'Alessandria*, the debut opera by Giorgio Federico Ghedini, marking the launch of the Teatro delle Novità. This venue was the latest addition to the array of music festivals established during the 1930s under the auspices of the fascist regime, poised to endure well beyond the dictatorship's downfall.¹ The opera was staged with sets designed by Contardo Barbieri and costumes by Titina Rota, under the direction of Mario Frigerio and the baton of Giuseppe del Campo (see Figure 1.1).² *Maria*

¹ Others were the Festival Internazionale di Musica Contemporanea di Venezia (1930), Maggio Musicale Fiorentino (1933), Sagra Musicale Umbra di Perugia (1937) and the Settimane Musicali di Siena (1939).

² Contardo Barbieri (1900-1966) was a painter and director of the Accademia Carrara in Bergamo. Titina Rota (1899-1978), cousin of the well-known composer Nino Rota, was a successful set designer and painter. Mario Frigerio (1893-1962) was an opera director from Bergamo, who had already been engaged several times by the Teatro alla Scala. Giuseppe Del Campo (1890-1950), originally from Parma and a friend of Arturo Toscanini, was a distinguished conductor at Italy's leading opera houses.

d'Alessandria received a warm reception from the public, eliciting more than twenty curtain calls for the artists and garnering extensive coverage in the national press. Notably, the Minister of Popular Culture Dino Alfieri personally conveyed his congratulations via telegram, underscoring the event's success.³



Figure 1.1 Scene sketch for Act I by Contardo Barbieri. Courtesy of the archive of Teatro Donizetti

The Teatro delle Novità stood as a further endeavour by the regime to confront the deepening crisis of opera. As Nicola De Pirro, the director of the Ispettorato del Teatro, explained, ‘if one thinks of the supremacy of Italian lyrical repertoire in all the theatres of the world (...), everyone will understand how natural it is that the government keeps a watch over this vast world. (...)’.⁴ To date,

³ ‘Lieto per felice esito prima manifestazione. Teatro novità invio a lei, autori, interpreti, masse mio cordiale saluto’. Alfieri’s telegram to Bindo Missiroli, quoted in ‘Il compiacimento del Ministro Alfieri’, *Regime Fascista*, 9 October 1937. All press clippings from the premiere mentioned here have been generously supplied by the Teatro Donizetti archive in Bergamo.

⁴ De Pirro’s presentation of the Ispettorato del Teatro programme (founded in 1935), reported in Roberto Illiano and Massimiliano Sala, ‘The politics of spectacle: Italian music and Fascist propaganda’, *Muzikologija*, 13 (2012), 9–26 (p. 15) <<https://doi.org/10.2298/MUZ120325010I>> [accessed 19 January 2023]. Nicola De Pirro (1898-1979) was a journalist and a bureaucrat engaged in the theatrical sector. He was founder of the Federazione nazionale fascista delle industrie dello spettacolo (1925) and president of the Consorzio italiano dell’opera lirica (1931).

the regime had been actively fostering innovation within the genre by endorsing music festivals, such as those held in Venice (Festival Internazionale di Musica Contemporanea) and Florence (Maggio Musicale Fiorentino).⁵ Concurrently, initiatives like the Carro di Tespi (1930) were implemented to disseminate established repertoire works to the masses.⁶

By the time of *Maria d'Alessandria's* premiere in 1937, the regime's deepening involvement in cultural and musical affairs intersected with significant political events. The imperialist enterprise in Africa between 1935 and 1936 set the stage for celebratory operas like *Il deserto tentato* (1937) by the modernist composer Alfredo Casella. Similarly, in the context of the regime's ongoing celebration of the glory of ancient Rome, new competitions—such as the one spotlighted at the 1937 Rassegna Nazionale di Musica Contemporanea—were instituted to champion and reward compositions that embodied 'Mediterranean' and 'heroic' ideals.⁷ The regime strategically supported burgeoning cultural initiatives not only to cultivate propagandistic forms of art, but also to offset the escalating economic difficulties and public discontent, fuelled by massive military expenses and autarchic policies in response to the League of Nations' sanctions against Italy. Driven by this overarching objective, the Sabati teatrali were launched to offer opera and prose performances to urban and working-class

⁵ The Maggio Musicale Fiorentino championed the revival of forgotten works and introduced innovative staging in established ones. Meanwhile, the Venice Festival fostered experimentation with new operatic formats, including chamber opera.

⁶ The Carro di Tespi, a summer traveling theatre promoted by the Opera Nazionale del Dopolavoro, brought repertoire operas to rural communities at affordable prices, catering to the masses.

⁷ The concept of *romanità*, encompassing references to ancient Rome, included not only the empire but also Christianity and the Byzantine East. It was central to fascist ideology, as we can read in the 1932 entry on 'Fascism' in the Treccani Encyclopedia, co-authored by the philosopher Giovanni Gentile and Mussolini himself. Beginning with the 1926 ROMA initiative (Rinascimento Opera Massima Artistica), musicians were encouraged by the regime to be involved in and to draw inspiration from this nationalistic narrative in their creative endeavours. One notable example was *Il deserto tentato, mistero in un atto* by Alfredo Casella (1883-1947), commissioned directly by the Ministry of Popular Culture and performed at the third Maggio Musicale Fiorentino. Marking the inaugural anniversary of the establishment of the Italian Empire, the opera was explicitly dedicated to 'Mussolini, fondatore dell'impero'. In the same year, winners at the Rassegna Nazionale di Musica Contemporanea—a showcase organised by the National Fascist Musicians' Union—were Gabriele Bianchi's *Trittico sinfonico* and Barbara Giuranna's *Decima Legio*, the latter being a pupil of Ghedini.

audiences, while the Estate musicale italiana was designed to host theatrical and concert events in stunning outdoor venues throughout Italy.⁸ Culture emerged as a key soft-power tool of the regime, and despite the burgeoning alliance with Nazi Germany, the Italian government preserved a notable degree of independence and cultural openness. As the *Entartete Kunst* exhibition in Munich condemned modern art, the 1937 Venice and Florence festivals presented the forefront of both national and international musical innovation. Despite facing some controversy, the programmes, overseen by forward-thinking organisers like Alfredo Casella and Mario Labroca, featured works by Dallapiccola, Berg, Stravinsky, Schoenberg, Bartók, Milhaud, Prokofiev, De Falla and others.⁹ These multifaceted initiatives were integral to a comprehensive cultural policy aimed at securing large consensus. As we will discover, this policy was built on a strategic and inclusive pluralism. The fascist regime provided music and opera catering to a wide range of preferences, involving both elites and the masses, and balancing innovation with respect for tradition.

The Teatro delle Novità fitted into this political and cultural climate. Its primary aim was to champion the production of new operas, undertaking the entrepreneurial risk of staging them, despite the possible scepticism of the audience. Indeed, while opera was revered by composers as the zenith of artistic achievement and a path to renown,¹⁰ the journey for new works to secure a place in the repertoire remained arduous, hindered by both aesthetic discernment and economic viability. The

⁸ Such as the Terme di Caracalla or the Basilica of Massenzio in Rome, the Sforza Castle in Milan, the San Giusto Castle in Trieste, the Boboli Gardens in Florence, and so on.

⁹ Festivals served as strategic promotional platforms to attract foreign intellectuals and promote tourism, aiming to reshape Italy's international image from one of cultural backwardness to that of a tolerant and art-sensitive regime. Fiamma Nicolodi, 'Su alcuni aspetti dei festival tra le due guerre', in *Musica italiana del primo Novecento: 'La Generazione dell'80'. Atti del convegno di studi, Firenze, 9-11 maggio 1980*, ed. by Fiamma Nicolodi (Florence: Olschki, 1981), pp. 141–204.

¹⁰ Alceo Toni, cited in Nicolodi, 'Aspetti di politica culturale nel Ventennio fascista', in *Italian Music during the Fascist Period*, ed. by Roberto Illiano (Turnhout: Brepols, 2004), pp. 97–122 (p. 108). At the Mostra del Novecento musicale italiano (Bologna, 1927), Mussolini himself stated that 'as far as popularization in concerned, concert music does not reach large crowds, theatre music does'. Mussolini cited in Adriano Lualdi, *Viaggio Musicale in Italia* (Milan: Alpes, 1927), pp. 203–209.

prevailing narrative suggested that the golden era of opera had passed, leaving a void that subsequent generations struggled to fill, caught between the pressures of tradition and the imperative of modernisation.¹¹ New operas seemingly grappled with engaging the public's interest, amidst the allure of familiar classics and emerging entertainment options like cinema and radio.¹² Italian opera found itself trapped in the tension between commercial interests and artistic integrity, between popular appeal and elitist refinement.¹³ Opportunities for commissions and stagings were scarce, revivals were limited, and often the costs of new operas were judged to outweigh the benefits.¹⁴ Amidst fascist ambitions to revive Italy's past glories, there was eager anticipation for a new operatic genius to reignite public interest, while financial constraints forced opera houses to rely mainly on established works and composers. As the politician Senator Borletti put it, 'La Scala is a university, not a junior high school'.¹⁵ In this scenario, Bindo Missiroli, the superintendent of the Donizetti theatre, along with the music critic Franco Abbiati and the composer and conductor Gianandrea Gavazzeni, pioneered the establishment of a platform dedicated to fostering new composers and operas: the Teatro delle Novità, otherwise known as the Festival Autunnale dell'Opera Lirica.¹⁶ The initiative was designed as a showcase for contemporary trends and a springboard for emerging

¹¹ The apparent 'anti-historicity' of contemporary opera was among the main topics discussed at the First International Congress of Music, held in Florence in 1933.

¹² Franco Abbiati, 'Galvanizzare il moderno melodramma. Un teatro delle novità', *Corriere Della Sera*, 17 October 1935.

¹³ Carmelo Alberti, 'Tradizione, innovazione e trascrizione e nella messinscena delle opere liriche italiane del Novecento eclettico', in *Il Novecento musicale italiano tra neoclassicismo e neogoticismo. Atti del Convegno di studi (Venezia, 10-12 ottobre 1986)*, ed. by David Bryant (Florence: Olschki, 1988), pp. 305–40.

¹⁴ The challenging state of Italian opera in these years was a recurring concern among contemporary voices and has become a pivotal theme in subsequent scholarship on Italian music and culture during fascism. See, for instance, Abbiati's and other contemporary comments reported in Sandro Angelini, Ermanno Comuzio and Franco Abbiati, *Teatro delle Novità di Bergamo, 1937-1973* (Bergamo: Comune di Bergamo, Assessorato alla cultura e allo spettacolo, 1985), or the general analysis of opera's crisis made in Harvey Sachs, *Music in Fascist Italy* (New York: Norton, 1988).

¹⁵ Statement by Senator Borletti, an important entrepreneur and Italian politician, friend of the poet Gabriele D'Annunzio and financier of his enterprise in Fiume, quoted in *ibid.*, p. 79.

¹⁶ Bindo Missiroli (1899-1962) emerged as a prominent figure in Bergamo's music scene, serving as a music critic and active organiser. Under his superintendence, the Donizetti theatre experienced a resurgence, transitioning from patronage and impresario management to municipal ownership under the administration of the municipality of Bergamo on 7 November 1938. Franco Abbiati (1898-1981) held the position of music critic for the *Corriere della Sera* for thirty-six years, from 1934 to 1973. Gianandrea Gavazzeni (1909-1996) was a composer, renowned conductor, musicologist and critic.

talents—a space for experimentation, recognising that even a ‘couple of enduring masterpieces’ would validate its efforts amidst the plethora of new compositions.¹⁷

The inception of the Teatro delle Novità involved navigating a complex web of negotiations and collaborations at both local and national levels: the MinCulPop (Ministry of Popular Culture, established in 1937, marked the height of the regime’s cultural control), the Direzione Generale del Teatro e la Musica under De Pirro, the Ispettorato Generale per la Musica represented by Mario Labroca, alongside guilds and musicians’ unions, and various public and private local entities.¹⁸ The initiative was received in the press as a properly fascist expression of the regime’s ‘cultural revolution’.¹⁹ Yet, concurrently, the project encountered some hurdles and opposition, including resistance from the Centro Lirico Italiano. These controversies vividly highlighted the divided nature of Italian culture at this point, which—as we will see—formed a crucial context for the reception of Ghedini’s opera.²⁰ Despite concerns about the festival possibly becoming another ‘ghetto’ for musical experimentalism,²¹ the primary goal of the Teatro delle Novità was to restore the harmonious interplay between composers, theatre and audience, something reminiscent of the traditional *impresario* role. On the one hand, the organisers encouraged composers to veer away from overly ‘aristocratic and intellectualistic’ works, and instead aim for better alignment with the public’s

¹⁷ A precursor to the Teatro delle Novità emerged with a similar experimental theatre endeavour in Rieti in 1935. Additionally, the staging of Gianandrea Gavazzeni’s *Paolo e Virginia* (1935) and Lodovico Rocca’s *In terra di leggenda* (1936) at the Donizetti Theatre could be seen as direct antecedents to the Teatro delle Novità.

¹⁸ The Direzione Generale per il Teatro e la Musica, replacing the former Ispettorato del Teatro, fell under the jurisdiction of MinCulPop in 1937. Led by De Pirro, the Direzione functioned as the official government entity responsible for overseeing and politically regulating theatres. Its duties included approving programmes and budgets, as well as censoring the works staged.

¹⁹ Theatre was esteemed as a ‘driving force and integral component in Italy’s spiritual and artistic resurgence’. See *La Voce di Bergamo*, July 1937, as quoted in Angelini, Comuzio and Abbiati, *Teatro delle Novità di Bergamo*.

²⁰ Established in 1936, the Centro Lirico Italiano succeeded the Consorzio Italiano dell’Opera Lirica, tasked with providing support services and coordinating the activity of various theatrical initiatives and organisations.

²¹ As in the opinion of Adriano Lualdi, reported in Fiamma Nicolodi, *Musica e musicisti nel ventennio fascista* (Fiesole: Discanto, 1984).

tastes and expectations.²² On the other hand, staging was streamlined through cost-saving measures such as reusing basic scenography and collaborating with the Accademia Carrara in Bergamo. According to its statute, the programme of the Teatro delle Novità, taking place in the autumn season, was to include three repertoire operas and three (or more) new works (operas or ballets), chosen by competition or on commission and screened by the MinCulPop. The criteria for selection were limited to novelty and Italianness: only premieres and Italian composers new to opera were eligible. As Abbiati articulated, these new works were expected to reflect contemporary styles, serving as a ‘mirror-of-the-times’, although specific criteria for this timeliness were not explicitly outlined.²³ Novelty and experimentation extended to repertoire works as well, incorporating new performers, conductors and directors, and establishing the theatre as a training ground for the entire operatic productive system.

The inaugural festival, held from 9 September to 3 October 1937, showcased *La stella d'Oriente* by Mario Jacchia, *Amore sotto chiave* by Edgardo Carducci and the ballet *Boè* by Renzo Massarani.

Complementing these premieres were stalwart repertoire operas such as Bizet's *Carmen*, Puccini's *Tosca* and Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor* (see Figure 1.2).²⁴ *Maria d'Alessandria* marked the inaugural performance at the Teatro delle Novità. Ghedini expressed his gratitude to Missiroli for the opportunity ‘to be baptised as an opera author at the Donizetti’ and praised the initiative ‘as a

²² From Missiroli's proposal sent to the Bergamo podestà. See Angelini, Comuzio and Abbiati, *Teatro delle Novità di Bergamo*. The public's disengagement from new music in general was perceived as a significant concern, so that it became one of the main issues discussed at the Second International Music Congress, convened in Florence in the same 1937.

²³ Franco Abbiati in *ibid.*

²⁴ The initial draft of the programme was more extensive than the final one, encompassing two more ballets. The choice of works often followed established institutional channels. For instance, *Amore sotto chiave* by Carducci (a musician from Bari, mostly famous for his film music) was recommended by the Società degli Editori as the winner of its competition (which was adjudicated by a panel including Respighi). The intricate negotiations between Missiroli, Carducci and the publisher Theo Mucci, regarding the premiere, rights and revenue from the score rental of the opera, are detailed in Serena Labruna, ‘Festival musicali nel Ventennio: dalla Biennale al Teatro delle Novità’, in *1919-1939, un Ventennio a Bergamo e nel suo territorio*, ed. by Maria Mencaroni Zoppetti and Monica Resmini (Bergamo: Sestante edizioni, 2018), pp. 823-48.

precious help for us artists and a new bright proof of the regime's power in this field of Italian spiritual life'.²⁵ The circumstances and reasons surrounding this double debut are worth investigating. What initially stands out is the apparent conflict the opera faced with fascist censorship regarding its libretto, something much deliberated between July and August 1937.²⁶ However, during the same period, a circular letter (no. 55, July 19, 1937) from the Federazione nazionale fascista degli industriali dello spettacolo recommended the inclusion of *Maria d'Alessandria* to opera companies and opera houses, as well as to the Centro lirico italiano.²⁷ In June 1937, preceding these events, Missiroli met Ghedini at the Turin Conservatory to propose the inclusion of his opera in the September programme at the Donizetti theatre. Intriguingly, Ghedini had already finished composing *Maria d'Alessandria* in August 1936—a full year ahead of its premiere—as reported at the end of the manuscript full score preserved in the Ricordi archive ('Bordighera, 16-8-36 - XIV ore 8,20 del mattino').²⁸

²⁵ From Ghedini's letter to Missiroli in *Teatro delle Novità. Programma Ufficiale dell'opera Maria d'Alessandria* (Bergamo: Istituto italiano di Arti Grafiche, 1937). Missiroli, alongside the conductor Giuseppe del Campo, was honoured as the dedicatee of Ghedini's opera.

²⁶ Ghedini himself mentioned the intervention of the censor in a letter to his pupil and friend Carlo Pinelli, as reported in Stefano Parise, *Giorgio Federico Ghedini: l'uomo, le opere attraverso le lettere* (Milan: Ricordi, 2003), p. 105. Pinelli highlights that censorship targeted the protagonist, a prostitute, deeming her morally improper. The censored parts, still evident in the first version of the libretto and in the full score archived at Ricordi, primarily involve the poignant dialogue between Maria and the dying Son. Serena Labruna suggests that the strong religious analogy, woven through symbolic names (the Son akin to Christ, sacrificed by the Father out of love, Maria echoing the Madonna, or the Blind woman embodying faith) made the portrayal of Maria and the Son as lovers unacceptable. The timing of the censor's intervention, so close to the premiere, is notable. Additionally, the full score reveals further cuts, particularly at the end of the opera, concerning those parts (like Zosimo's prayer) staged at the premiere (as critics confirmed), but eliminated probably at the publisher's request to shorten the length of the opera. Serena Labruna, 'Alessandria d'Egitto: luogo del 'caos': la decostruzione dello spazio scenico in Thaïs, Maria Egiziaca e Maria d'Alessandria' (unpublished doctoral thesis, Università Ca' Foscari, 2020) <<http://dspace.unive.it/handle/10579/18447>> [accessed 14 September 2022].

²⁷ 'Il comitato permanente per la lettura delle opere liriche nuove di autori italiani ha segnalato come meritevole di rappresentazione [...] Maria d'Alessandria di Federico Ghedini [...]. L'on. Ministero della Cultura Popolare, Direzione Generale per il Teatro, desidera che nella compilazione dei programmi delle stagioni liriche sia tenuta presente la segnalazione di cui sopra', cit. in Nicolodi, *Musica e musicisti*, p. 286.

²⁸ Ghedini recounted the anecdote during the twentieth anniversary celebration of the Teatro delle Novità. He vividly recalled the frenzied pace of preparing the opera in under four months, remarking that 'the first rehearsals began with the ink still wet on the page'. From *Festival autunnale dell'opera lirica. Teatro delle Novità* (Bergamo: Istituto italiano d'arti grafiche, 1957), reported in Alfonso Alberti and Marcello Piras, 'Uomini e no' di Niccolò Castiglioni: un'opera 'engagée' che non arrivò sulle scene', *Rivista Italiana di Musicologia*, 39.2 (2004), 329–60 (p. 352).



Figure 1.2. Poster from the inaugural year of Teatro delle Novità in 1937

This chronological reconstruction seems to reverse the expected logical sequence: Missiroli included the work prior to the ministerial recommendation, while the censors, paradoxically, intervened afterward. Was this reversal the outcome of the labyrinthine Italian bureaucracy, comprised of countless uncoordinated institutions and paperwork?²⁹ Furthermore, based on the sources investigated, Ghedini himself apparently undertook the huge endeavour of composing the opera without the preliminary backing of commissions or the assurance of a promised staging. In what follows, I will further excavate these contradictions and uncertainties, shedding light on the

²⁹ Similar to the endorsement of Massarani's opera by the Società degli Editori, the ministerial commission's recommendation of *Maria d'Alessandria*, oddly delayed after Missiroli's selection, might have served as a retroactive authorization, bureaucratically required for finalising the theatre's billing. Regarding the censorship following the recommendation, Labruna implies a lack of coordination among fascist entities, or perhaps a tendency for them to adopt a more symbolic rather than practical role. See Labruna, 'Alessandria d'Egitto: luogo del caos'.

circumstances surrounding *Maria d'Alessandria*'s debut at the Teatro delle Novità in its inaugural year. Upon closer exploration, the opera's text and music ambiguously navigated the conventional expectation of novelty, leaning heavily on tradition and consolidated cultural references. On the one hand, as we will see, the libretto drew on a subject emblematic of the D'Annunzian trend of religious operas, one that had been recently employed by the established composer Ottorino Respighi. On the other hand, guided by contemporary critical responses rooted in the ideal of *italianità*, we will discern the music's striking eclecticism and impressive technical proficiency—qualities unexpected from an emerging composer.

Exploring the intricate layers of this seemingly derivative yet successful 1937 double debut, I aim to dissect the opera's aesthetic touchstones as they emerged through contemporary critical responses. From the lasting echoes of the D'Annunzian-Pizzettian current, made explicit in subsequent reception, to the significant influence of Monteverdi in contemporary discourse, I seek to demonstrate how the opera's balance of past and present embodied a timely and winning formula within the late-fascist context. As we shall observe, this formula for rekindling tradition transcended mere aesthetic and technical aspects within the Italian cultural landscape, acquiring ideological significance far beyond the prevailing neoclassical tendencies of the era. The pervasive influence of late-D'Annunzianism, deeply interwoven within the libretto and pivotal in the Italian milieu of the time, unveils the opera's resonance with contemporary trends and their intricate political undertones. Mystical themes, the Mediterranean myth, the legacy of Monteverdi and Italian tradition, all converged in *Maria d'Alessandria* in the search for a renewed Mediterranean opera. The opera's novelty emerged from the incorporation of these established references, with Ghedini's distinctive blend of modernism and tradition. Furthermore, comparing the controversial staging of another *Maria*, Respighi's *Maria Egiziana* at the 1932 Venice Festival, with the premiere of *Maria d'Alessandria*

in 1937 at the Teatro delle Novità, we can find the motivations driving this new initiative and the significance of Ghedini's opera within the ongoing dispute between modernists and traditionalists in late-fascist Italy—a conflict that, as we will come to see, significantly escalated in 1937. Eclecticism, bridging the gap between past and present, intricately connected *Maria d'Alessandria* to its context, reverberating on multiple levels, from the opera and the Teatro delle Novità to the broader framework of fascist cultural policy and its strategic pluralism, with implications reaching beyond 1937.

Novelty at Stake

Fifteen years after *L'intrusa*, one of Ghedini's two earlier operatic attempts that never came to fruition, the choice of the subject for his debut opera took on a certain importance within the composer's career. The librettist of *Maria d'Alessandria* was Cesare Meano, a writer and man of the theatre, hailing from the same milieu in Turin as Ghedini.³⁰ Carlo Pinelli, a devoted pupil and close friend of Ghedini, described Meano as 'an exquisite individual with a subtly retro taste, halfway between D'Annunzio and Gozzano'.³¹ Pinelli suggested that Ghedini's choice of Meano's libretto, in addition to these appealing thematic resonances, was also a decision of expediency because the libretto was readily available. The appeal of such a libretto marked how *Maria d'Alessandria* diverged from Ghedini's more austere and neoclassical compositions of this period, presenting instead the decadent narrative of a courtesan's journey towards redemption. Bored with her life of luxury in Alexandria, Maria resolves to board a ship of Penitents bound for Palestine. Among the pilgrims, a

³⁰ Cesare Meano (1889–1957) was a playwright, director, writer, theatre critic and poet. In Turin, he founded and directed the Teatro del Nuovo Spirito. Although not primarily a librettist, Meano engaged in occasional collaborations with fellow musicians in Turin. He provided librettos for the promising composer Lodovico Rocca (1895–1986), including *La morte di Frine* (1937), *La corona di Re Gaulo* or *In terra di leggenda* (1936) and *Monte Ivnòr* (1939). He also collaborated with the well-established composer Franco Alfano (1876–1954) on his opera *Cyrano di Bergerac* (1936).

³¹ See Pinelli's interview in Stefano Parise, 'Profilo di Giorgio Federico Ghedini' (dissertation, Università degli Studi di Milano, 1992).

Father (Il Padre) grapples with the burden of guilt after attempting to kill his Son (Il Figlio), whose wound still bleeds (Act I). Onboard the ship, Maria's mesmerising and sinful allure overwhelms everyone, leaving even the Son spellbound by her presence. The ship, along with its commander Dimo, is entirely at the mercy of both Maria's influence and the formidable power of the sea. Blinded by religious zeal, the Father attempts to take the temptress's life, but the Son sacrifices himself, shielding her with his own body. Meanwhile, a raging storm brews, ultimately leading to the ship's wreckage (Act II). Emerging from the turmoil and stirred by the Son's selfless love, Maria embarks on a transformative journey of expiation in the desert, guided by the celestial voices of angels (Act III).

Adapted from Domenico Cavalca's *Vitae patrum*, the subject of *Maria d'Alessandria* had already inspired operas, notably Respighi's *Maria Egiziaca*, which premiered at Carnegie Hall in 1932 and was later performed at the 1937 Maggio Musicale Fiorentino, the same year as Ghedini's opera.³² Ghedini was already familiar with religious themes, with a mystical thread running through his oeuvre.³³ This influence partly stemmed from the broader neoclassical revival of ancient sacred vocal forms, as seen in his cantata *Il pianto della Madonna* (1921) and in his lauda *Canto d'amore* (1926). Beyond Ghedini's oeuvre, sacred themes also proliferated in opera from the early twentieth century onward, imbuing a multitude of works with medieval sources and forms. The religious origins of music theatre, rooted in the *misteri* and *sacre rappresentazioni*, were revitalised as the reference model for twentieth-century operas exploring religious subjects. The anti-realist and anti-theatrical approach of liturgical drama was complemented by music that non-philologically integrated elements of Gregorian chant,

³² Cavalca (1270-1342) was a Dominican, and his *Vitae Patrum* can be described as a kind of hagiographic encyclopaedia.

³³ Consider also Ghedini's *Notti angeliche, opera mistica in 5 episodi*, with a libretto by Castellino Onorato, premiered at the Teatro Pineta in Oropa on 13th August 1932.

modality and Renaissance polyphony, placing a significant spotlight on the chorus.³⁴ This new convergence of historicism and mysticism, diverging from the grandeur of nineteenth-century operas like Massenet's *Thaïs* (which shared the same subject as *Maria d'Alessandria*), delved into the aestheticizing mode of Decadence. Sacred figures and symbols underwent a manneristic appropriation and mystification, unfolding musically into post-Wagnerian or archaïcising soundscapes. Saints, torn between vice and virtue, carnality and spirituality, emerged as favourite subjects, embodying within religious narratives the enduring struggle between eroticism and the longing for purification, as initially explored in Wagner's *Parsifal* (1882).

Debussy's *Le martyre de Saint Sébastien* (1911), based on a text by the Italian poet Gabriele D'Annunzio, stood as a key precursor to this trend. In Italy, its emergence was chiefly attributed to the comprehensive influence wielded by D'Annunzio across Italian culture. The poet played a pivotal role in introducing the themes of European Decadence to Italy, alongside the imagery of Wagnerian theatre, Nietzschean philosophy and the fashion of medievalism (*ducentismo*) that had already influenced the pre-Raphaelite and Crepuscular movements. D'Annunzio's eclectic vision, weaving together historical and contemporary sources, left an indelible mark on Italian culture. The poet notably spearheaded a lasting Neo-medievalism (*neogotismo*) in both literature and music theatre. Newly emerging on the operatic stage as a result of this trend were tropes portraying saints confronting sin and seeking redemption, penitents and pilgrims singing *laude* and angelic voices *dans la coulisse*.³⁵ Beyond *Le martyre*, these recurring topics permeated not only D'Annunzio's works but

³⁴ For further exploration of this operatic trend focussing on sacred subjects, see Mercedes Viale Ferrero, 'Di alcune eclettiche sante della scena musicale novecentesca', in *Il Novecento musicale italiano tra neoclassicismo e neogotismo*, pp. 341–60; Marco Beghelli, 'Schegge di francescanesimo', in *Tendenze della musica teatrale italiana all'inizio del Novecento. Atti del 4° Convegno internazionale «Ruggero Leoncavallo nel suo tempo»*, ed. by Lorenza Guiot and Jürgen Maehder (Milan: Sonzogno, 2005), pp. 193–210; Fiamma Nicolodi, *Gusti e tendenze del Novecento musicale in Italia* (Florence: Sansoni, 1982).

³⁵ Mercedes Viale Ferrero observes that while choruses in nineteenth-century operas usually performed hymns, the trend of incorporating *landas* into opera gained momentum in the twentieth century, largely influenced by D'Annunzio.

also extended to the works of numerous authors influenced by him. Consider the composer Ildebrando Pizzetti, whose operas *Debora e Jael*, *Fra Gherardo* and *Lo Straniero* were imbued with D'Annunzian overtones. Likewise, Claudio Guastalla, the librettist behind Respighi's *La fiamma* (1934) and *Maria Egiziaca*, also demonstrated such influence.³⁶

The enduring fascination with sacred and mystical themes surged during the fascist years. During the 1920s and 1930s, a flourishing of *misteri* and *sacre rappresentazioni* underscored the institutional significance of this operatic subgenre in fascist Italy.³⁷ Just as with *Maria d'Alessandria* at the Teatro delle Novità, Pizzetti's *Rappresentazione di Sant'Uliva* (1933) was selected to open the inaugural Maggio Musicale, the flagship music festival initiated and supported by fascism. More broadly, the regime strategically incorporated religious symbols and imagery into its rhetoric through syncretism, especially following the Lateran Accords with the Catholic Church of Rome in 1929. According to Emilio Gentile, the regime vied with the Church in shaping and influencing consciences, striving for an enduring new order.³⁸ Giuseppe Bottai, then Minister of National Education and a pivotal figure in fascist culture, eloquently captured fascism as 'a political and civil religion, integrating with rather than supplanting the ecclesiastical one'.³⁹ Rome, as the shared capital and ideal city of both the regime and the Church, embodied this fusion, with the notion of *romanità* intertwining the ideals of

Consider works such as *La figlia di Iorio* (1906) by Alberto Franchetti, *Mosè* (1900) by Lorenzo Perosi, or slightly later, *Santa Cecilia* (1934) and *Margherita da Cortona* (1937) by Licio Refice. See Ferrero, 'Di alcune eclettiche sante'.

³⁶ Giacomo Puccini was also influenced by this trend, as seen in his *Suor Angelica* (1918) and the unrealised collaboration with D'Annunzio on *La crociata degli innocenti*. Puccini's use of instrumentation to evoke sacred atmospheres aligned with the archaïcising fashion of the time, as stated in Beghelli.

³⁷ See, for instance, Ildebrando Pizzetti's *Sacra rappresentazione di Abramo e Isacco* (1926), Ottorino Respighi's *Lauda per la natività del Signore* (1929), Riccardo Zandonai's *Giuliano* (1928), Gianfrancesco Malipiero's *misteri*, *San Francesco d'Assisi* (1921), *La cena* (1927) and *La passione* (1935). Now completely forgotten, religious operas by the composers and priests Lorenzo Perosi (1872-1956) and Licio Refice (1883-1954), such as *Cecilia* (1934) or *Maria da Cortona* (1938), enjoyed popularity in the 1930s.

³⁸ Emilio Gentile, *Il culto del littorio. La sacralizzazione della politica nell'Italia fascista* (Rome: Laterza, 1993).

³⁹ 'Libro, moschetto e fede' was the fascist motto.

empire, Christianity and the Byzantine East.⁴⁰ The merging of mysticism and fascist politics found a significant convergence within the mythic narrative of the Mediterranean, firmly anchored in ideals of nationalism and imperialism. Building upon this theme, the Mediterranean set the stage as a pervasive backdrop and mythical undercurrent throughout *Maria d'Alessandria*.

With a plethora of saints available for portrayal, Ghedini's choice of a subject recently covered by Respighi raises questions about his pursuit of originality as a debut composer at a new festival. Comparing the two operas and the different circumstances of their staging deepens our understanding of Ghedini's decision, unveiling a subtle continuum between them within the late-fascist context. Respighi's *Maria Egiziaca*, a *mistero* in three episodes, fully embraced the neomedieval trend, which resonates not only in its libretto by Guastalla but also in its musical and dramatic aspects. The music featured an aestheticizing revival of diatonic sounds, modal language and a chanting style, while the minimalist scenography—a flat triptych by Nicola Benois—alluded to the static nature of medieval theatre. Respighi's opera, characterised by its brevity, limited cast and reduced orchestration, was included in the chamber opera category at the 1932 Venice festival, stirring considerable controversy amidst the backdrop of heightened tensions in the Italian musical scene. Having been previously staged not only in New York but also at the Augusteo in Rome, Respighi's opera defied the expectation of absolute novelty for its inclusion in the Venice programme, leading to discontent among those excluded from the festival.⁴¹ Several fellow composers, including Casella, voiced grievances about the enduring dominance of certain monopolies, the marginalisation of younger Italian musicians and the perceived stagnation in the

⁴⁰ Quoted in Gentile, *Il culto del littorio*, p. 142. According to Gentile, ancient Rome served as the primary model for fascism's sacralization and state cult, predating its representation of the imperialist ideal.

⁴¹ Respighi was bestowed the title of Accademico d'Italia, an accolade directly sanctioned by the Duce, and as a tribute to this honour, *Maria Egiziaca* was staged in Venice, an exception to the festival's regulations.

roster of participants at Italian musical events.⁴² In response to the complaints, Adriano Lualdi, the organiser of the 1932 Venice Festival, issued a press release that shed light on the deeply factionalised state of Italian music.⁴³ Lualdi's statement underscored a strategic pluralism, asserting that the festival—and fascist cultural policy at large—aimed to 'reject extremisms contrary to Italian taste, while embracing and promoting music from all trends'.⁴⁴ Lualdi claimed that the festival programme encompassed the full spectrum of contemporary tendencies in Italian music: 'futurism by Casavola, extremism by Malipiero, academicism by Respighi, musicologists by Liuzzi and Caselliani by Casella'. Hence, as Lualdi contended, there was unequivocally no evidence of a '*clique* or *camorra*—put more bluntly'.⁴⁵ This episode marked an early clash between traditionalist and modernist factions within Italian music during the fascist era, a divide epitomised by the 1932 *Manifesto di musicisti italiani per la tradizione dell'arte romantica dell'Ottocento*, foreshadowing further escalation in tensions throughout the 1930s.⁴⁶

In this context, we can discern the significance of the Teatro delle Novità in bridging a notable institutional gap, specifically nurturing the emerging generation of musicians. We can also read *Maria*

⁴² Fiamma Nicolodi, 'Su alcuni aspetti dei festivals tra le due guerre'.

⁴³ For a deeper understanding of these aspects of factionalism, clientelism and contradictions inherent in the Italian musical landscape of the time, refer to Sachs' monograph and his interviews with firsthand witnesses such as the critic Mila, the composer Petrassi and the conductor Gavazzoni. Sachs, *Music in Fascist Italy*.

⁴⁴ «Comunicato riguardante la partecipazione degli autori italiani al festival di Venezia», 14 April 1932, cit. in Labruna, 'Alessandria d'Egitto: luogo del 'caos', p. 47. Lualdi (1885-1971) was a composer, critic and prominent figure within fascist musical institutions. He was founder of the Venice Festival and played a key role in organising its initial three iterations (1930, 1932, 1934).

⁴⁵ '(...) scopo non è di diffondere o sostenere la musica estremista, o quella passatista, o quella pacificamente conservatrice, ma invece, bandire gli estremismi contrari al gusto italiano, accettare e divulgare musiche di tutte le altre tendenze senza asservirsi a nessuna. Come è facile rilevare dall'elenco dei compositori invitati, tutte le tendenze sono rappresentate. (...) E nei programmi dell'Opera da Camera il futurismo sarà rappresentato da Casavola, l'estremismo da Malipiero, l'Accademia da Respighi, i musicologi da Liuzzi e i casellani da Casella. Quindi nessuna nemmeno lontanissima apparenza di "clique" o, per dirla meno elegantemente, di camorra, ma la massima larghezza di idee e d'azione'. Nicolodi, 'Su alcuni aspetti dei festivals tra le due guerre', p. 167.

⁴⁶ This 'Manifesto of Italian musicians for the tradition of nineteenth-century romantic art' was published in several major national newspapers on 17 December 1932, including *La Stampa*, *Il Corriere della Sera*, *Il Popolo d'Italia*. Conceived by the musician and critic Alceo Toni, the manifesto was signed by ten musicians, including Respighi and Pizzetti, and condemned 'the atonal and pluritonal trumpetings of the current xenophilia'.

d'Alessandria as an ideal response to the contentious case of *Maria Egiziaca*. Yet once more, the implementation of the new initiative fell short, as the main criterion of novelty appeared compromised by the unoriginal qualities of Ghedini's opera. The composer himself was not a novice, making his operatic debut only in his forties, after gaining considerable experience in other musical genres, although admired by the elite rather than broadly popular with the public.⁴⁷ Ghedini's delayed engagement with opera echoed the insights offered by Goffredo Petrassi in his 1935 article, 'Why young musicians refrain from writing for the stage'.⁴⁸ Petrassi observed that the widespread trend of composers debuting in opera around the age of forty reflected the comatose state of the genre, which, burdened by its historical legacy and perceived as outdated, failed to attract the younger generation. As Petrassi expressed, 'everything is done in homage to tradition rather than art', resulting in the genre falling behind both prose theatre and the evolution of music itself. Ghedini's age and prior career alone were thus one factor potentially jeopardising the requirement of novelty expected by the Bergamo initiative.

Compared with Respighi's *mistero*, *Maria d'Alessandria* was conceived in a more conventional manner, following a traditional structure with three acts and four scenes, and featuring many more characters and an extensive use of the chorus. Additionally, the opera exhibited a notable dynamism and realism (as in the opening scene), along with a diverse array of musical idioms that extended beyond mere revival of archaic sounds. From a literary standpoint, the reference to D'Annunzio—whom Meano openly admired—and his decadent aesthetic had become excessively clichéd by 1937. Through its

⁴⁷ Iginio Fuga, 'Giorgio Federico Ghedini e "Maria d'Alessandria"', *Musica d'Oggi*, XX.1 (1938), 7–9.

⁴⁸ The disparity between opera and theatre, as well as between libretto and literature, becomes apparent when comparing Meano's libretto with the works of contemporary authors such as Alberto Moravia and Luigi Pirandello. Goffredo Petrassi, 'Perché i giovani musicisti non scrivono per il teatro', *Scenario*, IV.9 (1935), 459–61. Goffredo Petrassi (1904–2033), along with Luigi Dallapiccola, belonged to the younger generation following the 'generation of the 1880s'.

D'Annunzian lens, the libretto incorporated several tropes from the operatic tradition: the prayer of the Penitents and the Parsifal-like bleeding wound of the Son in Act I; the family murder, the storm and the shipwreck in Act II; the bucolic song of the shepherds reminiscent of Monteverdi's *Orfeo*, the off-stage voice of the Son akin to an eighteenth-century *deus ex machina* and the angelic chorus concluding Act III.⁴⁹ In the D'Annunzian style of layering multiple references, the character of Maria echoed the sensuality and corrupting power of Strauss's Salome, the rejection of love by Verdi's Violetta, and the madness and hallucinatory moments of Donizetti and Bellini's heroines.⁵⁰ Similarly, Ghedini embraced eclecticism in his music, infusing it with references and quotations from the operatic past. As a result, many critics found his style to be both fragmentary and derivative.

All at Sea

The opening scene already provides a taste of the opera's eclectic approach, both in its D'Annunzian references and in Ghedini's music. It is a sort of *tableau vivant*, reminiscent of many nineteenth-century operas, particularly those with historical themes. In these operas, the collective dimension often prevailed, setting the scene and preparing the entry of the main characters. In Ghedini's opera, without any prologue or prelude to set the tone and the historical-geographical context of fourth-century Egypt, the music bursts forth as the curtain rises, plunging the audience directly into the scene. Late at night, the harbour of Alexandria teems with activity, the air filled with the chaotic overlap of voices from a bustling crowd. The stage is full of chained and burdened slaves, their

⁴⁹ Verdi continued to provide an endless reservoir of inspiration for operatic situations, from the pilgrims' prayer in *I Lombardi alla prima crociata* (1843) to the initial storm of *Otello* (1887) and the unwanted murder of his daughter by Rigoletto in his attempt to protect her from an unworthy lover, a theme resonating similarly in *Maria d'Alessandria*.

⁵⁰ Vincenzo Borghetti suggests that D'Annunzio's theatre was more operatic than dramatic, incorporating various features from opera to counteract realism. This included prioritising the text's musicality, emphasising the spectacular and ritualistic aspects, resorting to Leitmotiv technique and scenic tableau and adopting an irregular dramatic pace by alternating static and dynamic sections. In some ways, D'Annunzio's theatre seems to be a transposition of *melodramma* into non-musical theatre, rather than the other way around. See Vincenzo Borghetti and Riccardo Pecci, *Il bacio della sfinge. D'Annunzio, Pizzetti e «Fedra»* (Turin: EDT, 1998).

masters Brebo and Euno berating and whipping them, while the old guardian of the fire sleeps nearby. The scene closely mirrors a trope found in some D'Annunzian plays, opening as it does with a teeming harbour landscape—like the ‘public arengo’ in *La Nave* or the pier of Famagosta in *La Pisanelle*—, punctuated by the loud exhortations of the *comitus*.⁵¹ While later reception highlights this eclectic dimension of the opera, the critics of the time glossed over its closest and most obvious cultural references, including nods to D'Annunzio. However, their observations provide valuable insights into the factors contributing to the opera's success in 1937. Critics at the premiere lauded Ghedini's prowess and his adept incorporation of tradition into his music, striving for the ideal of *italianità* and its musical watchwords: the notion of *cantabilità*, adherence to the text, musical expressiveness and *plasticità* (clarity and form). They also commended Ghedini's stylisation of characters and his effective utilisation of the chorus. In the analysis of the opera's opening scene below, I will closely examine Ghedini's music to uncover the element that critics praised in the opera. By scrutinising the score, I aim to substantiate and provide musical evidence for their initial impressions.

Despite the vagueness of the concept of *italianità*, the tenets of national heritage became the primary lens through which Ghedini's music was assessed. Monteverdi continued to embody the quintessential reference model for the genre. As we delve deeper, this critical emphasis on national touchstones and myths aligned the opera with a broader cultural discourse, one that imbued musical neoclassicism with significant ideological undertones. Concurrently, this framework of familiar references from the past worked in counterpart with the acknowledged novelties within Ghedini's

⁵¹ *La Nave* (1908) and *La Pisanelle* (1913) were both plays by Gabriele D'Annunzio, with incidental music composed by Ildebrando Pizzetti. A comparison of their textual incipits with that of *Maria d'Alessandria* illustrates the strong D'Annunzian influence on Meano's libretto.

music: his technical mastery and his austere, aristocratic style, notably converging in a refined and restrained orchestration. Yet, in the context of idealistic aesthetics, the technical excellence of his music was deemed necessary but insufficient. There was a concern that without genuine artistic inspiration, a composition could become overly academic and lacking in emotional depth. Building upon this premise and the influence of the Monteverdian model, critics at the premiere thus focussed on evaluating Ghedini's music based on its ability to harmonise with the text. They examined how well the music adhered to the text, conveyed its prosody, infused it with expressiveness, and effectively delineated characters, environments and situations musically. In his later commentary on *Maria d'Alessandria*, Pinelli, guided by the same aesthetic principles, anchored his praise for Ghedini on the opera's seamless integration of music and text, as well as its delicate equilibrium between innovation and tradition. Pinelli emphasised the music's 'psychological quality' in delineating the characters and tracing their progression throughout the opera—an approach he defined as quintessentially Italian.⁵²

Here is how this all plays out in the opening scene. The music describes and evokes the atmosphere at the bustling harbour of Alexandria. With its orchestration limited to violas, horns and cellos, it creates a hauntingly dark timbre that sets the mood. The composition employs strong chromaticism and syncopated accents to evoke the tumultuous energy of the moment, with the *fp* emphasising Brebo's lashings. This scenario seemingly echoes Alberich's mistreatment of the Nibelungs in Wagner's *Das Rheingold*, drawing parallels in both visual and musical aspects. Yet, there is an additional layer. The music transcends the confines of the stage, extending the setting beyond its visible scenography defined by the lighthouse, cliff and sphinx, as depicted in Barbieri's sketch. The

⁵² Carlo Pinelli, 'Esordio di un operista italiano. "Maria d'Alessandria" di G. F. Ghedini', *Rivista musicale italiana*, XLIII.1 (1939), 1-22.

wind carries the distant echo of voices from offstage: the lascivious tunes from taverns mingle with Maria's sinuous and exotic voice, rising above the others and captivating all who hear it. The gloomy ambiance enveloping the lighthouse on stage, marked by violence and suffering, sharply contrasts with these unseen, Dionysian reverberations. The music redoubles the stage, combining heterogeneous elements: the chromaticism and absence of a tonal centre intertwine with the tropes of musical exoticism, like the harp (Maria's distinctive instrument), melisma and oriental-like modal scales, hinting at the hidden lasciviousness of the city. The chorus of slaves on stage is stereophonically balanced by the off-stage one. The reverberating melodies from the taverns and Maria's voice, enhanced by echo effects, deepen the sense of space and multiply the sound levels, thus actively enriching the setting through music (see Example 1.1).⁵³ The progressive buildup of these diverse layers creates an intricate, almost chaotic polyphony, seamlessly blending dialogic and strophic parts to maintain the scene's dynamic momentum without interruption. The rapid exchange of dialogue among the characters on stage interlaces with the verses sung by the two choruses and Maria's mesmerising song. Each role is well delineated at a musical level: syncopation, strong accents and tritones harden Brebo's rabid invectives, complemented by the onomatopoeic effect of his lashes (represented by the timpani's strokes, the quavers of tubas, trombones and bass tuba and a rapid descending gesture evoking the whip's motion); meanwhile the guardian's stentorian, psalmody-like recitative on a Tristan-like motive, accompanied by trombones and tubas, imbues him as the guardian with an aura of sacredness. Similarly, trochaic rhythms, the Aeolian mode and

⁵³ In the first two stanzas of Maria's song, an anonymous contralto voice sings the final verse on a descending scale, serving as an external echo of her voice. In her comparison of the settings in Respighi and Ghedini's opera, Labruna underlines how *Maria d'Alessandria* mainly relies on music for defining space and perspectives. Labruna, 'Alessandria d'Egitto: luogo del 'caos'', pp. 217-29.

predominantly syllabic chant aptly convey the heavy and afflicted character of the slaves, juxtaposed with the lighter, parallel thirds in the upper register that characterise the tavern voices.

(La catena si arresta di botto. Euno e gli Schiavi volgono il capo ascoltando. Ma tosto l'aguzzino si scuote e leva la sferza.)

La voce di Maria
(ancora più vicina)

Euno

Dimo

Barit.

Bassi

va

ww

f

mf

p

vc, db, bn, bcl, ch

La voce di Maria

spen - ta, si è spen - ta, la

Euno

Su! Su! A - van - ti!

(al Custode sempre impassibile)

Dimo

p sempre sommosso

Ep - pu - re in tut - to il por - to, da ta-ver - na a ta-ver - na, da

Il mio cie - - - lo è di

Il mio cie - - - lo è di

ob

pp

5

6

hp, vc

La voce di Maria

stel - - - la fra le mie

Euno

Dima

na-ve a na - ve so - lo si rac-con - ta e si can - ta e si mor - mora di le - i.

fuo - - - co, il mio

fuo - - - co, il mio

piano accompaniment

Example 1.1. Giorgio Federico Ghedini, *Maria d'Alessandria. Tre atti e quattro quadri* [vocal score] (Milan: Ricordi, 1937), pp. 22-23

The orchestra provides a flexible yet minimal accompaniment to the scene, functioning like a camera lens that frames and highlights the progression of characters and events. This approach guides the audience through the intricate interplay of voices and their diverse sonic perspectives. Throughout the scene, the orchestra's density varies significantly, from intimate chamber music to the full power of the entire ensemble, sometimes isolating individual instruments or contrasting different sections. The texture thus appears dynamic and fragmentary, comprising recognisable patterns or simple gestures—such as motivic cells, rhythms, pedal points, trills, or tremolos—which serve to support and punctuate the voices, enhance stage actions (like Brebo's lashes) and evoke the atmosphere and characters. These basic elements are reiterated within uniform sections or blocks, akin to ostinatos or undergoing gradual variation, rather than following traditional motivic development. The music unfolds by juxtaposing these distinct elements and the corresponding blocks in succession, resulting

in an episodic form reminiscent of the pre-classical paratactic style.⁵⁴ The instrumental role primarily serves a colouristic purpose and only occasionally a thematic one, with only a few motifs reserved for the main characters reappearing. As previously mentioned, the choice of timbre plays a key role in defining and connoting characters and settings within the story, beginning with Maria and the vibrant backdrop of Alexandria's busy harbour.

The opening scene of the opera is crafted entirely in anticipation of Maria, established as the protagonist right from the start solely by her vocal presence.⁵⁵ Her song serves as the musical embodiment of her legend, with everyone talking about and waiting for her. Words, facts and characters intertwine, held together by the recurring presence of Maria's sinuous voice and her echoing chorus, building gradually towards a crescendo of tension that reaches its climax with her appearance. The orchestra plays on without the entire violin section, mirroring Alexandria's intense yearning for Maria, caught in a state of spasmodic anticipation for her arrival. The suspense continues to mount. The guardian of the fire attempts to quell Dimo's curiosity about the legendary woman, urging him to set sail promptly for his holy destination. The orchestra empties, shrinking to an almost chamber dimension, with only the clarinets playing a sparse and repetitive dotted figure. Dimo's voice rings out distinctly as he bravely considers resisting Maria's enchanting power by plugging his ears to her song, akin to Ulysses with the sirens. Yet, it is too late, and Maria is already

⁵⁴ This free approach to musical form—based on repetition and juxtaposition without developments—draws its roots from the pre-classical Italian tradition. It consistently reappears in Ghedini's music, dating back to his earlier works like the *Concerto grosso* (1927) or the *Pezzo concertante* (1931). Carlo Mosso, 'Giorgio Federico Ghedini. Un itinerario stilistico', *La Musica Moderna*, II.69 (1967), 64–76; Guido Salvetti, 'L'«antipoetica» di G. F. Ghedini nella musica italiana tra le due guerre', *Studi musicali*, 1.2 (1972), 371–417.

⁵⁵ Just as the protagonist in D'Annunzio's *La Pisanella* captivates attention by simply remaining silent amidst the flood of words from the others, Maria assumes the role of protagonist without setting foot on stage.

there, emerging from the rocks: a swift upward motion courses through the strings, ultimately reaching the violins (see Example 1.2).

The musical score is for a vocal score from Giorgio Federico Ghedini's *Maria d'Alessandria*. It features two vocal parts, Il Custode and Dima, and an orchestral accompaniment. The score is in 3/4 time and consists of three systems of music.

System 1: The vocal parts enter with the lyrics "Trop - po tar - di!" and "Guar - da lag - giù...". The orchestral accompaniment includes a horn (hn) and a double bass (db). The tempo is marked "Andante mosso e misterioso" with a metronome marking of 104.

System 2: The vocal parts continue with the lyrics "Ulis - se" and "Che vuoi tu di - re?". The orchestral accompaniment includes a violin (vn) and a horn (hn). The tempo is marked "Andante mosso e misterioso" with a metronome marking of 104.

System 3: The vocal parts continue with the lyrics "Euno le si accosta.....Brebo accorre al". The orchestral accompaniment includes a violin (vn) and a horn (hn). The tempo is marked "Andante mosso e misterioso" with a metronome marking of 104.

System 4: The vocal parts continue with the lyrics "(Ella avanza lentamente, palesando una crescente inquietudine.)". The orchestral accompaniment includes a violin (vn) and a horn (hn). The tempo is marked "Andante mosso e misterioso" with a metronome marking of 104.

System 5: The vocal parts continue with the lyrics "Euno le si accosta.....Brebo accorre al". The orchestral accompaniment includes a violin (vn) and a horn (hn). The tempo is marked "Andante mosso e misterioso" with a metronome marking of 104.

Example 1.2. Giorgio Federico Ghedini, *Maria d'Alessandria*. *Tre atti e quattro quadri* [vocal score] (Milan: Ricordi, 1937), pp. 29-30

As Maria steps onto the stage, her voice falls silent, intensifying curiosity and suspense. Her arrival prompts a momentary pause in the hectic flow of voices, interrupted only by occasional scattered comments. For the first time, the orchestra takes the stage to give voice to the unspoken.⁵⁶ A sinister and hypnotic motif accompanies Maria's entrance, resurfacing throughout the opera in varied but recognisable forms, symbolising the fatal allure of her presence.⁵⁷ It comprises a dotted descending and chromatic figure, positioned in the orchestra's highest register, accentuated by the sharp and icy tones of the piccolo (or metallophones in later iterations). The soft rise of the solo violin (*dolcissimo*) intertwines with the slow chromatic progression of the horns, contrasting the downward motion of the piccolo and creating a cohesive wave-like gesture. True to Ghedini's distinctive style, this thematic element emerges from the interweaving of different instrumental parts, blurring the line between timbre, rhythm and melody, and evoking the *hoquetus* or *stile spezzato* technique. Maria is finally present and visible, yet her silence continues to heighten the tension in the air. We still await the moment when her physical and vocal presence unite on stage. Men begin to argue and vie for the woman. A peremptory downward leap of a ninth ('Basta') puts an end to the dispute, marking Maria's full debut on stage, finally in flesh and voice together.

The opening scene of *Maria d'Alessandria* encapsulates features that are intricately woven into the fabric of the entire opera. These include the original use of the orchestra spotlighting timbre, the

⁵⁶ Starting without any prelude, Ghedini's score grants very few purely instrumental passages throughout the opera, often serving to establish atmosphere, describe onstage actions, or evoke characters' inner emotions. Notable instances include the atmospheric openings of Acts II and III, and the 'In modo di berceuse' in Act III, accompanying Maria's slumber and the Son's body carried by shepherds. The longest instrumental segment occurs precisely at the opera's midpoint, featuring the interlude in Part 2 of Act II, setting the scene of a sinister calm at sea with the ship adrift, at the mercy of Maria and sin. In the 1984 staging of the opera, Mila defined the interlude as a 'certain lurch into Mascagni' (*una certa sbandata mascagnana*). Massimo Mila, '«Maria», la compilation di Ghedini', *La Stampa*, 20 December 1984, p. 19.

⁵⁷ To counterbalance the polarity between sin and goodness, the Son's recurring motif is distinguished by a choral-like style and the timbre of four cellos. This motif features a traditional four-part texture and is rooted in a cadential movement transposed and reiterated, yet remaining identifiable on a melodic level thanks to its repetition and use of neighbouring notes.

commanding presence of the chorus, the consistent use of disembodied voices to introduce each character onstage,⁵⁸ and the nuanced musical characterisation of both people and settings. Broadening our perspective to encompass the entirety of the work, one is immediately struck by the juxtaposition of a fragmented stylistic approach, incorporating diverse references, with a unified conception of the opera and a discernible musical attitude. Consider, for instance, the stark contrast between the initial and final scenes of the opera. Here, everything appears drastically transformed, from the setting to the music: in the bright sunshine, Maria, having survived the shipwreck and converted by the Son's loving gesture, is guided by a chorus of celestial voices offstage to embark on her path of atonement in the desert, seeking divine light and holiness. The music takes on a transparent texture and clarity of timbre, revisiting the unmistakable motifs often associated with heavenly music. Maria's part features ascending diatonic scales, accompanied by luminous orchestral tones. A choral hallelujah resounds in perfect intervals, complemented by offstage angels' trumpets. Gradually, the music fades and slows down, leading to a final chord of G major played *ppp* as the curtain falls.⁵⁹ Gone is the initial tension of chromaticism and darkness. The opera evolves from intricate polyphony and poly-chorality to a solo voice with harmonised chorus by the end. Likewise, the gloomy orchestral tones, initially lacking violins, transition to a clear solo monody of violins at the onset of Act III. Everything undergoes a dramatic reversal, while the pace of the narrative gradually slows down. The stage, initially crowded with the humming port of Alexandria, empties

⁵⁸ Throughout the opera, the characters progressively announce their presence on stage, sometimes through distant approaching voices or by remaining entirely hidden. The disembodied-voice technique is a pervasive device in Ghedini's first opera: the voice of Maria (lontana), as a presence that hovers and rises above the mass and her echoing choir (festivo, a folate) in Act I; Dìmo (da lontano) (Act I, 8); Penitents (Act I, 52); the voices of the Father and Son (Act I, 58); song of the tavern and Maria's voice coming from the hatch (Act II, 8 and 25); Shepherds (Act III, 1); Maria among the rocks (Act III, 13); the heavenly voice of the Son (Act III, 51); angelic voices from heaven (Act III, end).

⁵⁹ You can find a similar angelic ending also in Pizzetti's *Lo Straniero*.

into the hieratic stillness of the desert. In the initial scene, the chorus echoes Maria's Dionysian spirit, but by the conclusion, a reversal occurs, as Maria responds to celestial calls (see Example 1.3).

The musical score is arranged in five staves for vocalists and one grand staff for the piano. The vocal parts are labeled on the left: Maria, Sopr., Contr., Ten., and Bassi. The piano part is at the bottom.

Vocal Parts:

- Maria:** Treble clef. Lyrics: "co - m'è - bel - lo!". Dynamics: *ff*. Notes: C4 (quarter), D#4 (quarter), E4 (quarter), F#4 (quarter), G4 (quarter), A4 (quarter), B4 (quarter), C5 (quarter).
- Sopr.:** Treble clef. Lyrics: "ia, al - le - lu". Notes: C4 (half), D4 (half), E4 (half), F#4 (half), G4 (half), A4 (half), B4 (half), C5 (half).
- Contr.:** Treble clef. Lyrics: "Al - le - lu - ia,". Dynamics: *ff*. Notes: C4 (half), D4 (half), E4 (half), F#4 (half), G4 (half), A4 (half), B4 (half), C5 (half).
- Ten.:** Treble clef. Lyrics: "ia, al - le - lu". Notes: C4 (half), D4 (half), E4 (half), F#4 (half), G4 (half), A4 (half), B4 (half), C5 (half).
- Bassi:** Bass clef. Lyrics: "Al - le lu - ia,". Dynamics: *ff*. Notes: C3 (half), D3 (half), E3 (half), F#3 (half), G3 (half), A3 (half), B3 (half), C4 (half).

Piano Part: Grand staff (treble and bass clefs). The right hand features a series of triplets of eighth notes, starting with a *ww* (wide) marking. The left hand features a series of triplets of eighth notes, starting with a *v* (accents) marking. The piano part concludes with a final chord in the right hand and a sustained note in the left hand.

Maria

ia!

al - - - le - lu - -

ia!

al - - - le - lu - -

vn

ia!

66 8 7

tpt

sf *p* *EPESC:*

hn, va, vc

Example 1.3. Giorgio Federico Ghedini, *Maria d'Alessandria. Tre atti e quattro quadri* [vocal score] (Milan: Ricordi, 1937), pp. 239-40

Despite the huge stylistic and dramatic differences between these two extremes, the aforementioned musical features resurface consistently in terms of technique and function across both moments. The opera distinctly showcases a coherent overarching structure, following the typical technique of narrative reversal commonly associated with tales of conversion.⁶⁰ The storyline condenses the events into an ideal unit of time, spanning from the night of sin to the dawn of redemption. Maria's narrative delves into both external circumstances and internal conflicts. The journey symbolises her spiritual conversion as the setting transitions from the turmoil and moral decay of the city to the serene and pristine beauty of the desert. The seascape, rich with symbolism, serves as a central and transformative element in the narrative, extending beyond mere backdrop. The sea beckons Maria with its voice (as in the hallucination scene in Act I), purifies her through the storm, and ultimately, through the catharsis of the shipwreck, enables her soul's restoration. Ghedini's musical language serves as a theatrical device to depict the transition from worldliness to asceticism, transforming the dramatic narrative of conversion into a musical parabola. Between the two contrasting linguistic-expressive musical styles, a plethora of other stylistic nuances emerge: from raw, unaccompanied cries reminiscent of pure verismo to the refined vocal septet showcased in the shepherds' madrigal of Act III, and from the impressionistic depiction of the storm to the serene spirituality akin to a type of *landa* in Act I, to name but a few examples. On the one hand, *Maria d'Alessandria* exhibits a cohesive structure, where recurring motifs and techniques contribute to the work's unity; on the other hand, the score impresses with its remarkable versatility of musical means and eclectic range of stylistic references borrowed from the repertoire. These diverse musical vocabularies, though often simple and stereotypical, effectively correspond to the different situations depicted in the libretto.

⁶⁰ Ferrero, 'Di alcune eclettiche sante'.

Past and Present

As seen, despite its apparent unsuitability for inaugurating the initiative due to its heavy reliance on operatic tropes, the debut of *Maria d'Alessandria* at the Teatro delle Novità was widely acclaimed as a success. The score and rights to the work were acquired by Ricordi; critics delivered enthusiastic accounts of the evening, celebrating the fascist initiative with triumphant tones and swiftly acknowledging the quality of Ghedini's work. Success was mutual, with the opera benefitting from the visibility provided by the institutional context of the Teatro delle Novità. According to all reports, the dual debut seemed to offer a solution to the diminishing presence of new works and a shrinking audience, both essential for the genre's survival. Critics hailed the Teatro delle Novità, 'baptised by the much-admired work' of Ghedini, as an 'experimental field of invaluable opportunity in the interest of the illustrious and pure Italian tradition'. They noted its ability to evoke a public response that was 'astonishing in both its scale and passion', in line with Mussolini's motto to 'go towards the people'.⁶¹ Upon further examination of these responses, the opera's incorporation of familiar conventions within a new context, as part of a novel fascist initiative, rendered it both contemporary and relevant.

Indeed, in light of contemporary and subsequent commentary, *Maria d'Alessandria* is revealed to be firmly grounded in the prevailing aesthetic principles and cultural references of the late 1930s. Firstly, as mentioned earlier, the opera's subject and themes tapped into a broader D'Annunzianism or the so-called 'D'Annunzian-Pizzettian' trend, as labelled by later scholarship. This trend encompassed both aesthetic and ideological implications, particularly in its portrayal of the ideal of a Mediterranean opera. Secondly, contemporary critics consistently cited Ghedini's references to Monteverdi as a

⁶¹ Paolo Liggeri, 'Conti... in musica', *Festa*, 26 September 1937.

crucial influence for the opera, reflecting broader discourse that regarded Monteverdi as the father of Italian opera. In the next section, I will explore the significance of these references to comprehend their implications in Ghedini's opera within the late-fascist context. With D'Annunzio serving as a bridge between culture and politics at the root of fascism, theatre evolved into a political ritual. Mystical themes and symbols became integral to the regime's rhetoric, and the invocation of tradition in art carried ideological implications beyond mere neoclassical revivalism. The D'Annunzian ideal of a Mediterranean opera—with Pizzetti's *Fedra* serving as a prototype—encompassed the incorporation of Monteverdi's influence and, more broadly, the fundamental tenets of fascist rhetoric, such as the ideal harmonisation of past and present. Within this framework, we will see how *Maria d'Alessandria* embodied fascist motifs of the late 1930s while carving out its own distinct place amidst influential musical and operatic references of the time, including Pizzetti's theatrical productions, Monteverdi and neoclassicism. Ghedini's originality and novelty came to light against this backdrop, precisely through his engagement with tradition. His pursuit of expressiveness through a 'madrigalist' approach ultimately resulted in an idiosyncratic eclecticism and a form of emotional restraint with modernist undertones.

D'Annunzian Echoes beyond the Libretto

The blending of past and present in *Maria d'Alessandria* is evident primarily through the juxtaposition of Meano's old-fashioned libretto—later described by the critic Piero Santi as 'una melodrammaturgia certamente scaduta' (a melodramaturgy undoubtedly deteriorated)—with Ghedini's distinctive music.⁶² As noted earlier, the opera's subject was strategically situated within a well-established repertoire of topics and imagery deeply ingrained in the official rhetoric of fascism,

⁶² Piero Santi quoted in Rosy Moffa, 'Musicisti e letteratura (I)', in *La cultura dei musicisti italiani nel Novecento*, ed. by Guido Salvetti and Maria Grazia Sità (Milan: Guerini studio, 2004), pp. 141–74.

tapping into the so-called *movimento spirituale dannunziano*. D'Annunzianism was more than just the figure of D'Annunzio—it became a fully-fledged cultural movement; it permeated politics and society, weaving together literary mysticism with the ritualistic politics of the regime and linking the concept of Mediterranean opera with imperialism.⁶³ The impact of D'Annunzio in Italy throughout the first half of the twentieth century was profound and multifaceted, evolving from 'a literary gesture' to a 'social phenomenon', as characterised by the Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci. Depicted as both poet and warrior, revered as the *Vate* and *Comandante* of the homeland, D'Annunzio catalysed significant events in early twentieth-century Italian culture and history, earning him the epithet of the first Duce or 'John the Baptist' of fascism.⁶⁴ Under his influence, Italian nationalism, which initially centred on cultural pursuits, evolved into a political force. D'Annunzio was the bold interventionist who launched propaganda leaflets from a moving plane; the soldier wounded in one eye during World War I; and the leader of the irredentist occupation of Fiume (1919-20), situated on the Croatian border, with the aim of redeeming Italy's 'vittoria mutilata' after the war.⁶⁵ Integrating the eloquence of his speeches with tangible displays of bravery, D'Annunzio seemed to bridge the chasm between rhetoric and action, culture and politics, intellectuals and the masses.

D'Annunzianism has often been regarded as a prophetic precursor to the future fascist regime and, more broadly, as a harbinger of modern mass politics—a forerunner of the twentieth-century process of sacralisation and aestheticization of politics, as articulated by Walter Benjamin among

⁶³ See Nino Valeri, *D'Annunzio davanti al fascismo* (Florence: Le Monnier, 1963).

⁶⁴ See Michael A. Ledeen, *D'Annunzio. The First Duce* (New Brunswick and London: Transaction, 2000).

⁶⁵ D'Annunzio himself coined the expression 'vittoria mutilata' to encapsulate Italian discontent with the consequences of the Treaty of Versailles (1919). In reaction, the Italian Nationalist Association, a coalition comprising rebel factions of the Italian army under D'Annunzio's leadership, pursued the annexation of the city of Fiume, disputed by Croatia. This endeavour reached its climax with the Rapallo Treaty and subsequent military measures taken against D'Annunzio's resistance.

others.⁶⁶ As observed, the ambiguous intertwining of power and mysticism in the fascist regime, rooted in D'Annunzio's influence, was underscored by the resurgence of religious operas as part of fascist cultural initiatives. In a vision of all-encompassing aestheticism merging life and art, politics took on the guise of theatre and ritual, exemplified by the D'Annunzian regency in Fiume, which anticipated several aspects of the 'operatic' dictatorship of fascism.⁶⁷ Marches, balcony speeches, crowd engagement, civic festivals, and the introduction of new civic holidays were all implemented to sustain the legionnaires' continuous enthusiasm. The *poeta vate*, likened to a Superman, wielded his power as long as he was able to enchant the masses.⁶⁸ D'Annunzio crafted a novel civil liturgy and cult, blending sacred and secular elements and incorporating church symbols into civil functions. This was notably observed in Fiume's festivities honouring patron saints, exerting significant influence over the Italian catholic populace.⁶⁹

In 1937, the year of Ghedini's debut, D'Annunzio was at the end of his life. Admired and feared by Mussolini, he had spent his last years both revered and controlled within the *fiorente prigione* of the Vittoriale degli Italiani, the estate offered by the regime along the shores of Lake Garda. His death in

⁶⁶ The Carta del Carnaro, Fiume's statute, foreshadowed various aspects of the future fascist state: it introduced a syndicalist structure aimed at bridging the gap between the government and the people, emphasised the significance of art and culture and envisioned the creation of a mass theatre accessible to all free of charge. To delve deeper into D'Annunzio's role as a precursor to fascism, see Ledeer, *D'Annunzio. The First Duce*; Valeri, *D'Annunzio davanti al fascismo*.

⁶⁷ The writer Ennio Flaiano made a thought-provoking parallel between Mussolini and the opera star: 'applauded as an orator, he was merely a tenor; people were often content with his singing without understanding the words [...] after all, his aria was so catchy!', quoted in Stefano Biguzzi, *L'orchestra del duce. Mussolini, la musica e il mito del capo* (Turin: UTET, 2003).

⁶⁸ D'Annunzio was among the earliest in Italy to engage with Friedrich Nietzsche's ideas, incorporating and adapting them into his own aesthetic theories. He notably reinterpreted Nietzsche's idea of the Superman, a theme echoed in *Maria d'Alessandria*. Much like a sculptor, the poet-hero had the ability to reveal the hidden beauty within the multitude, employing 'the verse, the harangue, the sign of the sword'. This beauty often surfaced suddenly amidst moments of uproar, whether 'in the theatre or in the public square or in the trench'. Gabriele D'Annunzio, *Il fuoco - Forse che sì forse che no* (Rome: Newton Compton Editori, 2012). 'La tregua' in Gabriele D'Annunzio, *Alyone*, ed. by Pietro Gibellini (Milan: Mondadori, 1988).

⁶⁹ Consider, for instance, the grandiose commemoration of St. Sebastian's martyrdom, believed to purify the city through his suffering and bloodshed, or the primal bacchanal of the festival of San Vito. However, D'Annunzio's intrusion into religious realms and his unconventional manipulation of sacred symbols led to accusations of fostering false mysticism. As a result, he incurred ecclesiastical censure, resulting in the banning of his works in 1928.

1938 was commemorated with a grandiose staging of one of his most iconic works, *La nave*, set against the open-air backdrop of Venice as a huge life-sized stage. This work of tragedy vividly reflected D'Annunzio's significant political influence and enduring legacy in late thirties Italy, with a libretto resonating in various aspects with *Maria d'Alessandria*. The ideal of *Mediterraneità*, epitomised in *La Nave*, stood as one of D'Annunzio's most enduring images, with the poet's verses fervently advocating and celebrating Italy's colonial expansion in the Mediterranean Sea.⁷⁰ The myth of *Mare Nostrum* served as a symbol of both national identity and foreign policy long before the rise of fascism, but it gained heightened significance as one of the central themes of *romanità* during the regime.⁷¹ In the ambition to transform fascist Italy into a modern incarnation of Rome, eternal and universal, the regime asserted its entitlement to 'reconquer' the ancient empire and secure 'a place in the sun', thereby fulfilling the sacred and enduring mission of Italians in the Mediterranean Sea: 'Italy will be a seafaring nation, or it will cease to be'.⁷² Colonialism provided the stage for the heightened use of liturgical references characteristic of D'Annunzio's style, and the Mediterranean Sea emerged as the prime nexus between ancient and modern worlds, the sacred and the profane, reflecting 'the mystery of the continuity of Rome' (Mussolini).⁷³ As D'Annunzio claimed, 'sur la mer fatale - où la Grèce révéla le beau, Rome la justice, la Judée la sainteté – on ne peut pas attendre l'avènement de «l'homme teuto»'.⁷⁴ In the convergence of *italianità* and *mediterraneità*, nationalism and imperialism, religion and politics, D'Annunzio forged a contemporary repertoire of symbols and images that

⁷⁰ Consider D'Annunzio's *La canzone d'oltremare*, composed during the Libyan War in 1912.

⁷¹ Aurora Roscini Vitali, 'The Myth of "Mare Nostrum": Themes and Exhibitions, Legacy and Experimentation in the Construction of Mediterranean Fascist Italy', *Artl@s Bulletin*, 10.2 (2021), 172-86.

⁷² One of the slogans of the 1928 Esposizione di Arte Marinara, quoted in *ibid.*

⁷³ Mussolini quoted in Gentile, *Il culto del littorio*.

⁷⁴ 'On the fatal sea - where Greece revealed the beautiful, Rome the justice, Judea the holiness - one cannot wait for the advent of the "German man"'. Gabriele D'Annunzio, 'Fluctibus et fatis', in *Scritti giornalistici*, ed. by Annamaria Andreoli e Giorgio Zanetti, 2 vols (Milan: Mondadori, 2003), p. 842. Quoted in Filippo Caburlotto, 'D'Annunzio, la latinità del Mediterraneo e il mito della riconquista', *California Italian Studies*, 1.1 (2010), 1-14 <<https://doi.org/10.5070/C311008860>> [accessed 2 November 2022].

reverberated throughout the *ventennio*. Ships and maritime landscapes became prominent motifs in contemporary art and literature, while the regime organised exhibitions to commemorate the ‘secular sanctity of the sea’.⁷⁵ Mediterranean themes experienced a notable resurgence, particularly during the years surrounding the colonial ventures in Africa, endorsed and christened as a crusade by the Church.⁷⁶

From this perspective, the religious narrative and the redemptive sea voyage portrayed in *Maria d’Alessandria* in 1937 not only echoed D’Annunzian themes but also inevitably resonated with the official rhetoric of *Mediterraneità*. The opening scene of the opera, besides resembling a direct quotation from D’Annunzio’s tragedies, also served as a theatrical enactment of various contemporary paintings depicting maritime landscapes. These paintings were originally showcased in the Esibizioni di arte marinara, temporary exhibitions dedicated to celebrating the sea and propagating the fascist Mediterranean fiction (see Figure 1.3). The strong symbolism of Meano’s libretto—featuring ships, a personified sea, otherworldly voices, cathartic shipwrecks and transformative journeys—drew inspiration from both operatic and D’Annunzian repertoire and resonated with the contemporary colonial propaganda.⁷⁷ Allegorically, Maria’s spiritual journey from sinful exoticism to the purity of Christian sacred singing on the coast of Palestine mirrors the musical assimilation of native people in Casella’s *Il deserto tentato*, also from 1937. As highlighted earlier, during this era, Italian musicians became increasingly involved in colonialist propaganda through

⁷⁵ Roscini Vitali, “The Myth of “Mare Nostrum””.

⁷⁶ In 1933, Ghedini himself composed a piece titled *Marinaresca e Baccanale*, embodying this collective imagery.

⁷⁷ For further exploration of the sea as a setting in opera, refer to Salvatore Mazzarella, *Mare immenso ci separa* (Palermo: Sellerio, 2002).

competitions and commissions. The theme of the Empire pervaded various forms of artistic expression, whether through hymns, film scores, poetry, or operas, albeit sometimes subtly.⁷⁸



Figure 1.3. Pieretto Bianco, *Sailors unloading the goods*, in Saverio Kambo, 'Cronache romane. La prima mostra d'arte marinara', *Emporium*, LXIV.384 (1926), 390-98 (p. 391)

Mediterranean Opera: *Maria d'Alessandria* from Pizzetti to Monteverdi

D'Annunzianism, fascist politics and colonialism thus converged in the ideal of Mediterranean opera, a term coined by D'Annunzio at the beginning of the century and that advocated for a rejuvenation of the genre by returning to its Italian roots.⁷⁹ Opera stood as the exclusive stage where literary and political facets of D'Annunzianism met. In his 1900 novel *Il fuoco*, a manifesto of his aesthetics,

⁷⁸ Consider also Ildebrando Pizzetti's 'Inno a Roma', featured in the film score for the kolossal *Scipione l'Africano* and performed at the inauguration of Cinecittà in 1937, with a dedication to Mussolini.

⁷⁹ Despite lacking specialised knowledge, D'Annunzio exhibited a profound interest in music, shaping and directing trends within Italian music. He collaborated with prominent musicians of his time and supported key musical initiatives such as the *Raccolta nazionale delle musiche italiane* (which honoured Italian composers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries), the publication of Monteverdi's opera omnia and the *Corporazione delle Nuove Musiche* (the Italian division of the ISCM).

D'Annunzio presented Wagner's funeral as a symbolic catalyst for reviving the Latin genius and crafting a distinctly Mediterranean opera, capable of reimagining classical tragedy as a ritualistic and harmonious union of the arts. Monteverdi, acclaimed as the 'divino Claudio' by D'Annunzio and celebrated as a 'heroic soul of pure Italian essence', emerged as the epitome of inspiration for this revival of opera's origins. D'Annunzio championed the Florentine Camerata dei Bardi as the authentic precursor to Wagnerian opera, advocating for a 'Latin' and 'Mediterranean' way of overcoming the latter. Different works emerged from the collaboration between the poet and numerous musicians of the time.⁸⁰ D'Annunzian texts symbolised a mark of nobility and *italianità* for Italian composers.⁸¹ Among the diverse array of 'D'Annunzian' operas, *Fedra*—crafted by D'Annunzio and Ildebrando Pizzetti in collaboration—notably encapsulated, or at least closely approached, D'Annunzio's vision of a Mediterranean opera.

'Ildebrando da Parma', as D'Annunzio called him, commenced his collaboration with the poet by composing the incidental music for the verse tragedy *La Nave* (1908). This marked the beginning of a trend in modernising ancient musical forms, employing modalities, recitative, polyphony and more.⁸² Their enduring partnership, marked by both success and controversy, saw D'Annunzio's aesthetics deeply influencing Pizzetti's work, extending well beyond their direct collaborations. As a result, their names are often associated with defining some features and recurring topics of Italian music theatre

⁸⁰ D'Annunzio's collaborations with musicians fall into two categories: those driven by convenience and those driven by conviction. His alliances with Verismo composers such as Franchetti, Mascagni and Montemezzi were primarily influenced by financial interests. Conversely, his partnerships with musicians like Pizzetti, Malipiero and Debussy were rooted in his dedication to manifesting his artistic vision and aesthetic ideals. Vice versa, the extensive involvement of musicians with D'Annunzio reflects the wide-reaching influence of his work in music. See Beniamino Dal Fabbro, *Musica e verità. Diario 1939-1964* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1967); Rubens Tedeschi, *D'Annunzio e la musica* (Florence: Nuova Italia, 1988).

⁸¹ Guido Salvetti, 'I rapporti con la generazione dell'80: una «favola bella»', in *D'Annunzio, musicista immaginifico. Atti del Convegno internazionale di studi, Siena, 14-16 luglio 2005*, ed. by Adriana Guarnieri, Fiamma Nicolodi and Cesare Orselli (Florence: Olschki, 2008), 125–45; Nicolodi, 'Su alcuni aspetti dei festival tra le due guerre'.

⁸² Ildebrando Pizzetti (1880-1969) was a prominent member of the 'generation of the 1880s'. His notable debut occurred when he won the *Tirso* magazine competition for the incidental music of *La Nave* in 1905.

during the early decades of the twentieth century.⁸³ The artistic convergence of D'Annunzio and Pizzetti arose from their shared disdain for verismo, which they perceived as a decline of romantic opera into bourgeois sentimentality. Their collaboration was driven by a quest for an Italian counterpart to Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk*.⁸⁴ In his numerous essays, Pizzetti expressed his reverence for the origins of opera and the ideal of artistic unity found in classical tragedy. He aimed to revive the harmony and sought-after equilibrium between poetry and music, believing that drama inherently depended on music for its fullest expression.⁸⁵ According to the authors' intent, *Fedra* was meant to achieve all of this, emerging as the epitome of the 'new Latin music drama'.⁸⁶

Within this framework, it is valuable to explore specific features of *Fedra*, as they offer contextual insights into Ghedini's opera. Pizzetti's musical style was distinguished by a form of syllabic declamation that adhered closely to the prosody of D'Annunzio's text, echoing the traditional *recitar cantando* style. Additionally, he employed modality in a narrative capacity, drawing on ancient theories of *ethoi* to expressively convey the contrast between diatonic and chromatic musical elements. Pizzetti's orchestra functioned as an unseen narrator, providing seamless accompaniment through a rich tapestry of motifs. These motifs—comprised of symbolically potent brief fragments rather than traditional *Leitmotifs*—were repeated, transformed and layered. The chorus, engaging in dialogue with

⁸³ In addition to numerous *liriche da camera* based on D'Annunzio's texts, Pizzetti collaborated on several projects with the poet. These included composing music for the film *Cabiria* (1914) and incidental music for theatrical works like *La Pisanella ou La mort parfumée* (1913), as well as the incomplete *Gigliola* (1914-15). Even Pizzetti's late pastoral tragedy, *La figlia di Iorio* (1958), was inspired by a D'Annunzian text given to him by the poet in 1936. Many of D'Annunzio's recurring themes and topics also surfaced in librettos autonomously composed by Pizzetti.

⁸⁴ In 1887, after declaring the death of *melodramma*, D'Annunzio targeted Pietro Mascagni as the 'band leader' of *verismo*, condemning him for being 'suffocated by melodic fat'. Tedeschi, *D'Annunzio e la musica*.

⁸⁵ In his essay *Musica e dramma*, which reflects on the essence and evolution of opera, Pizzetti emphasised the religious roots of the genre, tracing it back to various forms of liturgical drama such as *misteri*, *sacre rappresentazioni*, *laude*, *maggio*, prevalent during the Middle Ages. Ildebrando Pizzetti, *Musica e dramma* (Rome: Edizioni della Bussola, 1945).

⁸⁶ Pizzetti and D'Annunzio's words in presenting the opera to the publisher Ricordi, quoted in Valentina Valentini, *La tragedia moderna e mediterranea. Sul teatro di Gabriele D'Annunzio* (Milan: FrancoAngeli, 1992), p. 37. After a long gestation period, *Fedra* premiered at La Scala on 20 March 1915.

characters and providing commentary on the unfolding action, stood out for its remarkably intricate contrapuntal composition.⁸⁷ Pizzetti's musical style demonstrated a Monteverdian reverence for the text, carefully balancing melodic and symphonic elements while seamlessly incorporating ancient musical elements into a modern context. In *Fedra*, while Pizzetti's musical archaism resonated with the text, its asceticism clashed with the verbose and fervent depiction of unrestrained and sacrilegious passions in D'Annunzio's tragedy. Fedra, embodying the archetype of the D'Annunzian superwoman, appeared to undergo a humanising transformation through Pizzetti's music by the end. A growing stylistic and moral discord became apparent between the poet and the musician, particularly evident in Pizzetti's subsequent works where he took on the dual roles of librettist and composer.

Pizzetti's operas delved into core D'Annunzian themes, yet they often took a divergent approach, aiming to humanise characters and narratives through either a genuinely Christian perspective or a romanticising lens, as noted by Giannotto Bastianelli.⁸⁸ That was the case of *Debora e Jaele*, *Lo Straniero* and *Fra Gherardo*.

The first critic to positively highlight the similarity between Ghedini's work and that of Pizzetti—positioning *Maria d'Alessandria* 'between Fedra and Debora'—was Gianandrea Gavazzeni, one of the founders of the Teatro delle Novità, as well as a pupil and an enthusiastic supporter of Pizzetti.⁸⁹ Gavazzeni faulted other critics for overlooking Pizzetti's strong influence on *Maria d'Alessandria*. Perhaps, as we could suppose, this omission might have been strategic in the politically charged

⁸⁷ See, for instance, the unaccompanied eight-part double chorus of the threnody for Ippolito.

⁸⁸ According to Bastianelli, the temptation of *ottocenteggiare* led Pizzetti to water down D'Annunzian themes with repetitive and popular-appealing manners. See 'Pizzetti pizzettiano' in Giannotto Bastianelli, *Il nuovo dio della musica*, ed. by Marcello De Angelis (Turin: Einaudi, 1978), pp. 157-59.

⁸⁹ 'L'inizio di Ghedini operista', in Gianandrea Gavazzeni, *Trent'anni di musica* (Milan: Ricordi, 1958), pp. 203-8.

atmosphere of the time, aimed at safeguarding the opera's independence from factionalism rather than emphasising its originality. The label D'Annunzian-Pizzettian has frequently been applied to *Maria d'Alessandria* in later critiques, though its exact origin remains unclear. As observed, the press reviews of the premiere notably omitted any mention of D'Annunzio or Pizzetti, perhaps because their influence was too close and evident. However, transitioning from the realism of the harbour scene, marked by Wagnerian-like chromaticism, to the pure clarity of Maria and the angels' sacred chant rooted in Italian tradition, *Maria d'Alessandria* seemed to epitomise the vision of Mediterranean opera prophesied in *Il fuoco*.

While the influence of D'Annunzio on the subject and its themes has been repeatedly demonstrated, Pizzetti's impact also resonates through both the libretto and the music of *Maria d'Alessandria*. At the textual level, one could argue that *Maria d'Alessandria* starts in a D'Annunzian style and concludes with a Pizzettian touch. Indeed, as Maria's voice dominates amidst the bustle of the opening harbour scene, she evokes the spirit of Fedra or Basiliola from *La Nave*, embodying a superhuman force capable of leading all, herself included, into perdition with an irresistible and subversive power that transcends social and sacred bonds. Even the Penitents aboard the ship ultimately find themselves chanting her name in what resembles a pagan bacchanal, reaching a climax midway through the opera. However, the Son's sacrificial love ultimately redeems Maria and the D'Annunzian essence of her narrative. Unlike Basiliola, who perishes in the flames in *La Nave*, or La Pisanella, suffocated by roses, Maria's fate takes a different turn. Just as in Pizzetti's *Lo Straniero*, the sacrifice that facilitates catharsis is not interpreted through a pagan lens but is profoundly Christian, emphasising that forgiveness and love are the sole paths to salvation. The Tristan-like finale, cherished by D'Annunzio, is alluded to but religiously sidestepped by Meano: Maria's desire to unite with the Son in death is overridden by his call for her to embrace a life of penance and redemption. The inclusion

of the episode and the anonymous characters of the Father and Son, absent entirely from the original source as well as from *Maria Egiziaca*, serve as the Pizzettian pillars of the narrative. Maria's power is only shattered by the Son's love, reflecting both the weakness and strength of his character, much like the case of Jael. The act of sacrifice enables Maria to rediscover her humanity, a quality typically precluded to D'Annunzian heroines but in alignment with Pizzetti's morally nuanced characters.⁹⁰

In terms of the music, Gavazzeni discerned several unmistakable Pizzettian features in *Maria d'Alessandria*, including the intricate deployment of choral passages and some recitativo moments. However, according to the critic, these elements were seamlessly integrated into Ghedini's style, along with a plethora of other references spanning from Monteverdi to Strauss.⁹¹ In this eclectic blend of diverse idioms, the composer might seem to forgo his own voice. Yet, Gavazzeni identified Ghedini's originality not in the sources or development of his musical language, but in his distinctive methods of presentation, particularly his innovative use of timbre and the orchestra as a dramatic tool.⁹² In this regard, the reference to Monteverdi—central to the D'Annunzian ideal of a Mediterranean opera and frequently cited in critical discourse—reemerges prominently. Monteverdi, known as a pioneer of modern use of instruments and their timbre, finds a tangible embodiment in Ghedini's music. Ghedini was a great admirer of Monteverdi and, as the author of several modern

⁹⁰ She sings at the end of Act II: 'Ah ecco... ecco/oh mio cuore... mio cuore immenso...come/bruci, palpiti, canti...'.

⁹¹ Gavazzeni. As later confirmed by Guido Salvetti, the stylistic elements of Pizzetti's operas are present in *Maria d'Alessandria* alongside their counterparts: chanting declamation alongside vocalisations, multi-subjective chorus alongside cohesive choral masses. Salvetti, 'L'«antipoetica» di G. F. Ghedini'.

⁹² This approach to originality is something that later scholars of Ghedini's music, such as Angiola Maria Bonisconti, Piero Santi, Carlo Mosso and others, would also revisit.

transcriptions of his works, he had ample opportunity to absorb much of Monteverdi's style into his own music. He even proudly referred to himself as an 'inveterate Monteverdian'.⁹³

Many of the musical features of *Maria d'Alessandria*, as highlighted in the above analysis, can trace their direct lineage to the techniques showcased in Monteverdi's *Orfeo*. Stereophony, incorporating multiple choral or instrumental groups, echo effects and personification, along with the integration of invisible sounds ('from inside'), musically defined and expanded the scenic space in *Maria d'Alessandria*. Similarly, Monteverdi's diverse utilisation of instruments, particularly in establishing the continuo, to signify the three distinct soundscapes of Orfeo's journey (earth, underworld, heaven), is echoed to some extent in *Maria d'Alessandria*, accompanying the protagonist from the harbour to the desert.⁹⁴ The instrumental chiaroscuro, characteristic of Renaissance and Baroque music, along with the deliberate omission of specific sections of the orchestra, were employed by Monteverdi for dramatic effect. Ghedini recalled these techniques in his opera, such as by withholding the violins until Maria's entrance.⁹⁵ As the composer himself declared: 'variety [...] different atmospheres, contrasting colours: the "great Claudio" already did it, so it is nothing new'.⁹⁶ In this context, adherence to tradition appeared to outweigh the quest for originality, emerging as the primary resource to be modern within the cultural discourse of fascist Italy. According to a later assessment

⁹³ 'Gli autori delle opere nuove rendono omaggio a Donizetti', *Bergamo Fascista*, 7 September 1937. Some of Ghedini's transcriptions from Monteverdi include: *Lamento di Arianna, Con che soavità* (1936); *Vespro della Beata Vergine* (1949); *Il combattimento di Tancredi e Clorinda* (1951); *L'incoronazione di Poppea* (1953). The composer had a fondness for sixteenth and seventeenth-century music, also transcribing works by the Gabriellis and Girolamo Frescobaldi.

⁹⁴ Carlo-Ferdinando de Nardis, 'La strumentazione come "serva dell'orazione"', *Musica+*, (2017), 28-32. The parallels with Monteverdi are numerous and intricate. For example, similar to the anonymous contralto extending Maria's singing in the first scene, in *Orfeo*, the echo was also personified externally through the enchanting voice responding from the cave in Act V.

⁹⁵ In the incidental music for *La Nave*, Pizzetti entirely omitted the use of strings to evoke an archaic atmosphere. Fiamma Nicolodi, 'Riflessi neogotici nel teatro musicale del Novecento', in *Il Novecento musicale italiano tra neoclassicismo e neogoticismo*, pp. 271–304.

⁹⁶ Ghedini's interview in '«Maria d'Alessandria» di C. Meano e F. G. Ghedini', *La Stampa*, 14 July 1937.

of Ghedini's career by Mosso, the composer's modernity stemmed precisely from his revival of the Italian pre-classical tradition.⁹⁷

Blending ancient and modern influences, this turn to Italian opera's roots paralleled the broader ascent of neoclassicism. Yet, beyond its technical and artistic dimensions, this international musical movement assumed a unique significance in Italy. As increasingly apparent, it acquired distinct rhetorical nuances and a deeper solemnity, serving as a convergence point between aestheticism and nationalism. In fascist Italy, as previously noted, the invocation of Monteverdi carried significance beyond the realm of music alone. According to Andrew Dell'Antonio, 'il divino Claudio' emerged as a crucial emblem in the fascist rhetoric of 'lyrical nostalgia', embodying the tendency to seek the future in the past in both opera and politics, a concept deeply intertwined with the myth of the Roman Empire.⁹⁸ This was the context in which the Teatro delle Novità operated. Monteverdi was the primary benchmark for evaluating institutional new operas like *Maria d'Alessandria*, offering a framework to assess their strengths and weaknesses.⁹⁹ As observed in the press reviews, the 'Monteverdian quality' was commonly and primarily interpreted in contemporary discourse as the music's commitment to the text, its clarity and expressiveness, all reflecting the cherished ideal of Italian *cantabilità*.¹⁰⁰ For certain critics at the premiere, Ghedini's opera demonstrated this quality notably in its more lyrical moments—almost closed pieces—, frequently mentioning instances like the 'Monteverdian duet' in Act II (Abbiati).¹⁰¹ On the contrary, some critics felt that Ghedini's

⁹⁷ Mosso, 'Giorgio Federico Ghedini. Un itinerario stilistico'.

⁹⁸ Andrew Dell'Antonio, 'Il divino Claudio: Monteverdi and lyric nostalgia in fascist Italy', *Cambridge Opera Journal*, 8.3 (1996), 271–84 <doi:10.1017/S0954586700004754> [accessed 1 March 2020].

⁹⁹ Alceo Toni (1884-1969) was a composer and musicologist. During that period, he held the position of music critic at Mussolini's newspaper, *Il Popolo d'Italia*. In the context of Monteverdi's relevance in fascist Italy, it is worth recalling the staging of *L'incoronazione di Poppea* in Florence in the same 1937.

¹⁰⁰ According to Monteverdi's 'seconda prattica', in contrast to Flemish practice, music should be servant and not master of words.

¹⁰¹ Franco Abbiati, 'Maria d'Alessandria di G.F. Ghedini e C. Meano', *Corriere Della Sera*, 10 September 1937.

abundance of technique and refinement stifled the opera's 'life', contradicting the principles of the prevailing idealistic aesthetic. They argued that the absence of thematic material sacrificed the essence of Italian melody, leaving Monteverdi's essence 'still far away'.¹⁰²

The Past in the Present: Neoclassicism and Ghedini's Expressive Paradox

The notion of expressiveness, pivotal in the broader rhetoric of *italianità*, was a recurring and contentious issue in the reception of Ghedini's operatic production. Intrinsically tied to the interplay between music and text, Ghedini sought to achieve expressiveness by portraying characters, environments and situations with a diverse range of musical techniques, thus resulting in his distinctive eclecticism.¹⁰³ In this regard, as Guido Salvetti suggests, Ghedini appeared to revive a 'madrigalistic' adherence to the text in his music. By this, Salvetti refers to the alignment of lexical modes with expressive intentions, acknowledging the rhetorical autonomy of music.¹⁰⁴ Ghedini adeptly utilised stereotypical and historically entrenched associations to narrate Maria's conversion. These included the established connections between consonance and sacredness, alongside the opposite links between dissonance and sin, as well as chromaticism and suffering. Though bearing similarities to Pizzetti's use of chromatic or diatonic genres, Ghedini elevated this expressive technique to a more comprehensive level in musical terms. He extended it beyond modality to encompass various stylistic elements such as texture, timbre and voicing. This approach resulted in the distinctive patchwork-like surface of his music. The seemingly inconsistent eclecticism of *Maria*

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ 'Through a Crocian lens, Ghedini emphasised the indispensable need to 'feel the subject in order to create good music'. 'Dieci minuti rubati a Federico Ghedini', *Il Popolo*, 11 October 1937.

¹⁰⁴ Salvetti, 'L'«antipoetica» di G. F. Ghedini'.

d'Alessandria can thus be attributed to an authentic—perhaps even naïve—pursuit of expressiveness, akin to a revival of the Baroque *teoria degli affetti* and its ‘variety’ of styles.¹⁰⁵

The paradoxical result of this diversity was that critics swiftly noted the ‘aristocratic’ nature of the music, crediting Ghedini’s exceptional mastery of various styles and techniques rather than its expressive content. Ghedini’s music sounded austere, cold and anti-rhetorical to the contemporary audience,¹⁰⁶ a trait that would echo throughout his later works and reception. Critics praised Ghedini’s seamless integration of music and text in his theatrical compositions, yet they also observed a sense of detachment arising from the inclusion of disparate historical references in his music. According to Iginio Fuga’s review of *Maria d'Alessandria*, an excessive sense of measure and meticulous attention to detail departed from the usual ‘melodramatic’ flair of opera, typically marked by unrestrained gestures. Instead, following the critic, restrained melodies and sparse sounds—chosen for their quality rather than quantity—‘all this was Ghedini’.¹⁰⁷ This controversial relationship between Ghedini’s music—packed with historical cultured references—and operatic expressiveness placed *Maria d'Alessandria* in a distinctive and somewhat ambiguous position within the prevailing cultural and operatic currents of the time, such as D’Annunzianism and neoclassicism.

Ghedini’s search for expressiveness, explored through an eclectic blend of various sources and techniques, surpassed any use of the past solely for formal, parodic or aestheticizing purposes, as emphasised by Salvetti.¹⁰⁸ Although rooted in similar D’Annunzian inspirations, Ghedini’s outcomes

¹⁰⁵ Building upon the theory of *etmoi*, which is connected to the expressive utilization of modality, the theory of affections encompassed a broader range of musical elements, extending beyond linguistic considerations to encompass stylistic facets as well.

¹⁰⁶ Abbiati, ‘Maria d'Alessandria di G.F. Ghedini e C. Meano’.

¹⁰⁷ ‘A specific sound within that range, and solely that, is sufficient for Ghedini to emphasise and articulate a psychological moment’. Fuga, ‘Giorgio Federico Ghedini e "Maria d'Alessandria"’.

¹⁰⁸ Salvetti, ‘L’«antipoetica» di G. F. Ghedini’.

diverged significantly from Respighi's tendency toward aestheticizing archaism and Pizzetti's adherence to a uniform and easily identifiable style.¹⁰⁹ The breadth and terseness of Ghedini's music effectively removed *Maria d'Alessandria* from the D'Annunzian essence of the text, departing from both the trend of pure archaism and the usual aestheticism associated with such themes. The critic Andrea Della Corte characterised Ghedini's opera as a 'human rather than mystical drama', where a quest for realism and measured restraint tempered and counterbalanced the intense passions, intricate symbolism and pursuit of pure spectacle often found in D'Annunzio's works.¹¹⁰ Ghedini's fundamentally contemplative nature led him to outwardly conform to the D'Annunzian text in the opera, while subtly contradicting its spirit.¹¹¹ His lack of interest in the clichés of Decadence—as noted by Salvetti about the opera's trivialisation of La Cieca, a key allegorical figure in Symbolism—might be further underscored by his extensive implementation of disembodied voices in *Maria d'Alessandria*.¹¹² This common technique of symbolist theatre, highlighted by Abbate for its effectiveness in evoking a sense of mystery and authority, aptly symbolised the opera's allegorical exploration of the divide between inner and outer worlds, and effectively portrayed the ominous influence of Maria, the superwoman caught between the realms of flesh and spirit.¹¹³ However, Ghedini's systematic employment of acousmatic voices throughout *Maria d'Alessandria*—applied

¹⁰⁹ Romualdo Giani offered a critical characterisation of Pizzetti's style as uniform and consistently polished, evoking an archaic tone. Romualdo Giani, *La fionda di Davide. Saggi critici (Boito, Pizzetti, Croce)* (Turin: Fratelli Bocca, 1928).

¹¹⁰ According to the critic, D'Annunzian themes were increasingly diluted in the thirties: 'which of the saints, sprouting on the stage of the thirties, exhibit passions and perversions that are not purely verbal?'. Andrea Della Corte, "'Maria d'Alessandria" di Ghedini alla Scala', *La Stampa*, 2 April 1939.

¹¹¹ Fernando Fasciotti, 'Cronache d'arte. Il Teatro delle Novità', *Osservatore Romano*, September 1937.

¹¹² According to Salvetti, the portrayal of a blind and innocent character in *Maria d'Alessandria* (like the Yuródiviy in Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov* or the Cieco di Kinnareth in Pizzetti's *Debora e Jaele*) lacks any significant dramatic impact or distinctive musical characteristic, such as the childish and melodic voice often found in symbolist works. Already upon composing *L'intrusa*, Romualdo Giani reproached Ghedini for his inability to convey the mystical essence of Maeterlinck's text in his music. Salvetti, 'L'«antipoetica» di G. F. Ghedini'.

¹¹³ Carolyn Abbate, 'Debussy's phantom sounds', *Cambridge Opera Journal*, 10.1 (1998), 67–96, <doi:10.1017/S0954586700005334> [accessed 16 September 2022]; Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2006) <<https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/7137.001.0001>> [accessed 16 September 2022].

consistently to all characters, including the hyper-realistic tavern song emanating from within the hatch—diminished and diluted its symbolic significance. It seemed more like a musical tool to widen the auditory landscape of the scene beyond the stage, reminiscent of Monteverdi's *Orfeo* with its frequent 'from inside' direction.

Following this trajectory, Ghedini occupied a middle ground not just within the D'Annunzian-Pizzettian movement, but also concerning neoclassicism as a musical current. He grappled with a dual inclination: the imperative for expressiveness inherent in the Italian tradition and a more contemporary, objective detachment. Indeed, despite drawing from the same repertoire with its strong rhetorical implications, such as the reference to Monteverdi, Ghedini inadvertently diverged his music from the distinctive Italian neoclassicism. This movement typically shunned internationally accepted notions of 'objectivity', 'craftsmanship', 'musical autonomy, or 'formalism', terms often associated with Stravinsky's compositions.¹¹⁴ In Italian musical discourse, these concepts were dismissed as false ideals, promoting an art that prioritised superficiality and intellectualism, in stark contrast to the idealistic aesthetic and the quest for expressiveness deeply rooted in Italian tradition. Italian musicians typically perceived neoclassicism, or 'new classicism', as an ideal fusion of tradition and innovation, a delicate equilibrium between form and content. Nationalistically, they championed the autonomy of Italy's recovery of the past from the broader international neoclassical movement, epitomised by Stravinsky and his groundbreaking compositions. While Stravinsky's approach embraced historical discontinuity and aimed for musical autonomy devoid of external influences, the Italian stance emphasised a deep reliance on cultural heritage and its ideal content.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁴ Anna Quaranta, 'Neoclassicismo musicale. Termini del dibattito italiano ed europeo', in *Alfredo Casella e l'Europa. Atti del convegno internazionale di studi, Siena, 7-9 giugno 2001*, ed. by Mila De Santis (Florence: Olschki, 2003), pp. 93–145.

¹¹⁵ Alfredo Casella, 'Il Neoclassicismo mio e altrui', *Pegaso*, 1.5 (1929), 576–83; Quaranta, 'Neoclassicismo musicale'.

Paradoxically, starting from a thoroughly Italian base, Ghedini's eclecticism led him towards a neoclassicism reminiscent of Stravinsky's style—albeit without any hint of irony in *Maria d'Alessandria*, as it would be in the next comic opera *La pulce d'oro* (1939). Indeed, as Ghedini sought to transpose the baroque 'madrigalistic' approach into the twentieth century, emphasising stylistic diversity as a means of expression, he encountered the hallmark neoclassical principles of objectivity. This entailed incorporating stylistic amalgamation, anachronism and a pronounced historical and technical filter.

In subsequent critical assessment, Ghedini's remarkable mastery in navigating such diverse musical elements was regarded as the most effective 'antidote' to the prevailing rhetoric and trends of his time in Italy.¹¹⁶ Ghedini's employment of Monteverdian techniques and expressive tools surpassed mere Mediterranean rhetoric, evolving into a modernist eclecticism and detachment. In *Maria d'Alessandria*, as Salvetti describes, 'the drama unfolds in the music parallel to the scene', rather than merging with it in the harmonious fusion of music and text that Pizzetti idealised.¹¹⁷ In this sense, I would argue that *Maria d'Alessandria* sounds both modernist and contemporary precisely because of its adherence to tradition, which is conveyed through austere expressiveness and virtuoso technique. Ghedini's eclecticism revived a somewhat baroque theory of affections while simultaneously offering a modernist perspective that viewed the past with distanced awareness. According to Fuga, *Maria d'Alessandria* departed from the conventions of nineteenth-century *melodramma*, emerging as a composite opera that rejuvenated the past through 'Ghedini's new sounds and modern conception'.¹¹⁸ Hence, infused with nods to tradition while deeply entrenched in the contemporary

¹¹⁶ Mario Pasi, 'La peccatrice redenta', *Corriere Della Sera*, 20 December 1984, p. 23.

¹¹⁷ Salvetti, 'L'«antipoetica» di G.F. Ghedini', p. 409.

¹¹⁸ Fuga, 'Giorgio Federico Ghedini e "Maria d'Alessandria"'.

rhetoric of late fascism, Ghedini's opera presented a compelling blend of timeworn sources and modernistic means, integrating the old-fashioned libretto with the original quality of Ghedini's music. This seemingly anachronistic juxtaposition of past and present proved exceptionally fitting for the 1937 debut of the Teatro delle Novità.

***In media stat virtus*: Eclecticism as a Musical and Political Formula**

After exploring the opera's features, cultural references and reception, we can understand why *Maria d'Alessandria* succeeded at the Teatro delle Novità in 1937. Its blend of eclecticism, sense of measure and modern use of the past resonated with all the complexities of late-fascist culture, navigating its pluralism and factionalism in newly resonant ways. Such a work was aptly hosted by the Teatro delle Novità, which had been created in response to concerns about opera's future viability, forming part of broader efforts by the regime to rekindle the genre's tradition. Rather than aiming to revolutionise the genre, this fascist initiative sought to ensure its continuity, 'taking soundings amongst emerging musical personalities'.¹¹⁹ The programme of its inaugural season, with its apparent 'unevenness' and 'uncertainty' (Fearn) in the diverse range of works selected, already encapsulated the festival's philosophy of embracing the pluralism of the time.¹²⁰ The Teatro delle Novità provided a platform for young composers and served as an institutional outlet for those marginalised by mainstream national and international festivals. In this context, Ghedini's *Maria d'Alessandria* appeared to present a challenge to Respighi's more widely recognised *Maria Egiziaca*, engaging in implicit competition with it.¹²¹ By staging the same subject in a markedly different manner from Respighi's opera, especially in the wake of the latter's contentious performance in Venice, *Maria d'Alessandria* served as

¹¹⁹ Raymond Fearn, *Italian Opera since 1945* (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic, 1998), p. 52.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

¹²¹ Drawing parallels with Respighi's opera proves instrumental in depicting the continuity and transformation of Italian music alongside the cultural policies of fascism during the 1930s.

a dual debut for both the composer and the Teatro delle Novità. This production underscored the unique musical vision of Ghedini while also exemplifying the distinct objectives of the Bergamo initiative within the broader landscape of fascist music festivals.

The Teatro delle Novità emerged as a venue for debuting new musicians rather than innovative operas. Therefore, concerns over the lack of originality in *Maria d'Alessandria* did not stop it fulfilling the initiative's goal. The opera's libretto, while somewhat outdated in its literary style, remained politically relevant in late-fascist Italy. It leaned on enduring D'Annunzian themes, such as the Mediterranean myth, echoing the contemporary rhetoric of the regime and thereby reinforcing its ideological narrative. Furthermore, by delving deeply into the repertoire, the opera served as an effective testing ground for a composer new to the genre. Meano's libretto offered diverse scenarios, prompting Ghedini's creativity and allowing him to showcase his expertise across a range of musical styles. As Pasi noted, 'the music varies with each situation', demonstrating the composer's versatility and technical mastery.¹²² *Maria d'Alessandria* earned unanimous acclaim from critics for the exceptional quality of Ghedini's music; he was also acknowledged as an 'autore personalissimo' (an essential value according to Italian idealism), emphasising the originality and modernist bareness of his music.¹²³

In other words, Ghedini's ability to blend convention and novelty, popular subjects and refined techniques, ensured *Maria d'Alessandria* met the expectations of the Teatro delle Novità. The opera not only reflected the festival's ethos—'old and new' was indeed to be the subtitle of the 1942 initiative, when provisionally transferred to Parma during the war—but also epitomised the broader

¹²² Pasi, 'La peccatrice redenta'.

¹²³ Fuga, 'Giorgio Federico Ghedini e "Maria d'Alessandria"'.

political agenda of fascism. Though open to diverse interpretations, this agenda advocated the revival of the past—be it the Latin Empire or Monteverdi's opera—as a means of staying contemporary and original, echoing Mussolini's motto: 'lean firmly on the past to better rush towards the future'.¹²⁴

Hence, the example of *Maria d'Alessandria* illustrates how this artistic and political formula, particularly as encapsulated within the Mediterranean rhetoric, operated on various levels, seamlessly embedding the opera within its cultural context.¹²⁵ On an operatic level, this old-and-new formula is not only discernible in *Maria d'Alessandria* but also emerges as a recurring motif in the other 'Mediterranean works', spanning from *Fedra* to *Il deserto tentato*.¹²⁶ On an institutional level, this very formula guided the Teatro delle Novità in upholding tradition and confronting opera's crisis, while also encapsulating the core principles of fascist cultural politics, particularly in 1937, as a strategy for reconciling opposite forces.

Indeed, the escalation of historical circumstances contributed significantly to heightened tensions between the so-called modernists and their adversaries within the Italian musical landscape, culminating in a peak of discord after 1932. The case of Casella was emblematic of the weighty atmosphere of that period. In 1937, the musician, a leading figure in the modernist movement, became the target of a vicious campaign driven by anti-Semitism, rivalry and resentment. This animosity was likely fuelled more by his decisions as the organiser of the Venice festival, which led to exclusions, than by the modernist style of his music. According to Casella, at the 1937 Congress of

¹²⁴ Benito Mussolini, 'Passato e avvenire', *Popolo d'Italia*, 21 April 1922. See also Laura Basini, 'Alfredo Casella and the rhetoric of colonialism', *Cambridge Opera Journal*, 24.2 (2012), 127–57 <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/23319597>> [accessed 27 October 2022].

¹²⁵ According to Ruth Ben-Ghiat and Mia Fuller, colonialism served as the primary arena for reconciling ancient and modern elements, as 'important templates for the elaboration of an Italian national image that evoked both Italy's modernity and its weighty historic and cultural patrimony'. Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 149.

¹²⁶ As Basini argues, Casella's opera, with its amalgamation of old and new musical elements or compositional techniques, epitomised the realisation of fascism's imperialist and purportedly civilising mission, achieved through the cutting-edge technology of aviation. *Ibid.*

the National Syndicate of Musicians, the young composer Porrino, a disciple of Respighi, along with ‘a great number of unimportant musicians’, launched ‘a vicious campaign of defamation’, proclaiming themselves the ‘champions of the so-called *national* music’.¹²⁷ The campaign against Casella reached its peak with an article titled ‘La piovra musicale ebraica’ (‘the Jewish Musical Octopus’), penned by the composer Francesco Santoliquido in the pages of the Roman daily *Il Tevere* (December 14, 1937). This article merged the emerging racist rhetoric with the notion of *camorra* that had surfaced in 1932, railing against the modernist monopolisation of festivals, influence peddling and aesthetic snobbery. In line with Lualdi’s 1932 press release, Alessandro Pavolini (president of the Confederation of Professionals and Artists), sought to ease tensions with an official statement in *Il musicista*. He reasserted the pluralistic principle of fascist cultural policy, emphasising that ‘every artistic tendency, pursued with sincerity and in the spirit of a modern sensibility, has the right of citizenship’ in fascist Italy, provided it drew inspiration from the ‘sources and genius of their race’.¹²⁸ In essence, adherence to good music and *italianità*, without any specific stylistic demands, were the only things necessary to appease the regime, as illustrated by the case of *Maria d’Alessandria* at the Teatro delle Novità.

Emblematically falling into the escalating tension between the modernist and conservative factions of Italian music post-1932, Ghedini’s eclecticism and moderation can be viewed as a winning formula amidst the strained cultural atmosphere of late-fascist Italy. Here, aesthetic pluralism and its counterpart of factionalism continually aimed to reconcile the old with the new, and the popular with the elitist. In this regard, the critics’ navigation of *Maria d’Alessandria*’s significance at the premiere

¹²⁷ Ben Earle, *Luigi Dallapiccola and Musical Modernism in Fascist Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 68–69.

¹²⁸ The entire controversy is detailed in *ibid.*

reflects the emphasis on the opera's eclecticism underscored in later criticism. Massimo Mila took it a step further by labelling the opera as 'Ghedini's *compilation*'. As a novice opera composer, Ghedini's utilisation of a broad array of sources could have been interpreted as confusion or as a struggle to define his own artistic voice, mirroring the apparent inconsistency of the fascist regime's cultural policies. However, it was precisely the opera's disorienting eclecticism that rendered it effective and relevant in 1937, paralleling Ghedini's stylistic approach with the strategic pluralism of fascism. Through its diverse musical initiatives, the regime aimed to accommodate and assimilate all individuals and trends under its broad aesthetic umbrella, seeking to please and encompass every facet of artistic expression. Pluralism likely served as the most effective strategy for navigating Italy's individualistic and heavily clientelist environment. Ghedini's 'vaguely indefinite lexicon', as later described by Mosso, mirrored the deliberately vague aesthetics pursued by the regime, acting as a patron of the arts rather than an art legislator.¹²⁹ Nicolodi suggests that 'eclecticism became the norm' in Italy beginning in 1923, when Guido M. Gatti brought together 'musicians with diverse tendencies, tastes and interests', to form the Italian division of the International Society of Contemporary Music. Yet, this inherently liberal pluralism evolved into a successful cultural tactic under fascism. Rather than imposing strict guidelines for an official fascist art, the regime embraced and labelled various trends within Italian culture as fascist. As the Minister Bottai articulated, fascist art encompassed 'the art being made in Italy today by Italian artists', eschewing overtly celebratory forms in favour of a more inclusive and tolerant approach.¹³⁰

¹²⁹ Marla Stone, *Patron State: Culture and Politics in Fascist Italy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1998); Nicolodi, *Musica e musicisti*; Mosso, 'Giorgio Federico Ghedini. Un itinerario stilistico'.

¹³⁰ Bottai quoted in Dino Marangon, 'Alle radici del successo: dall'«Arte per la Nazione» allo «Stato per l'Arte»', in *Il Novecento musicale italiano tra neoclassicismo e neogoticismo*, pp. 383–451. See also Fiamma Nicolodi, 'Su alcuni aspetti dei festival tra le due guerre'.

Within this framework, it becomes evident why Ghedini was the fitting choice for the inauguration of the Teatro delle Novità, and how his music in *Maria d'Alessandria* was especially valued during a period of heightened tension. The composer was highly regarded for his technical proficiency while maintaining a reserved demeanour in his pronouncements, which contributed to his reputation as an independent figure uninvolved in controversy. He perfectly embodied the directives set forth by the MinCulPop, as articulated by the Minister Dino Alfieri during the 1938 Venice Festival. Alfieri's words, though specifically aimed at the festival, were broadly applicable to all fascist institutions, including the Teatro delle Novità: 'the Festival (...) has the task of bringing to the judgement of the public all the Italian musicians who have a positive artistic reputation; it must never be a showcase of trends'.¹³¹ In this vein, both Ghedini's claim of his freedom from preconceptions, along with the critics' recognition of his independence from trends, provided him with a diplomatic advantage in a highly factionalised environment. Notably, Alceo Toni—the promoter of the 1932 Manifesto—wrote in his review of the opera in the *Rivista Illustrata del Popolo d'Italia*, commending Ghedini for his 'modern sensitivity and experience', without 'wearing the clothes of all the passing fashions'.¹³² He appreciated the opera's skilful integration of the aristocratic and 'italianissimo' Monteverdi with a more popular post-Wagnerian style. Toni contrasted Ghedini's music with what he termed the 'raging musical Volapuk' of modernism: 'musica da quattro gatti' (music for a limited audience), relying solely on 'successi di stima' (critical acclaim) and supported by 'limitate confraternite internazionali del mutuo soccorso reclamistico' (limited international guilds of mutual acclaim). In other words, according to Toni, Ghedini stood apart from the modernist *camorra*, despite his refined and contemporary musical style.

¹³¹ Quoted in Illiano and Sala, 'The politics of spectacle'.

¹³² Alceo Toni, 'Giorgio Federico Ghedini', *Rivista Illustrata del Popolo d'Italia*, XVI.12 (1937), 46–7.

In *Maria d'Alessandria*, the composer's integration of different styles, encompassing both historical and contemporary elements in what was described as a 'linguistic average' by Mosso, coupled with his penchant for moderation and restraint—apt at tempering trends and excesses, as later acknowledged by Pasi—mirrored the fascist strategy of assimilating different trends while moderating their extremes, as explicitly outlined in Lualdi's 1932 press release and as crucially reaffirmed by Pavolini in 1938.¹³³ *Maria d'Alessandria* could be seen to embody Dell'Antonio's depiction of fascism as a 'de-historicised historical bricolage'.¹³⁴ Marrying sophisticated and contemporary elements with popular and traditional solutions, *Maria d'Alessandria* 'diplomatically' catered to a diverse audience, pleasing both conservative critics like Toni and more progressive musicians like Gavazzeni. Just as Maria could allure both sinners and pilgrims, the opera had the potential to captivate both the public and the critics, as well as to unite the modernist and traditionalist factions of Italian music, akin to the regime's multifaceted initiatives.

Beyond 1937

Having explored the historical significance of *Maria d'Alessandria* in 1937, amidst late fascism, one might now contemplate the future of the opera, its composer and the Teatro delle Novità, and whether they lived up to their auspicious debut. Ghedini believed that for an opera to demonstrate its quality, it must progress on its way ('l'opera deve camminare'), and in 1939 *Maria d'Alessandria* reached the prestigious stage of La Scala.¹³⁵ The opera received a mixed reception at this Milan performance, drawing both applause and boos from the so-called 'melodici scontenti' (disgruntled melodists), representing the faction of staunch anti-modernists within the city's generally

¹³³ Mosso, 'Giorgio Federico Ghedini. Un itinerario stilistico'; Pasi, 'La peccatrice redenta'.

¹³⁴ Dell'Antonio, 'Il divino Claudio'.

¹³⁵ Ghedini, cited in 'Dieci minuti rubati a Federico Ghedini'.

conservative audience, as well as Ghedini's opponents.¹³⁶ Amidst escalating tensions in the waning years of fascism and in the absence of overt regime support, the 1939 staging laid bare the factionalism and simmering animosity within Italian music.¹³⁷ Nevertheless, Ghedini's career as an opera composer soared following *Maria d'Alessandria*. At the onset of that same year—1939—he premiered another new opera, *Re Hassan*, at La Fenice in Venice. Meanwhile, a mere two years after its opening, the Teatro delle Novità was already grappling with financial difficulties, further exacerbated by the looming spectre of war, which ultimately led to the suspension of the current season.

Taking in a longer purview, *Maria d'Alessandria* has only been staged four times since its debut (excluding radio broadcasts) and, like most of Ghedini's other operas, has not been performed for decades.¹³⁸ The Teatro delle Novità, along with many other musical institutions founded during the fascist era, survived the fall of the regime. Missiroli, like many other bureaucrats, retained his role as the festival's organiser. In 1957, on the twentieth anniversary of the Teatro delle Novità, both Ghedini and the renowned conductor Nino Sanzogno praised Missiroli's leadership for his 'courageous and unscrupulous eclecticism' in selecting new works—an approach deemed more

¹³⁶ Regarding the lukewarm reception of Ghedini's opera at La Scala, Gavazzeni remarked: 'this public seems increasingly incapable of evaluating both the music of the past and that of today'. Gavazzeni. Ghedini himself recounted an alternative response by the Milanese audience in letters to his student Carlo Pinelli. He observed a growing enthusiasm over the three performances, particularly during the last one, which was open to the public of the Opera Nazionale del Dopolavoro, a fascist initiative for organising workers' leisure activities. According to Ghedini, his hostile reception was orchestrated by the soprano Serafina Di Leo, who had previously been the main performer in Bergamo, but was now excluded from the new casting. Additionally, some representatives of the Turin conservatoire may have contributed to this adverse claque, following Ghedini's conflict with its director Franco Alfano and subsequent dismissal. Parise, *Giorgio Federico Ghedini*, pp. 145–46.

¹³⁷ In her comprehensive analysis of the evolving phases of fascist patronage, Stone underscores how the war acted as a catalyst, heightening tensions among the previously coexisting factions of Italian culture. Stone, *Patron State*.

¹³⁸ After its premiere, *Maria d'Alessandria* saw subsequent stagings at the following venues: Modena's Teatro Comunale (1938), Teatro alla Scala (1939), Trieste's Teatro Comunale (1960) and Turin's Teatro Regio (1984).

significant than the novelty of the works themselves.¹³⁹ Eclecticism not only remained a hallmark of Ghedini's style but also served as a liberal and strategic criterion for structuring programmes. It stood as one of the enduring elements of continuity in the policies of Italian musical institutions, transcending the demise of fascism and the swift transformations in historical and political contexts.¹⁴⁰ The Italian state continued to support opera institutionally and economically even after the nationalistic era of fascism.¹⁴¹ Despite facing challenges, the Teatro delle Novità persevered until 1973, presenting the operatic debuts of composers like Nino Rota (*Ariodante*, 1942), Luciano Berio (*Mimusique N. 2*, 1955) and Giacomo Manzoni (*La Sentenza*, 1960). However, the initiative increasingly grappled with the overarching and gradual decline of opera composers, the genre itself and its audience.¹⁴²

¹³⁹ Ghedini's remarks at the *Festival autunnale dell'opera lirica*, reported in Alberti and Piras, "Uomini e no' di Niccolò Castiglioni".

¹⁴⁰ This further reinforces the narrative of significant continuity between the regime, liberal Italy before it and the Republic after, a theme this thesis aims to explore.

¹⁴¹ Besides departing from the D'Annunzian themes of *Maria d'Alessandria*, Ghedini revisited the mystical essence and imagery of the sea in other works, notably exemplified by the renowned *Concerto dell'Albatro*.

¹⁴² In 1953, the Teatro delle Novità also began welcoming debuts from foreign composers. See Ermanno Comuzio, *Il teatro Donizetti. Due secoli di storia* (Bergamo: Lucchetti editore, 1990).

CHAPTER 2

NO MORE SAINTS: *RE HASSAN* AS A TURNING POINT (1939)

Back in the Limelight

Ahead of his debut with *Maria d'Alessandria* in 1937, Ghedini was already working on his next opera, *Re Hassan*. As he declared, 'theatre captivates me, and I am burning with the passion of a neophyte'.¹ Driven by enthusiasm and confidence, Ghedini embarked on this new project seemingly without a formal commission. According to his pupil Barbara Giuranna, while *Maria d'Alessandria* catered to the public (in line with Mussolini's recommendation for art to reach 'towards the people'), *Re Hassan* was supposed to be both appealing to the masses and exemplary as a more self-consciously modern work.² The libretto for the latter was by Tullio Pinelli, an emerging playwright and brother of Carlo, Ghedini's pupil and confidant. In early 1938, as the opera neared completion, Ghedini shared the text with his fellow composer Goffredo Petrassi. Petrassi, who had previously collaborated closely with Mario Labroca at the Ispettorato del Teatro, now held the position of superintendent at the Teatro La Fenice in Venice. Ghedini sought Petrassi's opinion on the libretto and explored the potential for staging the opera in the city.³ Simultaneously, *Re Hassan* was already under consideration among the proposed productions for the upcoming season at the Teatro Reale dell'Opera in Rome.⁴ In the late 1930s, the regime's cultural directives compelled the so-called Enti

¹ 'Dieci minuti rubati a Federico Ghedini', *Il Popolo*, 11 October 1937.

² As reported by Ghedini in his letter to Carlo Pinelli (14.08.1937), in Stefano Parise, *Giorgio Federico Ghedini: l'uomo, le opere attraverso le lettere* (Milan: Ricordi, 2003), p. 105.

³ Ghedini held Goffredo Petrassi (1904-2003) in genuine regard, as evident in his personal writings, considering him among the few esteemed musicians of their time. Petrassi, with influential connections like Alfredo Casella and Nicola De Pirro, held prestigious positions within fascist institutions, including the Ispettorato del Teatro, a division of the Ministry of Popular Culture. Fiamma Nicolodi, *Musica e musicisti nel ventennio fascista*. (Fiesole: Discanto, 1984), p. 17.

⁴ See Ghedini's letter to Petrassi (26.02.1938), in Parise, *Giorgio Federico Ghedini*, p. 108.

Lirici to include either a premiere or an opera by a contemporary Italian composer into their programmes. In seamless continuation with the Teatro delle Novità's approach, this strategic measure aimed to promote national musicians and new works.⁵ Meeting both requirements, *Re Hassan* finally premiered on 26 January 1939 at La Fenice, with a special dedication to Petrassi, who had ensured its staging in Venice.⁶

The triumph of *Maria d'Alessandria* at the Teatro delle Novità in 1937 had firmly established Ghedini within the official realm of Italian music, granting him access to the most prestigious events, including the highly sought-after Venice Festival.⁷ *Re Hassan* marked another occasion where Ghedini benefited from the regime's support in line with its protectionist approach to contemporary Italian operas. As observed by a critic, *Re Hassan* was the 166th new opera staged in La Fenice's long history.⁸ In contrast with its sombre content, depicting the fall of the kingdom of Granada in the fifteenth century, the production spared no expense, the theatre investing 200,000 lire to create a notably sumptuous staging. The opera was conducted by Fernando Previtali and directed by Mario Frigerio, with costumes designed by Titina Rota (see Figure 2.1).

Re Hassan received considerable success, being warmly welcomed by the discerning audience in Venice, who rewarded it with '26 curtain calls', as reported in the press. Alfredo Casella, a significant presence in the contemporary musical realm, praised the opera for its intense drama and refined aesthetics, noting Ghedini's commitment to quality over facile effects and positioning him at 'the

⁵ According to the 1938 directives issued by Alessandro Pavolini, who was then heading MinCulPop, half of the bills of Enti Lirici were reserved for Italian operas dating from 1900 onwards. Within this quota, another half was mandated to feature works from the most recent twenty years. See Roberto Zanetti, *La musica italiana nel Novecento*, 3 vols (Busto Arsizio: Bramante, 1985), I, p. 657; Fiamma Nicolodi, 'Aspetti di politica culturale nel Ventennio fascista', in *Italian Music during the Fascist Period*, ed. by Roberto Illiano (Turnhout: Brepols, 2004), pp. 97–122.

⁶ See Petrassi's interview in Parise, *Giorgio Federico Ghedini*, p. 365.

⁷ In September 1938, Ghedini made his debut at the Venice Festival with two cantatas, *Lectio libri sapientiae* and *XII capitolo dell'Apocalisse*, having been invited by the organisers, Alfredo Casella and Mario Corti. In the same period, Ghedini was also commissioned to compose the music for a documentary on the inauguration of a new FIAT factory in Mirafiori—a project serving as a showcase of the regime's touted successful policies.

⁸ Guido Piamonte, 'Re Hassan, 3 Atti e 4 quadri di T. Pinelli, musica di G. F. Ghedini alla Fenice di Venezia (26 gennaio 1939)', *Musica d'Oggi*, XXI.2 (1939), 57–58. All press clippings from the premiere mentioned here have been generously supplied by La Fenice archive in Venice.

forefront of Italian opera composers'.⁹ The critics, largely favourable, consistently acknowledged Ghedini's technical prowess, along with the theatrical depth of his music in vividly portraying the onstage situations and characters. Some admired the music for its faithful adherence to the text, while others faulted it for its perceived secondary role in accompanying rather than enhancing the action.¹⁰ To some observers, Ghedini's restrained and anti-rhetorical style came across as somewhat aloof, resulting in music that, while noble, lacked vitality. For others, instead, the opera's overall terseness was seen as a hallmark of modernity.¹¹ These disputes surrounding *Re Hassan* continued beyond its premiere. In this chapter, I will examine the subsequent stagings of the opera, exploring their reception across different historical contexts, before discussing its specific relevance within the late-fascist era from which it emerged.



Figure 2.1. Sketch for *Re Hassan* by Titina Rota for the Venetian premiere of the opera (Archive of the Teatro La Fenice)

⁹ Alfredo Casella, 'La stagione operistica in Italia' [22 April 1939], in *La musica al tempo dell'aereo e della radio. Cronache musicali (1925-46)* (Turin: EDT, 2014), pp. 226–29.

¹⁰ As one critic put it, 'the music seizes and explains the situation, but without enhancing nor transfiguring it'. 'Lettera da Venezia', *La Rassegna Musicale*, 12.3 (1939), pp. 129–32.

¹¹ Franco Abbiati, "'Re Hassan" di Ghedini. Il vivissimo successo alla "Fenice"', *Corriere Della Sera*, 27 January 1939; Luigi Torchi, 'Ghedini, Giorgio Federico, *Re Hassan*, tre atti e quattro quadri di Tullio Pinelli. Riduzione per canto e pianoforte (Milano: G. Ricordi, 1938)', *Rivista Musicale Italiana*, XLIV.4 (1940), 378–80.

The Shelf Life of a Contemporary Opera

Following the premiere, Ghedini's *Re Hassan* continued to benefit from fascist promotional efforts and was prominently featured at Milan's Teatro alla Scala in 1942 as the opening work of the *Stagione di opere contemporanee*, one of the regime's last and most distinctive initiatives in the musical sphere and cultural policy at large.¹² The context of this second staging presents a particularly intriguing perspective for grasping the fate of Ghedini's opera and shedding light on the broader challenges encountered by new operas in such a swiftly changing environment. Occurring amidst significant social and political upheaval, this seminal initiative projected a sense of continuity into the post-war era, revealing—as Nicolò Palazzetti argues—the emergence and cultural validation of the Italian Resistance precisely within fascist institutions.¹³ In direct correlation between political stance and aesthetics, the 1942 Stagione marked a breakthrough in Italian musical debate, triggering revaluations of the elusive concept of modernity. Looking ahead to the post-war era, these discussions foreshadowed a shift in how art would be evaluated, emphasising its historical significance as a primary criterion.

Conducted under the auspices of the Direzione Generale per il Teatro e la Musica, this opera season showcased a range of 'contemporary' works, encompassing both Italian and foreign productions. It took place in the autumn of 1942, preceding the annual seasons of La Scala and the Teatro dell'Opera in Rome.¹⁴ As Nicola De Pirro suggested, akin to the Triennale of contemporary art, this initiative offered a distinct platform for evaluating new operas independently, devoid of unwarranted comparisons with the traditional repertoire, in order to guide and refresh public taste.

¹² As Parise suggests, the inclusion of *Re Hassan* in the 1942 initiative was likely a further acknowledgment of Ghedini's growing stature, both as a modern composer following the success of *Architettura* (1940), and as a respected figure in the Italian musical establishment of the time. This was evident through his appointment as a composition professor at the Milan Conservatoire in 1941 and his elevation to the status of Academician of Santa Cecilia in 1942. Stefano Parise, 'Profilo di Giorgio Federico Ghedini' (dissertation, Università degli Studi di Milano, 1992).

¹³ Nicolò Palazzetti, *Béla Bartók in Italy: The Politics of Myth-Making* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2021).

¹⁴ During that period, there was a notion circulating about merging the two theatres into a single Ente Lirico. Zanetti, *La musica italiana nel Novecento*, I, p. 662.

Eclecticism continued to prevail as the guiding principle, with the programmes design to present various trends of contemporary music theatre. The operas featured were not necessarily groundbreaking or experimental, but rather quite recent, typically from the past two decades.¹⁵ The lineup at La Scala, for instance, included *Re Hassan* (3 October), the Italian premieres of Carl Orff's *Carmina Burana*, Béla Bartók's *The Miraculous Mandarin* and Arthur Honegger's *Amphion* (12 October), followed by Felice Lattuada's *La tempesta* (21 October) and Alfredo Casella's *La donna serpente* (31 October).¹⁶ From the expressionistic flair of Bartók's ballet to the outmoded romantic style of Lattuada's work (chosen to represent Milanese composers), critics found the juxtaposition of these diverse works instructive. It allowed for a nuanced assessment of the varying degrees of modernity and artistic value present in contemporary operas.¹⁷ As De Pirro remarked, these works were frequently consigned to oblivion, largely due to the public's lack of interest and the critics' uncertainty.¹⁸

This focus on the fate of opera in contemporary cultural discourse might appear somewhat unexpected, especially considering that the destiny of the nation itself was at risk. Indeed, the 1942 initiative took place during the turmoil of World War II and amidst the severe cultural and economic restrictions it imposed. It is even more striking to note that the programmes of this initiative included works by composers who were banned by the National Socialists, Italy's major ally at the time. This included a performance of Alban Berg's *Wozzeck* in Rome, a work condemned by the Nazi regime as 'degenerate art', and Bartók at La Scala, who had already sought refuge in the United States. Scholars investigating the interplay between modernism and fascism argue that this apex of modernist endorsement, departing from the Nazi stance, showcases how the Italian

¹⁵ Nicola De Pirro, quoted in Zanetti, *La musica italiana nel Novecento*, III, pp. 1639–42.

¹⁶ The operas performed in Rome included *I capricci di Callot* by Gian Francesco Malipiero, *Belfagor* by Ottorino Respighi, *Wozzeck* by Alban Berg, *Volo di notte* by Luigi Dallapiccola, *Coro di morti* by Goffredo Petrassi, *Arlecchino* by Ferruccio Busoni.

¹⁷ Luigi Rognoni, 'Lettera da Milano', *La Rassegna Musicale*, 15.11 (1942), 294–97.

¹⁸ De Pirro, quoted in Zanetti, *La musica italiana nel Novecento*, III, pp. 1639–42.

regime leveraged culture as a platform to compete and assert its independence within the Axis alliance—potentially compensating for military shortcomings.¹⁹

In keeping with this argument, *La guerra perpetua* (1941), an allegorical tale by the Italian writer Alberto Moravia, delved into this clash between fascist Italy and Nazi's Germany's military alliance and cultural divergence.²⁰ The narrative metaphorically depicted a scenario where two allies were locked in a 'perpetual war'. The book was based on an agreement between two hypothetical countries involving the exchange of human and material resources slated for destruction: while one country emphasised the artistic quality of the goods and men supplied, the other claimed to value quantity over quality and vaunted their promptness in destroying such resources. A fictional minister from the former country staunchly championed their nation's cause by declaring, 'the realm of art is yet another domain in which our superiority is indisputable (...) I maintain, as I always have, that the loss of a poet weighs much heavier on the war budget than that of ten thousand soldiers'.²¹ These iconic words succinctly captured Italy's stance during that period.

As popular consensus waned irreversibly during the war, the fascist regime renewed efforts to enlist the backing of intellectuals and artists; this intention was clear in the selection of operas for the 1942 Stagione. Indeed, in a notably conservative theatre such as La Scala, famously dedicated to nineteenth-century opera, the new superintendent Carlo Gatti made a bold move to engage the conservative subscriber base with provocative works and pioneering stage design. This involved the collaboration of Italy's leading contemporary painters, such as Giorgio De Chirico, Enrico Prampolini and Felice Casorati. The initiative defied all expectations regarding the response of La

¹⁹ Palazzetti contends that the initiative was a double-edged sword for the regime, exhibiting an unexpected liberalism while inadvertently nurturing the rise and growth of cultural resistance against fascism. Palazzetti; Ruth Ben-Ghiat, *Fascist Modernities: Italy, 1922-1945* (London: University of California Press, 2001).

²⁰ Alberto Moravia, *Racconti surrealisti e satirici* (Milan: Bompiani, 1982), pp. 265–70.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 265–70.

Scala audience, proving to be remarkably successful—somewhat foreshadowing Milan’s role as the backdrop for post-war renewal and significantly shaping the trajectory of Ghedini’s later career.

In contrast to the controversial staging of *Maria d’Alessandria* in 1939, *Re Hassan* was embraced warmly by the large audience at La Scala in 1942. This enthusiastic reception left Ghedini ‘feeling akin to Amilcare Ponchielli’, a beloved nineteenth-century opera composer.²² However, in the press reviews, when compared to other contemporary works on the programme, critics raised doubts about the modernity of Ghedini’s new opera. While consistently acknowledging Ghedini’s mastery, critics noted a discord between the advanced quality of his music and the seemingly outdated nature of the libretto. The opera was perceived as teetering between bold artistic exploration and a hesitance to fully embrace modernity. For critics such as Luigi Rognoni or Ferdinando Ballo, who post-war were associated with antifascism and emphasised the importance of moral commitment in art, Ghedini’s modernity seemed more a stylistic preference than a matter of conscience. Consequently, they perceived his work as displaying a cold academicism, a lack of discernible taste and a superficial response to the challenges facing opera and the contemporary era.²³

The year following *Re Hassan*’s performance in Milan, the opera’s full score, housed in Ricordi’s archive, was badly damaged during bombing raids on the city. As a result, Ghedini had to undertake the task of re-orchestrating the work.²⁴ The opera remained unperformed until 1961, when it was staged for the last time at the San Carlo theatre in Naples, featuring a finale completely revised by

²² See Ghedini’s letter to G. Negri (07.10.1942), in Parise, *Giorgio Federico Ghedini*, p. 169.

²³ Assessed through this lens of historical relevance, which uncovered certain latent anti-Nazi, if not anti-fascist sentiments among the critics, Bartók’s ballet resonated with this call for dedication. Conversely, Honegger’s *Amphion* was seen as an opera centred solely on aestheticism, while *Carmina Burana* was deemed vulgar and anachronistic, reflecting a broader crisis transcending the realm of art. Ferdinando Ballo, ‘La stagione di opere contemporanee a Milano’, *Musica*, 2 (1943), 220–35; Rognoni, ‘Lettera da Milano’; Luigi Rognoni and Eva Randi, ‘La stagione di opere contemporanee alla Scala’, *Emporium*, XLVIII.12 (1942), 542–47.

²⁴ As Ghedini expressed: ‘this opera now feels alien to my current spirit, requiring double effort and causing some annoyance’. Quoted from Ghedini’s letter to C. Pinelli (20.12.1944) in Parise, *Giorgio Federico Ghedini*, p. 242.

Ghedini for the occasion.²⁵ As time passed, the composer's initial enthusiasm for the opera faded to the point of his defining *Re Hassan* an outdated work with dull music.²⁶ In the post-war era, dominated by an uncompromising avant-garde movement, and as Ghedini neared the end of his career, some moderate critics persisted in their appreciation of the opera. They commended its measured approach, which avoided the pitfalls of both traditional sentimentality and modern technicism—what they called the 'mechanical nature' of contemporary avant-garde music. In contrast to the perceived stylistic uncertainty that drew criticism two decades prior, critics in 1961 identified in *Re Hassan* the unmistakable hallmarks of Ghedini's style, akin to those showcased in his most acclaimed works.²⁷

Judgments on the opera thus changed throughout Ghedini's career. Once hailed as 'an example of modern theatre' in the late thirties and listed among contemporary works in 1942 (although its modernity was already debated by then), *Re Hassan* had become outdated even in the eyes of its author by the 1960s. In other words, although stylistic recognition emerged later, the opera itself seems to have aged quickly. Despite the profound changes in the Italian historical and socio-cultural landscape over the intervening twenty years, *Re Hassan* seemed to mirror the fate of most contemporary operas, as De Pirro had described it back in 1941: 'staged in large theatres with no more than three performances, contemporary operas typically receive a mixed reception from critics, and the composer's efforts are quickly forgotten. Only a few manage to secure performances in two or three additional theatres at most before fading into obscurity'.²⁸

²⁵ Regrettably, to date, no recordings of the opera have been found, hindering a more comprehensive understanding of the work in performance.

²⁶ Literally in Italian 'fa crescere la barba'. See Ghedini cited in Alfredo Parente, 'Re Hassan di Ghedini al Teatro S. Carlo di Napoli', *Musica d'Oggi*, 4.3 (1961), 121–23.

²⁷ *Ibid.*; Piero Santi, 'Un'opera di Ghedini. Re Hassan', *Radiocorriere*, 38.29 (1961), 27.

²⁸ 'Tutti sappiamo quale sia la sorte delle opere contemporanee: eseguite generalmente in un grande teatro, vi tirano a stento la breve esistenza di due o tre rappresentazioni; il successo è su per giù sempre lo stesso, la critica si divide quasi sempre in due campi, la fatica dell'autore viene prestamente dimenticata. Alcune di queste opere compiono un certo ciclo attraverso due o tre teatri al massimo e finiscono poi per arenarsi'. De Pirro quoted in Zanetti, *La musica italiana nel Novecento*, III, pp. 1639–42 (p. 1639).

Confronted with the opera's ephemeral nature and its fleeting sense of modernity, it would be beneficial to revisit *Re Hassan* within its original historical context, to further gauge its initial novelty and relevance. Positioned 'at the forefront' of musical endeavours in 1939, as Casella noted, and chosen to inaugurate the 1942 review of contemporary works, *Re Hassan* inevitably prompts us to consider its contemporaneous significance—just as it did critics at the time. In the analysis that follows, I will delve into the interplay between the opera and the years leading up to the collapse of fascism during the World War II. As I will demonstrate, the opera's relevance extends beyond the circumstances of its initial productions, which were shaped by the regime's cultural policies, to encapsulate the zeitgeist of late-fascist Italy, reflecting the prevailing disillusionment of the era. Both the text and the music portray a world anxiously awaiting its inevitable demise, resonating with themes found in other contemporary musical and literary compositions. Falling into a watershed moment of Italian history, but frequently disregarded in subsequent cultural discussions, *Re Hassan* marked a significant turning point in Ghedini's operatic output and reception.²⁹ Dismissed by some already in 1942 as dusty and conventional for its historical subject, and thus criticised by some wartime reviewers for its perceived detachment from contemporary concerns, the opera has recently been reassessed by later scholars as an exemplar of 'moral theatre' and a witness to the crisis of its times.³⁰ Probing further this more recent reading of the opera and its historical relevance, I will suggest how *Re Hassan*, in committing to its contemporary moment, enacts a metaphorical and disenchanting reflection on the role of art in history.

²⁹ In 1948, critics frequently cited *Re Hassan* in their reviews of Ghedini's new tragedy, *Le Baccanti*, using it as a benchmark to highlight the superior quality and balance of *Re Hassan* that were lacking in the new work.

³⁰ Andrea Lanza, "... una stesura che ho voluto secca e avara di parole...". Ghedini e il teatro d'opera: uno sguardo d'insieme', in *Giorgio Federico Ghedini: dallo spirito torinese alle suggestioni europee. Atti del convegno, Torino, 22 gennaio 2016*, ed. by Giulia Giachin (Turin: Edizioni del Conservatorio, 2017), pp. 79–98; Guido Salvetti, 'L'«antipoetica» di G. F. Ghedini nella musica italiana tra le due guerre', *Studi musicali*, 1.2 (1972), 371–417. According to Lanza, *Re Hassan* is perhaps Ghedini's operatic masterpiece.

Difficult Times

As his second venture into music theatre, Ghedini felt both emboldened to experiment further with the genre and was more self-assured in what he wanted to achieve; this marked *Re Hassan* as a transitional opera within the composer's production. Not entirely satisfied with *Maria d'Alessandria*, Ghedini 'was looking for something more up-to-date', when he started his collaboration with Pinelli.³¹ Upon receiving the new libretto from Ghedini, his 'beloved friend and highly esteemed musician', Petrassi lauded the text as 'interesting, fast-paced and dramatic', deciding to include *Re Hassan* in La Fenice's next season.³² The subject was drawn from the children's novel *Gli ultimi signori dell'Alhambra* by Luisa Banal, a professor and writer, originally published in Turin in 1926. The libretto marked Pinelli's debut in music theatre and served as a testing ground for his enduring partnership with Ghedini—a meeting described as a 'coup de foudre' by Angiola Bonisconti.³³ By his own account, Pinelli had never been an operagoer and indeed harboured a certain aversion towards the genre.³⁴ He endeavoured to sidestep traditional operatic conventions while working on the subject of *Re Hassan*, yet he did not strive for an entirely 'atypical' libretto. As can be read in his letters and interviews, Ghedini insisted on a terse and austere text, devoid of unnecessary words and rhetoric.³⁵ Pinelli responded to his requests by delivering a libretto featuring 'concise and robust scenes', providing essential 'dramatic and lyrical nuclei' for musical development.³⁶ The plot unfolds through a series of brisk yet not particularly dynamic situations, depicting the political and human demise of a kingdom.

³¹ Quote from Carlo Pinelli's interview in Parise, 'Profilo di Giorgio Federico Ghedini', pp. 575–76.

³² See Petrassi's interview in Parise, *Giorgio Federico Ghedini*, p. 365.

³³ See Angiola Maria Bonisconti, 'Il teatro musicale di Giorgio Federico Ghedini', *Musica d'oggi*, 4.5 (1961), 194–200.

³⁴ 'Operatic tradition repelled me', as Pinelli declared in his interview with Parise, 'Profilo di Giorgio Federico Ghedini', pp. 577–78.

³⁵ Ghedini presented Pinelli's libretto to Petrassi as 'una stesura, che ho voluto secca, spoglia, avara di parole e di inutile retorica'. Ghedini's letter to Petrassi (26.2.1938) in Parise, *Giorgio Federico Ghedini*, p. 108.

³⁶ Ghedini's words from the same letter. *Ibid.*

To the sound of a forlorn voice singing from afar, the opera opens with King Hassan and his son Hussein wandering restlessly through the deserted halls of their palace in Granada at night, awaiting the arrival of the delegation from King Ferdinando, whose visit will seal the fate of the Moorish kingdom. Two women intercede to restore peace, but in vain: Moraima, Hussein's young wife, attempts to reconcile the hostilities between the king and his son; Jarifa, the ousted queen, endeavours to avert the impending war. However, Hassan disdainfully rejects Jarifa and the terms set by the Christian messenger, thereby shattering a centuries-old peace between the two peoples. The repercussions of his decision swiftly unfold in Act II of the opera. In the first scene, the populace grieves over the ravages of war, which have impacted all, be they friends or foes, irrespective of their allegiances. Yet, King Hassan remains merciless and inflexible. Meanwhile, as depicted in the second scene, Hussein, along with his mother and wife, are held captive by the Christians. Moraima's kind nature succeeds in lifting Hussein out of his troubles through her singing, engaging him in a duet celebrating their youth and love. Yet, this idyll is short-lived: King Ferdinando's envoy approaches Hussein, proposing freedom and arms to overthrow his father and seize control of the kingdom of Granada, in exchange for the life of his young son. Ambition and greed prevail over paternal love, and the end draws near. In Act III, the backdrop reverberates with the voices and sounds of war. The kingdom lies in ruins and King Hassan decides to abdicate. Hussein assumes the throne, but he too is inwardly defeated; Moraima has died of grief for their young son. Granada's fate is sealed: Hussein confronts defeat against the enemy, while King Hassan walks away in solitude, leaving desolation behind him.³⁷

Re Hassan stands out as a dark tragedy set against an historical background, contrasting with both the mystical parable of *Maria d'Alessandria* and the mocking comedy of the subsequent *La pulce d'oro* (1939). In many ways, it resonates more with the pessimistic and existentialist undertones found in

³⁷ In the second version of the finale, Ghedini opts for King Hassan to commit suicide among spears, a more 'heroic' and canonical solution compared to the utter bleakness of the first one.

his later post-war operas, such as *Le Baccanti* (1948) and *Billy Budd* (1949).³⁸ Ghedini's eclectic choice of operatic subjects reflected a desire for experimentation, characterised by what Petrassi termed as 'indeterminate stylistic research' during the late thirties, marking a distinctive phase in the composer's artistic career.³⁹ Some critics viewed this versatility as a flaw, interpreting it as a sign of the composer's lack of distinct personality. They contended that it resulted in an array of disconnected choices lacking a cohesive thread or style.⁴⁰ While the unoriginal aspects of *Maria d'Alessandria* had not garnered criticism just a few years earlier in the welcoming setting of the Teatro delle Novità, the historical theme of *Re Hassan* seemed outmoded to many, relying too heavily on tradition and proving inappropriate for addressing the contemporary crisis of the genre.

The composer was widely blamed for his choice: 'how could Ghedini possibly set to music those old and dusty *polpettoni melodrammatici*?'.⁴¹ Pinelli's libretto faced extensive criticism for its overly ambitious and somewhat convoluted fusion of operatic modes, tropes and characters. The critics even discerned dilettantish remnants of romantic, verismo and D'Annunzian-Pizzettian opera within his pages.⁴² Indeed, despite Pinelli's professed aversion of opera, *Re Hassan*'s libretto evokes several conventional situations, beginning with its setting in ancient Spain, which serves as an ideal backdrop for power struggles, religious conflicts and overall melodramatic intensity.⁴³ While the figure of the tyrant is a long-standing trope in tragedy, the tangle between politics and family ties, the clash between public duties and personal matters, as well as scenes of imprisonment and the

³⁸ Premiered after nearly a decade of development, *Le Baccanti* (see Chapter 4) was mostly composed during the war years and like *Re Hassan*, portrayed the self-destruction of a civilisation.

³⁹ See Petrassi's interview in Parise, *Giorgio Federico Ghedini*, p. 365.

⁴⁰ 'Lettera da Venezia'.

⁴¹ Ballo, 'La stagione di opere contemporanee a Milano'. According to the critic, the choice of libretto implied moral obligations beyond artistic responsibilities on the part of the composer.

⁴² Rognoni, 'Lettera da Milano'; Ballo, 'La stagione di opere contemporanee a Milano'.

⁴³ Consider numerous nineteenth-century operas, including Cherubini's *Les Abencérages* (1813), Meyerbeer's *L'esule di Granada* (1822), Donizetti's *Elvira* (1826), Verdi's *Ernani* (1844), *Il trovatore* (1853), *Don Carlos* (1867), Massenet's *Le Cid* (1885).

motif of curses, stand out among the most common operatic clichés.⁴⁴ Warriors, knights, courtiers, prisoners and the crowd, are among the typical roles for operatic choruses, with the lament of the people recurring in choral scenes, prompting critics to draw reference to Mussorgsky and Verdi. *Boris Godunov*, *Don Carlos* and *Simon Boccanegra* were the most often cited titles in reviews of *Re Hassan*.⁴⁵

These operatic commonplaces appeared to contradict Ghedini's quest for a libretto more aligned with contemporary themes than Meano's libretto for *Maria d'Alessandria*, which was deeply entrenched in traditional tropes. Despite the clichés evident in Pinelli's text, Guido Salvetti recognised a unique freshness in *Re Hassan*, offering a new perspective on both human nature and the genre itself when compared to the preceding opera. The moral optimism portrayed in *Maria d'Alessandria*, marked by its happy-ending, heroic gestures and redeeming conversions, did not resurface in Ghedini's oeuvre, not even in the subsequent comic opera, *La pulce d'oro*. The Pizzettian belief in the redemptive power of love was lost and would only be revived in Ghedini's final opera, *Lord Inferno* (1952). Moreover, the hopelessly pessimistic tone of *Re Hassan*, a rarity within the tradition of Italian opera, sharply contrasted with the triumphalist depiction of history in other contemporary Italian works around this time: operas like Mascagni's *Nerone* (1935), Malipiero's *Giulio Cesare* (1936) and Porrino's *Gli Orazi* (1941) reclaimed the Roman myth to exalt past glories and pay tribute to fascism.⁴⁶ History served as the regime's political canvas. Set in Moorish Spain, *Re Hassan* stands instead as an opera of total defeat, encompassing both material destruction and moral degradation. Here, the historical context serves merely as a backdrop to narrate the

⁴⁴ The latter occurs twice in the opera: first, when Jarifa lashes out at Hassan, and second, when Hussein curses himself at the end.

⁴⁵ Piamonte recognised the explicit influence of Verdi's *declamato* and Mussorgsky's use of chorus in *Re Hassan*, for the rest appreciating Ghedini's stylistic autonomy. Piamonte, 'Re Hassan'.

⁴⁶ However, these examples of celebratory operas differ significantly from one another, not only musically but also in their premises and outcomes. Their shared outwardly laudatory tone varies: it is evident in Porrino's case, somewhat clumsy in Mascagni's portrayal of the anti-heroic Nero, and remains ambiguous for Malipiero, who approached the Roman myth through a Shakespearean lens.

inescapable decline of a civilisation and its people. The battle is doomed from the outset, with no triumphant hero and characters trapped within their assigned roles: Hassan, the lonely and stubborn tyrant; Hussein, contrasting as a greedy and vile man; Jarifa, consumed by vengeance; and Moraima, sweet and defenceless. Nobody wins, and they are all defeated in the end, with no chance of catharsis amidst this ultimate desolation.

The opera's unrheterical and anti-triumphalist tone sharply contrasted with the official circumstances of its earliest stagings, which took place under the aegis of fascism.⁴⁷ As reported in the press reviews, the Venetian premiere of *Re Hassan* was introduced with the playing of national anthems, along with that of the Spanish Falangists. As early as 1937, Mussolini sent volunteers and equipment to support the nationalists in the Spanish Civil War. Yet, this intervention resulted in disastrous defeats, such as at Guadalajara in 1937, exposing Italian military unpreparedness on the eve of a looming world war. In 1937, when an interviewer suggested the timeliness of Spain for Ghedini's new opera, the composer clarified that he was referring to the old Spain 'of centuries past'.⁴⁸ However, the echoes of that bloody, strife-torn Spain of Christians and Moors reverberated in the atrocities of the contemporary Civil War, famously captured in Picasso's *Guernica* (1937).⁴⁹

In other words, the 'anti-tyrannical' and 'anti-militarist' character—as defined by Salvetti—of *Re Hassan*'s libretto had a poignant relevance in the contemporary moment and within the broader context of fascist Italy.⁵⁰ Besides the facile parallels with the figure of a stubborn and unscrupulous

⁴⁷ This apparent contradiction could arise within fascist culture, as we will see in the opera of the next chapter, *La pulce d'oro*. Conversely, the positive narrative of *Maria d'Alessandria* aligned with fascist rhetoric surrounding *mediterraneità* and the constructive approach of the Teatro delle Novità, which aimed to revitalise opera.

⁴⁸ 'Dieci minuti rubati a Federico Ghedini'.

⁴⁹ It is worth remembering how the Church and fascism found perfect ideological alignment in supporting the reactionary faction during the Spanish Civil War. The propaganda of the era proclaimed, 'cross and sword against hammer and sickle', evoking a quasi-holy war reminiscent of the conflict depicted in *Re Hassan*. Andrea Di Michele, '«...per la cristiana e romana civiltà». Fascismo e religione nella Guerra civile spagnola attraverso le fotografie di un "legionario" italiano', *Spagna contemporanea. Rivista semestrale di storia, cultura, istituzioni*, 34 (2008), 179–95; Luciano Canfora, *Le vie del classicismo* (Rome: Laterza, 1989).

⁵⁰ Salvetti, 'L'«antipoetica» di G. F. Ghedini'.

tyrant, the tragic and non-heroic portrayal of war starkly contradicted the rhetoric and core essence of fascism as a belligerent and militarist regime born from the aftermath of the World War I. Fascism exalted violence as a palingenetic means, shaping both its social structure and foreign policy around a programme of mass militarisation. This permanent mobilisation of Italians aimed to cultivate from youth the ideal of the *Cittadino soldato* (citizen soldier), as emphasised in the emblematic title of a 1936 pamphlet (see Figure 2.2).⁵¹ According to Walter Benjamin, the ‘aestheticization of war’, characterised by the pleasure found in self-destruction, was the epitome of fascism.⁵² As Mussolini famously declared in 1937, ‘when Spain is finished, I will think of something else. The character of the Italian people must be forged through conflict’.⁵³



Figure 2.2. Opera Nazionale Balilla, Breno 1943, photo by Ernesto Fazioli
 <<https://www.lombardiabeniculturali.it/fotografie/schede/IMM-LOM60-0012994/>>

⁵¹ ‘Libro e moschetto’ (book and musket) was the slogan to encapsulate the fascist educational model.

⁵² The theme of human self-destruction, already evident in *Re Hassan*, will be the core of *Le Baccanti*. Walter Benjamin, *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, 1938–1940*, ed. by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge Mass.: Belknap Press, 2006), p. 270.

⁵³ Quoted in Martin Clark, *Modern Italy, 1871 to the Present* (New York: Longman, 2008), p. 335.

1939 emerged as a transitional historical juncture, marked by a juxtaposition of triumphalist rhetoric and burgeoning dissent towards the regime. Despite the relentless dissemination of fascism's militaristic propaganda, its repeated military setbacks irreversibly eroded popular consensus. If, as Mussolini reiterated, war was the test of a nation's mettle, Italians appeared ill-prepared and suffered the sacrifices this entailed. Similar to the Ethiopian campaign of 1935-36, the recent invasion of Albania in 1939 proved to be another tragic depletion of manpower and resources, further fuelling discontent among the populace. The prospect of a new war was unwelcome, but its spectre hung palpably in the air.⁵⁴ In 1939, 'the last year of peace, there was only talk of war', enveloping society in a climate of expectation and ineluctability, just like in *Re Hassan*.⁵⁵ This sense of the 'calm before the storm' also imbued other contemporary works, like Dino Buzzati's novel *Il deserto dei Tartari* (1940). In the story, nothing much happens, but the anticipation of war shapes the stagnant existence of lieutenant Drogo, as he seeks his futile moment of glory through military exploits.⁵⁶ Similarly, in historical reality, the envisioned glory remained elusive for fascist Italy, despite lofty expectations. The succession of military failures, coupled with the looming threat of a new war, further deepened Italians' disillusionment with the regime.⁵⁷

This is how Petrassi—one of the musicians deeply entrenched within fascist institutions—recalled his painful realisation, joining the ranks of numerous intellectuals and artists experiencing disenchantment: 'I suffered a lot for the kind of world in which I had believed', he lamented, 'all

⁵⁴ Jonathan Dunnage, *Twentieth Century Italy: A Social History* (London: Routledge, 2014), p. 116.

⁵⁵ Quote from Emilio Tadini, '1939 la nostra storia. Carissima Milano', *Corriere Della Sera*, 13 August 1989.

⁵⁶ From the same period, Eugenio Montale's poem *Nuove Stanze*, featured in the collection *Occasioni* (1939), evoked a similar sense of helplessness in the face of history, providing an allegory of war as a game of chess, with pawns unaware of their fate.

⁵⁷ The implementation of racial laws in 1938 served as a tipping point for fascist consensus, leading to a significant political shift for many individuals, including the composer Luigi Dallapiccola. However, it was primarily the series of military defeats and the ensuing material hardships that shattered the allure of fascism in the eyes of Italians. This contradicted the rhetoric of violence and power that lay at the roots of fascism.

of this led me for many years to a kind of cynicism, not to believe anymore in nearly any values'.⁵⁸ This common mindset could have influenced Petrassi's decision to feature his friend's opera, *Re Hassan*, in the 1939 season of La Fenice, as well as directly shaping Petrassi's own compositions of those years. Composed as Italy entered the war in 1940, Petrassi's *Coro di morti* showcased his pessimistic turn, signifying a drastic shift in perspective and tone from his earlier works, much like how *Re Hassan* marked a departure from *Maria d'Alessandria* in Ghedini's oeuvre. The theme of waiting, along with omens and prophecies of an imminent war occurring offstage in Ghedini's opera, find a seamless continuation in Petrassi's work. Here, a chorus of living mummies stands as a poignant symbol of the definitive decay of fascist Italy, giving voice to its moral and physical victims.⁵⁹

Amidst this pervasive disenchantment, it might be tempting to interpret such impassioned works as 'anti-fascist pamphlets' or expressions of 'protest music'—labels that Petrassi, nevertheless, refuted in relation to his *Coro di morti*.⁶⁰ Indeed, the prevailing sense of moral despondency and nihilism of the time surpassed any straightforward political stance. Expanding upon Petrassi's insights into his own work, we can interpret *Re Hassan* as an expression of anguish and resignation in response to contemporary events, while also seeing it as serving a broader exploration of human nature and existence, inevitably prompted by those historical contingencies. As these existential and historical reflections intertwine, the theme of choice emerges as a timely and pressing

⁵⁸ Cit. in Alessia Angela Elda Macaluso, 'Fascist Disenchantment and the Music of Goffredo Petrassi' (unpublished doctoral thesis, York University, 2017), p. 128. In her dissertation, Macaluso examines Petrassi's stylistic evolution from the 1930s to the 1950s, drawing connections to the contemporary events and developments of Italian history. The cynicism prevalent among Italians during late fascism is also evident in Ghedini's next opera, *La pulce d'oro*.

⁵⁹ Petrassi commenced work on *Coro di morti* (a dramatic madrigal for men's choir with instruments) in June 1940, merely ten days after Italy entered the war. It premiered on September 28, 1941, at the Teatro La Fenice in Venice. The composition draws its inspiration from a text by the Italian poet Giacomo Leopardi, *Dialogo di Federico Ruysch e delle sue mummie* (1824). This text imagines a dialogue between a scientist and his awakened mummies, exploring themes of death, the anguish of existence and the mysteries of the unknown.

⁶⁰ Petrassi's words cited in Macaluso, 'Fascist Disenchantment' p. 141. The distinct approach that Macaluso highlights in Petrassi's music, compared to Dallapiccola's protest music, can similarly be observed in Ghedini's works.

concern.⁶¹ Distinctive of the tragic genre, the concept of choice remains ensnared between human agency and a vain illusion in a world predetermined by fate. On the eve of the arrival of Christian ambassadors, Hassan—portrayed with ‘Shakespearean stature and Aeschylean immobility’, as the critic Franco Abbiati put it—dreads the impending fulfilment of a destiny shaped by his choices, all driven by his pride.⁶² Later in the opera, when the people plead for an end to the bloodshed, Hassan sternly rebukes their perceived weakness, accusing them of being guilty and deserving of defeat.⁶³

By 1942, after enduring over two years of devastating warfare, the depiction of such a scenario on stage would likely resonate even more deeply with the public.⁶⁴ In both the opera and Italian history, despite defeat and the king’s withdrawal, the war persists, leaving the issue of responsibility unresolved.⁶⁵ ‘So it was written’ were the words that echoed at the end of *Re Hassan*, though fate alone proved to be an unsatisfactory explanation for all the horrors experienced.⁶⁶ Similarly, unlike in a classical tragedy, religion in *Re Hassan* serves merely as part of the historical backdrop and lacks the depth to engage as a true interlocutor for humanity and its actions. It unfolds as an entirely ‘human drama’, devoid of tragic irony or *deus ex machina*, such as the heavenly voice of the Son triggering redemption in *Maria d’Alessandria*.⁶⁷

⁶¹ This is also something evident in subsequent operas. Indeed, this will be a central theme in both *Le Baccanti* and *Billy Budd*. For more on these works, see Chapters 4 and 5.

⁶² Abbiati, “‘Re Hassan’ di Ghedini”.

⁶³ The opera’s theme of blaming weakness, as seen in Act III’s rebuke of the wounded by a general—‘why did they get hurt? They must march like the others’—echoes the anti-bourgeois rhetoric of fascism. It urged Italians to be ‘less nice and to become harsher, merciless, hateful. That is: masters’. Cit. in Galeazzo Ciano, *Diario 1937-1943*, ed. by Renzo De Felice (Milan: Biblioteca universale Rizzoli, 1998), p. 235.

⁶⁴ The year prior, following a series of defeats, the short-lived Italian empire in Africa crumbled. Hence, the triumph of Ghedini’s opera at La Scala might also stem from an emotional connection with the audience, transcending the typical nationalist or regressive tendencies of the Milanese public.

⁶⁵ It is almost prophetic of the events that unfolded in 1943, when the capture of Mussolini marked the beginning of a protracted civil war in Italy. Responsibility emerged as a crucial theme in post-war Italian history, a way of grappling with the weighty legacy of fascism. This theme emerges and evolves in Ghedini’s operas: the common people, victims of the tyrant’s stubbornness in *Re Hassan*, become accomplices in the impostor’s lies in *La pulce d’oro*, while any clear distinction between victims and perpetrators is entirely lost in *Le Baccanti*.

⁶⁶ ‘Così era scritto’ in Tullio Pinelli, *Re Hassan. Tre atti e quattro quadri* (Milan: Ricordi 1938), p. 24.

⁶⁷ See Abbiati, “‘Re Hassan’ di Ghedini”.

In this nihilistic scenario, mirroring historical truths, *Re Hassan* echoes with Schopenhauer's notion of the tragic—a phenomenon deeply ingrained in humanity, inherent to existence itself.⁶⁸ The narrative's sense of inevitability stems from the characters' psychological stiffness, their inability to transcend their own nature: they persist as static human prototypes rather than evolving personas.⁶⁹ The perspective leans towards resignation rather than protest. As the opera implies, Hassan bears not sole responsibility; rather, everyone contributes to the eventual demise. Political ruin, in fact, emerges as a consequence of human misery, rather than the other way around. Hatred reigns supreme, overshadowing all else, while the thirst for power and selfishness fractures even the bonds of family: within a legacy of betrayal, Hassan mistreats Hussein, who then sacrifices his own son to satiate his greed. With equal anguish and determination, they stand together as allies in their ultimate downfall. Political and private reasons blend, leading to unscrupulous decisions that inflict suffering on entire populations. History, crafted by a few, is endured by many.

Even love exists only as a fleeting interlude, unable to survive within this context. Happiness and peace appear unattainable for both Hussein's pursuit of glory and Moraima's longing for domestic serenity. In the intricate balance of the opera, defined by its multiple symmetries (Hassan-Hussein, Jarifa-Moraima, Hussein-Moraima, Hassan-the people, Hassan-Moraima), the young princess stands out as the sole refuge in a bleak universe, providing the audience with the only beacon for emotional engagement in the tale. Although considered conventional and superfluous by some critics, seemingly disrupting the opera's unity,⁷⁰ Moraima indeed plays a key role in both ideal and musical terms. As a traditional operatic figure, Moraima's singing holds a central position, as exemplified in the duet in Act II. Her inherent sweetness makes her the most relatable character,

⁶⁸ Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation* ([n.p]: Aegitas, 2016), Kindle ebook, (para. 51).

⁶⁹ This 'synthetical' portrayal of characters was criticised by some who argued that Pinelli's libretto failed to delve into and develop their inner psychology—a crucial aspect according to Italian critics' evaluation of opera. 'Lettera da Venezia'; Rognoni, 'Lettera da Milano'; Ballo, 'La stagione di opere contemporanee a Milano'.

⁷⁰ Ballo, 'La stagione di opere contemporanee a Milano'.

her feminine quality and tender nature serving as a poignant counterpoint to the ruinous ideals of masculinity and militarism prevalent in the surrounding world.⁷¹

Difficult Music

Re Hassan offers a pessimistic reflection on history and human nature through its diverse cast of characters, showcasing how relationships falter and various existential models equally fail. The opera is pervaded by a ‘drone of inhumanity’, a leaden atmosphere, as the critics recognised at the premiere.⁷² Despite the conventional appearance of the plot, this disenchanted perspective held meaningful relevance in Italy at the turn of the 1940s, coinciding with the impending end of the fascist regime during World War II. Gloom, expectation and stagnation not only connect the opera’s content to the contemporary context, but—according to Salvetti and contrary to critics’ claims of a gap between music and text—these themes are also mirrored in the opera’s dramatic form and musical quality. As Salvetti pointed out, *Re Hassan* definitely departed from the ‘romantic’ idea of opera, where formal cohesion and tonal language traditionally ensured the possibility of dramatic development imbued with expressive and moral intentions.⁷³

In spite of its many nods to tradition, *Re Hassan* moved towards an anti-melodramatic mode, marked by a sense of stillness and expressive restraint: ‘Everything is distilled to its essence’.⁷⁴ The plot, as conceived by the authors without frills or twists, aligns with an austere and straightforward drama, made up of sparse dialogue and swift changes. However, it remains fundamentally static, serving more as a contemplation of decay rather than a fully realised story. The form is fragmented, with the opera progressing through a series of ‘juxtaposed scenes’, where the epilogue is hinted at

⁷¹ David Osmond-Smith and Ben Earle, ‘Masculine Semiotics: the Music of Goffredo Petrassi and the Figurative Arts in Italy during the 1930s’, *Twentieth-Century Music*, 9.1–2 (2012), 11–37 <doi:10.1017/S1478572212000187> [accessed 4 May 2023].

⁷² ‘Lettera da Venezia’.

⁷³ Salvetti, ‘L’«antipoetica» di G. F. Ghedini’.

⁷⁴ Santi, ‘Un’opera di Ghedini. *Re Hassan*’.

from the start.⁷⁵ Just as in *Maria d'Alessandria*, the dramatic equilibrium unfolds along a symmetrical arc, reaching its apex with a central bipartite act. While the three-act structure is conventional, Pinelli's text flows without adhering to a regular metre, except for specific instances such as the chorus of prisoners in Act II or the off-stage voice heard at the opera's outset. The language is direct and uncomplicated, eschewing sophisticated terms and allegories.

Upon delving into the musical score, we can discern how Ghedini's music embodied these defining characteristics of the opera, offering additional evidence of its inherent coherence, as advocated by Salvetti. The terseness of the text, in which some contemporary critics identified the opera's modern quality,⁷⁶ resonated with a 'rugged, starkly dissonant if at times rather static world of sound', as John C.G. Waterhouse described Ghedini's musical language.⁷⁷ Immediately prior to the more widely recognised modernism of *Architettura* (1940), Ghedini's music in *Re Hassan* exhibited a particularly harsh harmony and timbre, echoing the tragic content of the libretto.⁷⁸ Defined as 'tense', the music tracks the action with brief gestures and rapid shifts in mood and texture.⁷⁹ The sombre atmosphere of the opera is established through the extensive use of medium-low registers and the pervasive presence of dissonance, including chromaticism, tritones, minor 9th intervals and superimpositions of different triads, which are apparent right from the outset. Here, the music's static nature effectively captures the restless anticipation of both a Moorish Granada night and 1939 in Italy, both teetering on the edge of ruin.

⁷⁵ This static and fragmentary conception of opera, composed of distinct blocks, reached its peak with *Billy Budd*.

⁷⁶ Torchi, 'Ghedini, Giorgio Federico, Re Hassan'.

⁷⁷ John C. G. Waterhouse, 'Re Hassan', in *Grove Music Online* (2002)

<<https://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-5000904245>> [accessed 15 November 2020].

⁷⁸ *Architettura* is an orchestral composition consisting of seven panels. It marked the turning point of Ghedini's mature phase, serving as evidence of his autonomous and distinctive style, thus earning him a place among the so-called modernists.

⁷⁹ See Andrea Della Corte, "'Re Hassan" di Ghedini alla Fenice', *La Stampa*, 27 January 1939.

Without a prelude, the monodic opening in *ppp* and the low register immediately set the gloomy tone of the opera. It is a quietly enigmatic outset, starkly contrasting the fervent energy that animated the opening scene at the port in *Maria d'Alessandria*. Over the repetitive yet impassive gesture in the dense lower register (*senza colore*), there emerges a parallel movement of tremolo chords in the contrasting upper register, featuring minor 9th harmonic intervals divided internally by a tritone (see Example 2.1). As Ghedini himself articulated, 'sound clashes find justification in timbre', serving as sound effects rather than mere harmonic combinations.⁸⁰ This is how Carlo Pinelli explained the composer's emphasis on timbre: 'Ghedini does not orchestrate, but rather thinks instrumentally'.⁸¹ Consequently, the dissonances remain unresolved, and the motifs do not undergo development. The sound maintains a consistently dark and harsh quality throughout the opera, echoing the fateful events of Alhambra. Atonality signifies a sense of disorientation, with no tonal resolution occurring, even at the end, in contrast to the eclectic tonal restoration found in *Maria d'Alessandria*.

Calmissimo, senza colore ♩ = 44

ppp

sempre pp

- VELARIO -

1

8

ppp

Example 2.1. Giorgio Federico Ghedini, *Re Hassan. Tre atti e quattro quadri* [vocal score] (Milan: Ricordi, 1938), p. 1

⁸⁰ See Ghedini's letter to Carlo Pinelli (17.01.1941) in Parise, *Giorgio Federico Ghedini*, p. 157.

⁸¹ Carlo Pinelli, *Re Hassan, di Giorgio Ghedini* (Milan: La lampada, 1942).

This kind of music, deemed ‘intelligent’ but somewhat ‘cold’, could sound difficult, ‘preventing the listener from sympathising’ with the characters and events on stage.⁸² In his presentation of the opera, Carlo Pinelli identified the challenge in Ghedini’s music as stemming from a gap between the intensity of the composer’s ideas and their plain realisation. This disparity is evident in the difference between the conceptual richness and the minimalist sound quality of Ghedini’s music, characterised by short musical motifs, clear lines and sparse yet pristine timbres.⁸³ According to Pinelli, Ghedini’s music, stripped of excess and emphasis, demanded competence and effort from the listener to experience emotions that might not spontaneously overwhelm the audience otherwise. ‘Aristocratic’ was the attribute most frequently assigned to Ghedini’s music in the critical reception of his time. To be an ‘aristocrat’ encompassed more than just stylistic elegance; it also entailed a certain degree of detachment from the public.

According to Petrassi’s recollection, Ghedini was considered a ‘relevant but somewhat contentious figure’ during the time of *Re Hassan*, esteemed as a musician, albeit with certain reservations.⁸⁴ Amidst a pivotal historical transition, the musician found himself navigating a middle phase of his career, occupying ‘a strange position within the Italian musical scene’. At this juncture, his style remained ambiguously defined, blending progressive and regressive elements.⁸⁵ What was once a successful aspect of *Maria d’Alessandria*, its cross-party eclecticism, started to be perceived as a flaw, especially by 1942. The neoclassical and fascist compromise between tradition and innovation—between conventional content and progressive music—was no longer acceptable to critics who

⁸² ‘Lettera da Venezia’.

⁸³ Carlo Pinelli, *Re Hassan*. On several occasions, such as with *Maria d’Alessandria*, Pinelli served as Ghedini’s spokesperson, as the composer was rather reserved and disinclined to speak about his own music. Pinelli’s viewpoint on *Re Hassan* was inevitably influenced by both bias and privileged insight due to his intimate connection with both the composer and the librettist.

⁸⁴ ‘Typically, musicians who lacked complete trust were often referred to as *noble*.’ Cit. Petrassi’s interview in Parise, *Giorgio Federico Ghedini*, p. 365.

⁸⁵ Ballo, ‘La stagione di opere contemporanee a Milano’.

were already looking towards post-war hard-line aesthetics.⁸⁶ The relationship between music and text remained the most heavily contested concern of critics.⁸⁷ Amidst the conflicting views, a recurring opinion gained prominence and solidified over time: Ghedini's music was seen as straddling the line between technical perfection and creative deficiency, vacillating between sobriety and expressive 'frigidity'.⁸⁸ According to Ballo, Ghedini's music remained aloof from the tragedy depicted in *Re Hassan*, treating the dramatic struggle between peoples as a mere 'adornment'—a pretext for composing music without genuine heartfelt resonance.⁸⁹

Building upon recent revaluations of *Re Hassan* by Salvetti and Lanza among others, I aim to reassess the prevailing prejudice that perceives Ghedini's music as refined yet unsympathetic. Having established the opera's relevance and its engagement with the historical context, I will now examine the perceived detachment of the music from the text—specifically, its purported lack of expressiveness—and explore the reasons behind this perception. To do so, I will focus on the opera's most intimate scene: the love duet between Moraima and Hussein. Here Ghedini's music confronts a fundamental trope of operatic tradition: the realm of sentimentality, where the expressiveness of his music could be measured, but with neither coldness nor detachment allowed. The duet, often mentioned in the early press reviews, was described by Bonisconti as a 'flattering concession' to both the public and tradition.⁹⁰ According to the letters between Ghedini and Pinelli, the former expressly requested this duet from the latter. According to Ghedini's 'theatrical instinct', the opera needed a break in tension to allow the young couple to sing calmly. Otherwise, 'no

⁸⁶ According to Antonio Gramsci, a pivotal figure for post-war culture, the interregnum between the old and the new was the essence of crisis. Antonio Gramsci, *Quaderni del carcere* (Turin: Einaudi, 1975), p. 311.

⁸⁷ In 1939, the critic of *La Rassegna musicale* unfavourably characterised *Re Hassan* as more of a musical drama than an opera. Conversely, among the admirers of Ghedini's music were Della Corte and Abbiati, who described *Re Hassan* as a model of 'musical intuition at the service of dramatic expression'. Later on, Piero Santi and Alessandro Piovesan asserted that Ghedini's music lent expressiveness to the dramatic content, rather than the other way around.

⁸⁸ See, for example, Abbiati, "'Re Hassan" di Ghedini'; Piamonte, 'Re Hassan'; Torchi, 'Ghedini, Giorgio Federico, Re Hassan'.

⁸⁹ Ballo, 'La stagione di opere contemporanee a Milano'.

⁹⁰ See Bonisconti, 'Il teatro musicale di Giorgio Federico Ghedini'.

dramatic soprano would be interested in performing the opera'.⁹¹ By delving into this particular scene, I seek to challenge the perception of disengagement often associated with the opera. I demonstrate how the duet, acting as both the most lyrical and mimetic moment, could be read as an effective metaphor for the role of art in history, epitomising the composer's perspective and commitment. The juxtaposition of the sentimental scene with Ghedini's sparse music encourages a deeper contemplation of the genre, prompting questions about the very essence of operatic singing and its connection to the real world. These themes, which carry both aesthetic and existential implications, would be further explored in Ghedini's subsequent operas.

At the Heart of *Re Hassan*

Act II plays a central role in the dramatic balance of the opera, divided into two distinct yet complementary scenes: the intense choral confrontation between the war-afflicted crowd and the tyrant, and the intimate duet between Moraima and Hussein. The act opens with a dramatic theme reminiscent of a French overture. The theme, both impassioned and tenuous, is played solely by woodwinds.⁹² While little occurs on stage, the consequences of events are shown through multiple perspectives, both collective and private. War rages on unseen, drawing everyone into the fray, both guilty and innocent, and prompting grievances among the people. 'Basta sangue' presents an intense tableau of 'Caravaggesque polyphony', as defined by critics for its chiaroscuro effect. Here, Hassan's monophonic singing confronts a complex and multifaceted chorus, alternating between impactful homophony and realistic mock-casual polyphony. In this poignant scene, critics observed a distinct echo of Mussorgsky's influence, enhancing the opera's tapestry.⁹³ Meanwhile, Hussein,

⁹¹ 'Il mio fiuto teatrale mi diceva che, se non si trovava qualche cosa che rompesse la tensione, l'opera sarebbe stata difettosa di equilibrio. E poi, io avevo bisogno di far cantare un po' in calma quei due poveri sposi... se no non si sarebbe mai trovata una soprano drammatica di una certa notorietà che si fosse presa la briga di studiare l'opera'. Quoted from Ghedini's letter to C. Pinelli (04.08.1937), in Parise, *Giorgio Federico Ghedini*, pp. 103–4.

⁹² It exemplifies the disparity in intensity between the musical concept and its actual realization in sound, as noted by C. Pinelli.

⁹³ Parente, 'Re Hassan di Ghedini al Teatro S. Carlo di Napoli'; Della Corte, "'Re Hassan" di Ghedini alla Fenice'; Abbiati, "'Re Hassan" di Ghedini'. The chorus is not an amorphous and uniform mass; rather, it consists of

along with his wife and mother, each exhibit their own distinct moods amidst their captivity: Jarifa sees the imprisonment as a chance for revenge, Moraima finds solace in being close to her husband, while Hussein wrestles with torment, torn between his ambitions for power and his love for his family. The sole lyrical moment of the opera unfolds within the prison walls, where Moraima's song breaches the operatic boundaries, multiplying the theatrical levels.

Moraima picks up the lute, gently guiding Hussein away from his troubles, involving him in her simple joy, nurtured by their love and youth. The scene reverses a common operatic trope, where the inner turmoil of characters in a duet often contrasts with a surrounding collective celebration.⁹⁴ Ghedini draws upon various traditional motifs here: the situation of imprisonment,⁹⁵ the love duet and the timeliness ode to youth, as well as the metatheatrical singing on stage, accompanied by prop instruments like the lute.⁹⁶ There are indeed many examples of serenades, lullabies and other songs performed on stage throughout the operatic repertoire. The dichotomy between music as a quintessentially operatic means (the so-called *recitar cantando*) and music as an element of scenic fiction lies at the very origin of the genre. Music about music—the 'Orphic concept of operatic singing' as Elizabeth Hudson defines it—provides an opportunity to delve into the very essence of opera and its nuanced boundaries. Straddling the line between scenic realism and metatheatre, music on stage unveils and even parades the conventions deeply entrenched in tradition.⁹⁷ This operatic device engenders multiple theatrical layers, sparking an interplay of perspectives between

individual voices dispersed within the group, each unique and anonymous. The theme is echoed by the chorus through gradual and overlapping entries. The people's laments are expressed through recurring chromatic and melismatic patterns that ascend progressively. According to Parente, the music thus demonstrated Ghedini's remarkable skill in crafting various sonic perspectives.

⁹⁴ Michele Girardi, 'Per un inventario della musica in scena nel teatro verdiano', *Studi Verdiani*, VI (1990), 99–145.

⁹⁵ Consider, for instance, the duet between Aida and Radames in Verdi's *Aida*.

⁹⁶ 'Singing's enactment as performance for an audience on stage', as Hudson puts it. Elizabeth Hudson, 'From Orpheus to Opera – Singing about Singing in Verdi's *Il Trovatore* Verdi, "Tacea La Notte" (Leonora), *Il Trovatore*, Act I', *Cambridge Opera Journal*, 28.2 (2016), 179–82 (p. 179) <doi:10.1017/S0954586716000203> [accessed 26 November 2020].

⁹⁷ *Ibid.* See also, on a similar topic, 'La dinamica scenica', in Carl Dahlhaus, *Drammaturgia dell'opera italiana*, ed. by Lorenzo Bianconi (Turin: EDT, 2005), pp. 47–72. Rossana Dalmonte, 'La canzone nel melodramma italiano del primo Ottocento: ricerche di metodo strutturale', *Rivista Italiana di Musicologia*, 11.2 (1976), 230–313. Marco Beghelli, *La retorica del rituale nel melodramma ottocentesco* (Turin: EDT, 2003); Girardi, 'Per un inventario della musica in scena'.

the composer, the opera and the audience. Indeed, in the duet scene, Hussein and the audience share an equal footing as spectators of Moraima's song, engaging in what Zoppelli terms a process of 'focalisation'.⁹⁸ Furthermore, much like the composer grappling with the demands of his audience and the turbulent period, Moraima's singing struggles to take flight, striving to captivate her husband's attention amid his concerns and involving him in the love duet. Ghedini navigates the boundary between diegetic and extradiegetic music within the opera, exploiting their misalignment to extend the opera's meaning beyond its borders.⁹⁹

The structure of the duet is established at the outset through the alternation between Moraima's singing and recitation—between her onstage performance and her operatic vocal delivery—each corresponding to a distinct harmonic area. An arpeggio, divided between the clarinet and flute, traces an ostinato that endures throughout the entire scene. Alongside the tempo's fluctuations (*un poco più*), this ostinato demarcates the boundaries of 'music within music'. The orchestration remains relatively simple for the most part: Ghedini employs minimal string vibrato, woodwinds and harp to onomatopoeically imitate the sound of Moraima's lute on the stage. While the arpeggio gesture is quite commonplace in stage singing, the resulting harmonic language is unexpectedly harsh, underscoring the gap between traditional settings and modern musical means. The ostinato consists of the following sequence of notes: E# - A - C# - F# - B - D# (see Example 2.2). Challenging to categorise harmonically due to its polytonal succession of an augmented and a major triad, the alternation of major thirds and perfect fourths evokes the resonance of the open strings

⁹⁸ Luca Zoppelli, "'Stage music" in early nineteenth-century Italian opera', *Cambridge Opera Journal*, 2.1 (1990), 29–3 <doi:10.1017/S0954586700003098> [accessed 14 April 2023].

⁹⁹ Regarding the difference between objective and subjective music's voice, between *representing* or *respeaking* music, see Carolyn Abbate, *Unsung Voices: Opera and Musical Narrative in the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

on Moraima's instrument, which she plucks with casual abandon. She lacks virtuosity and Ghedini aims to create an impression of deliberate improvisation (*con fantasia*).¹⁰⁰

This moment should mark the pinnacle of lyrical expression in the opera; however, in its musical bareness, it also emerges as the most vividly mimetic and descriptive moment—a singular moment of truth within a genre built upon the conventional illusion of singing. As Bonisconti argued, human participation and musical control merged in Ghedini's opera.¹⁰¹ Moraima's song, characterised by its simplicity and spontaneity, sometimes verging on declamation, weaves between pauses in her lute playing (*con ritmo libero, come improvvisando*). Gradually, her singing becomes more ornate and acute, following a varied strophic structure. The repetition of Hussein's name by Moraima, consistently uttered with the same interval profile to capture his attention, delineates the sections of her song. However, he remains callous, prompting her to eventually cease her singing. Her voice then shifts to an unaccompanied and monotonous recitation, expressing her deep discouragement, while she wearily plucks the lute for the final time.

The musical score is for a vocal piece by Giorgio Federico Ghedini. It is marked 'Lentamente, con fantasia' with a tempo of a quarter note = 69. The key signature is three sharps (F#, C#, G#). The vocal line is written in a single staff, alternating between forte (f) and piano (p) dynamics. The piano accompaniment is written in two staves (treble and bass). The bass line features a triplet of eighth notes in the first measure of the second system, followed by a triplet of eighth notes in the third measure. The treble line has sustained chords. The score is divided into two systems, with the second system starting at measure 6.

Example 2.2. Giorgio Federico Ghedini, *Re Hassan. Tre atti e quattro quadri* [vocal score] (Milan: Ricordi, 1938), p. 109

¹⁰⁰ Just as Rossini simulates the improvisational and amateurish character in the serenade of the Conte d'Almaviva.

¹⁰¹ Bonisconti, 'Il teatro musicale di Giorgio Federico Ghedini'.

Only at this point does the duet begin. Stirred by Moraima's words, Hussein finally steps forward to join her—though uncertainty lingers about whether the duet involves operatic or onstage singing. The ostinato resumes, but both Hussein's voice and the accompaniment are rhythmically and harmonically unstable, serving as a musical reflection of his insecure character. Moraima and Hussein take turns in separate sections, each marked by unique musical content and texture. While not strictly following the formal structure of a traditional duet, Ghedini restores its dramatic arc through the succession of diverse moments and a gradual intensification leading to a moment of *a due* singing—something that never happens in *Maria d'Alessandria* between Maria and the Son. The voices start out staggered, with overlapping consonant intervals, but gradually blend together until they sing in perfect unison. At the end the duet fades out: Moraima and Hussein echo in canon, while a stark dissonance between the orchestra and their voices highlights the intrusion of the outside world into their fleeting interlude of serenity. The duet stands out in the gloomy tone of the opera, yet it cannot be isolated from the dramatic context as a truly closed form.

The boundaries of the stage in *Re Hassan* are also ambiguous, as Ghedini explores them in different directions, navigating between realism and metatheatricality, and integrating both onstage and disembodied voices. Moraima's metatheatrical singing, leading up to the duet with Hussein, blurs the distinction between opera and reality, complementing the ominous voices and sounds emanating from offstage and permeating throughout the opera. The use of disembodied voices in *Re Hassan*, while less systematic than in *Maria d'Alessandria*, proceeds from the abstract to the concrete, from outside the fictional realm to within it, and from singing to recitation. Indeed, at the outset, an anonymous and abstract voice (*una voce lontana*) launches the opera with a strophic song, serving as both a prologue or an epigraph, effectively introducing and encapsulating the essence of the drama. In Act II, the lugubrious and dissonant chorus of prisoners resounds from within the stage, intertwining with Moraima's dirge as she echoes their lament in her mournful

lullaby. Towards the end, the offstage voices transition into the militaristic sounds of the raging war: they speak rather than sing, providing a realistic backdrop that extends the action beyond the stage. Drum rolls and blaring trumpets were common auditory motifs in operas depicting historical events, often employed to enhance realism. However, with the spectre of a new war imminent, these descriptive sounds took on an even more ominous and palpable significance, nearly blending historical reality into onstage fiction.¹⁰² Similarly, as realism and lyricism converged, Moraima's onstage singing not only nodded to operatic tradition but also offered an alternative to the fateful reality lurking offstage, heightened by the foreboding echoes of war in the background.

Placed at the heart of *Re Hassan*, this moment of 'meta-music' becomes pivotal in grasping Ghedini's exploration of the genre and his interpretation of the role of 'making music' within the gloomy context of the late 1930s. The character of Moraima, the focal point of the scene, has drawn criticism from many for her somewhat contrived portrayal on a dramatic level, with her excessive sweetness often contrasting sharply with the overall tone of the opera. However, musically, she exhibits a depth that belies her mild appearance. Ghedini infuses her song with a terse realism, employing a monotonous and harsh language, and using minimal and almost inexpressive descriptivism. These aspects are not primarily intended to emotionally engage the audience with the scene. He opts for challenging music at what should be a moment of pure escapism from the surrounding tragedy. Moraima's singing embodies a compositional effort, enacting the hard-earned birth of a song. Though sincere, she struggles to engage her troubled listener, even if just for a brief moment, much like Ghedini's music with his contemporary audience at large. Temporarily setting aside his extra-diegetic voice, the composer appears to relinquish the spotlight to Moraima, aligning himself with the character.¹⁰³ With Moraima's song, Ghedini seemingly calls into question the operatic illusion and convention of singing as an effective means

¹⁰² Girardi, 'Per un inventario della musica in scena'.

¹⁰³ See Dalmonte, 'La canzone nel melodramma italiano del primo Ottocento'.

of communication on stage—a theme that will be more prominently explored in *Billy Budd*, where the protagonist's singing is confined to the realm of meta-operatic fiction and diegetic onstage performance.

In the duet scene of *Re Hassan*, music takes centre stage, transformed as it is from a mere theatrical tool into a protagonist. This pivotal moment offers a bitter reflection on history and the role of art within it, confirming the opera composer's civic and ethical commitment, with recent scholars emphasising *Re Hassan* as a relevant yet nuanced denunciation of its contemporary moment. Almost akin to a prophetic warning of the impending war, the anti-militarist and anti-triumphalist undertones of the opera constituted an 'act of covert resistance' against fascist rhetoric, a subtle defiance that contemporaries seemingly struggled to discern.¹⁰⁴ *Re Hassan* unfolds without apparent action: the narrative consists mainly of anticipation, followed by grappling with the consequences of events that occurred offstage or in the background. The opera pessimistically focusses more on human nature than on external events. This perspective echoes Mario Pasi's description of fascist Italy in 1939, where he observed that 'the façade was polished, but the inside was already in ruins'.¹⁰⁵

Within this decaying world, Moraima's onstage singing sparks a metaphorical meditation on the role of art in times of crisis, teetering on the boundary between escapism and commitment. Her song serves as the sole lyrical oasis and a fleeting refuge from the harsh and desolate reality around, uniquely capable of rescuing humanity from desires and torments. At the opposite extreme of Hassan, who stirs his subjects towards hatred and war akin to fascism, Moraima embodies the other side of history—a more intimate and sensitive perspective contrasting with the dynamics of power and greed. She offers an alternative truth, serving as the sole breach in the wall of hatred; yet

¹⁰⁴ From this perspective, consider also the censorship imposed on Fernanda Pivano's translation of *A Farewell to Arms*, or the subsequent publication of *Tempo di uccidere* (1947) by Ennio Flaiano, which directly challenged fascist militarist rhetoric.

¹⁰⁵ Mario Pasi, '1939 La nostra storia. Musica classica/un anno intenso e strano, ricco di opere, concerti, festival fra tradizione e segnali nuovi', *Corriere Della Sera*, 13 August 1989.

ultimately she too succumbs to defeat, like everyone else, reflecting the inherent disillusionment portrayed in the opera. In *Re Hassan*, there's no room left for miracles or saints. In the wake of *Maria d'Alessandria*, Salvetti finds it undeniable that, whether consciously or not, Ghedini 'was departing from the theatre of illusion' to embrace an art form rooted in commitment and a testament to the contemporary crisis.¹⁰⁶ Following this reading of the opera, Moraima could in fact be heard as the mouthpiece of the authors of *Re Hassan*, vocalising their historical and existential disenchantment, in which art is not given up but remains only an interlude of beauty.

¹⁰⁶ Salvetti, 'L'«antipoetica» di G. F. Ghedini'.

Except for a few minor changes, the text of the following chapter has already been published as Maria Grazia Aurora Campisi, 'Not just a Fairy Tale: Parody, Late Fascism, and Ghedini's 'La pulce d'oro' (1940)', *Music and Letters*, 19 December 2023 <<https://doi.org/10.1093/ml/gcad085>>

CHAPTER 3

NOT JUST A FAIRY TALE: PARODY, LATE FASCISM AND GHEDINI'S *LA PULCE D'ORO* (1940)

Comedy in Crisis

It seems hardly likely, up to now, that the 20th century, ushered in by universal ruin and the destruction of civilisation, will give us much that is joyful. This is so true, that even in Italy, the birth-place of laughter, the native land of the greatest comic actors and buffoons, the soil on which grew that miracle of the stage called the *opera buffa*, the sense of fun seems to be lost for ever. The old maliciously sparkling wit of our grandfathers is replaced by scurrility, vulgarity and silliness. The most obscene vaudevilles which the Parisian *boulevard* has to export and the insipid Viennese operettas vie with the incredible invasion of the cinema in putting the finishing touch to the idiocy of the public.¹

Such was Alfredo Casella's disenchanted opinion on comic opera in the early decades of the twentieth century, as it appeared in a 1920 article with the title 'Some Reasons why a Futurist may Admire Rossini'. As the title suggests, Casella hoped for a convergence of modernity and tradition, albeit from an anti-romantic and nationalistic perspective. His reflection was multifaceted, covering issues of great concern for him and his contemporaries: the supposed historical, cultural and moral crisis of the West, which by this point had already experienced the catastrophe of a global war; the recognition of a general crisis of opera (not just of the comic genre), which was losing its popular appeal in the throes of the emergence of mass society and the advance of new technologies and genres; and the widespread identification of a divorce between art, the public and entertainment. This gloomy situation, depicted by Casella in 1920, was to be further complicated shortly after by the rise of the fascist regime in Italy. Within this framework, the question arises as to whether Casella's predictions came true. Was comic opera—and comedy more generally—possible in those ensuing troubled years? Was a sense of fun lost

¹ Cit. from Alfredo Casella, 'Some Reasons why a Futurist may Admire Rossini', *Chesterian*, 2 (1920), 321–24 (p. 322).

forever or did the genre just become coarse entertainment in the ‘land of laughter’, as Italy was (proudly) defined?

Let us skip forward a couple of decades to find some answers to these questions, to 1940, just before the outbreak of World War II and the final years of the fascist regime. Data relating to Italian operatic production seemingly justifies the increasing laments about the genre’s crisis, especially with regard to the dearth of new operas performed and entering the repertoire: if, when Casella wrote his article, sixty-seven new operas were premiered in the 1919-20 theatrical season, that of 1939-40 counted only twenty-one, including the Italian premiere of Ferruccio Busoni’s *Arlecchino* (1917) and Luigi Dallapiccola’s *Volo di notte*.² Operatic crisis was just one of a multitude of social, cultural and economic crises afflicting Italy at this time. As seen in the previous chapter, after almost twenty years, fascist consensus was crumbling in the face of widespread hardship and costly blunders by the regime, including expensive military enterprises (those in Africa, Spain and Albania), economic restrictions and the introduction of racial laws. The triumphalist tones of propaganda conflicted with rising unemployment, forced emigration, rationing of consumption and the devaluation of the Italian currency.³ Scepticism was rampant and discontent was growing, as documented by police reports: graffiti and clandestine leaflets were discovered, inscribed with the slogan ‘pane pei nostri bambini o la testa di Mussolini’ (bread for our children or Mussolini’s head).⁴ The actual situation in Italy evidently clashed drastically with the regime’s promises and

² This data is taken from the yearly column edited by Giuseppe Albinati in *Musica d’oggi* between 1919 and 1941, beginning with ‘Prospetto delle opere nuove italiane rappresentate nell’anno 1919’, *Musica d’oggi*, 1 (1920), 16–17.

³ As a result of international sanctions, Italian national debt had spiked to sixteen billion lire between 1936 and 1937. In 1938 Mussolini launched an austerity policy, which included restricting the population’s diet and nutritional intake (e.g. less meat and mandating the use of poorer-quality flour in bread-making) as well as proposing recipes for ‘autarchic cuisine’. In 1940, with Italy’s entry into the war, a ration card was introduced for food and other necessities, such as soap and clothes. The Italians became ever hungrier and angrier and, as a prefectural commissioner would later recall, ‘the stomach has no ideals: it is conservative if it is full, it is anarchic if it is empty’. Filippo Colombara, ‘Si cantava per esorcizzare la tragedia. Quella fame terribile tra fascismo e guerra’, *Patria indipendente*, 11 (2007), 12–16; Assunta Trova, ‘L’approvvigionamento alimentare nella RSI’, *Storia in Lombardia*, 1–2 (1993), 171–89.

⁴ *Pane pei nostri bambini o la testa di Mussolini. Volantini e stampa della Cgdl nelle carte di polizia 1927–1943*, ed. by Riccardo Terzi and Luigi Martini (Rome: Ediesse 2002).

unmasked the inconsistency of its propaganda, especially in the shadow of a new impending war—a war that would soon sweep away any remaining rhetoric and bluster of fascist Italy.⁵

Amid this dark and troubling time, on 15 February 1940, Ghedini's *La pulce d'oro*, a one-act comic opera, had its premiere at the Carlo Felice theatre in Genoa (see Figure 3.1). It was the third theatrical work by the Piedmontese composer, conceived in 1939, the same year as the controversial staging of *Maria d'Alessandria* at La Scala and the premiere of *Re Hassan* at La Fenice. Though composed in quick succession, the three operas were strikingly different. *La pulce d'oro* stood out as a seemingly carefree interlude between the two tragic works, *Re Hassan* and the later *Le Baccanti* (1948). The comic opera was inspired by the 1935 play of the same name by Tullio Pinelli, Ghedini's long-time collaborator and friend. Best known for his subsequent collaborations with Federico Fellini, Pinelli adapted his play as a libretto for Ghedini's opera. In a manner that already suggests the fantastical nature of his future film scripts, such as *La strada*, *La pulce d'oro* staged a seemingly farcical tale: a mysterious wanderer (Lupo Fiorino) enters a tavern and entices the proprietor and his family (Olimpio, Fortuna, Lucilla), as well as the tavern's patrons (Verna, Daghe, Mirtillo) with his exotic flea, capable—as he says—of transforming anything it bites into gold. Everyone wants to possess the prodigious animal, but no one can see it; only old Verna remains sceptical. Suddenly, the flea supposedly jumps into the clothes of Lucilla, Olimpio's beautiful daughter, and Lupo Fiorino demands to stay with the girl overnight to keep watch over his precious animal. When at night-time the stranger tries to escape by stealth, Olimpio almost kills him with a violent blow of his stick. The next morning, with Lucilla's honour at stake, marriage is inevitable, and the young couple happily take their leave.

⁵ Martin Clark, *Storia dell'Italia contemporanea, 1871-1999* (Milan: Bompiani 1999), pp. 346–49.

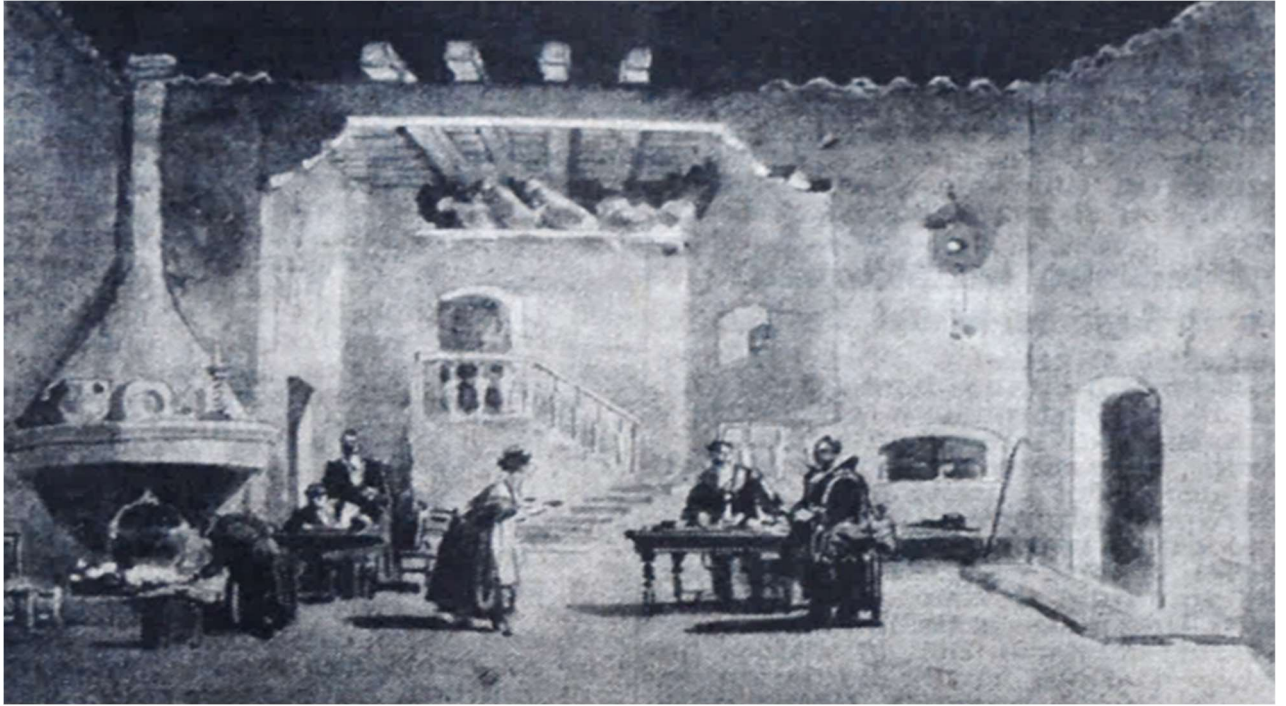


Figure 3.1. 'La pulce d'oro', watercolour by A. Craffonara, in R.G., 'Due Novità al "Carlo Felice". "L'intrusa" di Pannain e "La Pulce d'oro" di Ghedini', *Il Secolo XIX* (Genoa, 16 February. 1940).

With its mixture of fantasy and comedy, *La pulce d'oro* seemed to revive the stock recipe for comic opera, in the unlikely moment of 1940 and contrary to Casella's fatalistic prophecy two decades earlier. As Raymond Fearn states: 'the Italian tradition of *opera buffa*, which had been perfected by Rossini and which had re-found its roots with Verdi's *Falstaff* in 1893, had re-appeared occasionally during the earlier part of the twentieth century'.⁶ In the twenty years between Casella's article and *La pulce d'oro*, the comic genre in music theatre had in fact persisted in various forms, ranging from realistic to fantastic subjects: operettas and musical fairy tales, such as Casella's own *La donna serpente* (1932) and Ottorino Respighi's *La campana sommersa* (1927); operas in the tradition of *opera buffa* and *commedia dell'arte*, such as Gian Francesco Malipiero's *Tre commedie goldoniane* (1926) and Ermanno Wolf-Ferrari's eighteenth-century-style comedies; and the so-called 'operina di scuola' of a sentimental character, such as Riccardo Zandonai's *La via della*

⁶ Raymond Fearn, *Italian Opera since 1945* (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic, 1998), p. 25.

finestra (1919).⁷ One of the few comic operas to emerge in the troubled late-fascist moment, *La pulce d'oro* is also difficult to define in relation to these previous examples, most of which date from the 1920s.

The opera's reception nevertheless offers some useful clues as to how to situate the work within the history of the genre and how its comedy was perceived at the time. From the outset, *La pulce d'oro* enjoyed a predominantly positive response and multiple revivals in the years immediately following the premiere, as well as being broadcast several times on the radio.⁸ Critics were impressed by the pleasantness of the opera. They especially praised its gracefulness in matching music and text and its playing with the conventions of comic opera. As one critic noted: "The music is pleasant, adhering to the text in an illustrative way, and it draws on a tradition whose models in Italy are *Falstaff* and *Gianni Schicchi*?⁹ The comparison was more than honourable: *La pulce d'oro* was recognised and invested with the weight of a noble legacy, providing that continuity between past and present hoped for by Casella.¹⁰ At the same time, the critics glossed over any sense that the light-heartedness of the opera might stand at odds with the difficult contemporary moment. If comedy as a response to a time of crisis is an age-old phenomenon, critics in 1940 designated *La pulce d'oro* a pure form of entertainment, one apparently without deeper implications. According to the critical barometer of the time, calibrated to the governing mode of idealism, the opera was held to be well-crafted, confirming the composer's technical mastery, but

⁷ Guido Salvetti, 'L'opera nella prima metà del secolo', in *Musica in scena. Storia dello spettacolo musicale*, 6 vols, ed. by Alberto Basso (Turin: UTET, 1995), II, pp. 435–86.

⁸ Along with *Billy Budd*, *La pulce d'oro* was perhaps the most performed opera by Ghedini during his lifetime. Following its debut, it was staged in Milan (1946), Turin (1947), Genoa (1950), Venice (1961), Florence (1963), Bologna, Ferrara and Modena (1965) and Naples (1972).

⁹ F. B., 'Al Lirico "La Pulce d'oro" e "Mavra"', *Avanti!*, 18 May 1945. On that date, *La pulce d'oro* was performed again in Milan on the same bill with Stravinsky's *Mavra* and in place of Ghedini's next opera, *Le Baccanti*, in the attempt to insert a bit of light relief in the dark times of the immediate post-war period. All press clippings from the premiere mentioned here have been generously supplied by the Carlo Felice Theatre archive and the Biblioteca Universitaria in Genoa.

¹⁰ This neoclassical ideal was defined in Alfredo Casella, 'Il neoclassicismo mio e altrui', *Pègaso*, 5 (1929), 576–83.

its flippant content supposedly prevented it from being a true artwork, which would need to be predicated on sincerity of expression.¹¹

This blind spot in the criticism might lead us to ask whether the opera was a form of escape from troubling times or rather an anachronistic attempt to perpetuate a glorious tradition. In this chapter, I propose a re-evaluation of *La pulce d'oro* that locates the opera's timeliness precisely in its commitment to tradition and in its seeming detachment from the contemporary moment. The questions *La pulce d'oro* posed go beyond interest in a single opera, leading us to some of the most fraught concerns about Italian identity and culture in late fascism, as well as to a general reflection on the fate of comic opera in the tumult of the twentieth century. In what follows, I will continue from the starting point of the critical reception to draw on historical studies of fascist Italy and contemporary culture, theories of comedy and comic theatre, and musicological studies on opera and tradition in twentieth-century music. The aim is to demonstrate the opera's striking relevance in 1940, a critical juncture for the history of both Italy and the genre.

In ways that were in some respects typical and in others idiosyncratic, *La pulce d'oro* responded to and illuminated this seminal, but much overlooked, late-fascist moment. At the same time, Ghedini's opera might be viewed as a bridge, in the history of the genre, between Busoni's *Junge Klassizität* and the post-war renewal of themes and modes such as the grotesque, the caricature and the mixing of styles. As we shall see, parody was the opera's primary mode of engagement with its contemporary moment of crisis, with respect both to operatic tradition and society at large. Combining comedy with a certain critical stance, *La pulce d'oro* created multiple parodic

¹¹ The opera was defined as an 'opericciola di mestiere' in 'Lettera da Genova', *La rassegna musicale*, 3 (1940), 160–2. As previously mentioned, complying with the aesthetics of idealism, critics often found fault with Ghedini's music, which seemed to them marred by a mismatch between technical perfection and a supposed weakness of expression. According to the philosopher Benedetto Croce, the critical assessment of an art work was based on a strict dichotomy between 'poetry or non-poetry', disregarding any technical and purely intellectual dimension, detrimental to the immediacy of inspiration and its 'lyrical foundation'. Alberto Casadei and Marco Santagata, *Manuale di letteratura italiana contemporanea* (Rome: Laterza, 2007), p. 66.

levels that wove together past and present, fiction and reality, fairy tale and history. Deploying parody as musical technique and allegory, Ghedini's opera encompassed some of the key cultural currents of the time—neoclassicism, magic realism and social satire—in a hitherto unexplored and original way. Comic opera and fascism collided here, corroborating the words of the Italian historian Gaetano Salvemini, who defined fascism itself as an 'opera buffa', an absurd chain of misunderstandings improperly called revolution.¹² Just as Verdi's use of comedy and tradition in *Falstaff* served as a testament to its troubled present, the *fin de siècle*,¹³ so too *La pulce d'oro* engaged with both the past and the present at a similarly heightened historical moment, an Italy in the midst of collapse and on the brink of war.

Straddling Past and Present

La pulce d'oro opens with a conventional tavern scene on a dark and stormy night: while all are gathered inside, a gust of wind violently opens the door, and a mysterious stranger appears. The opera is replete with clichés drawn from fairy tales and the operatic tradition, right from this opening scene through to its conventional happy ending with the marriage of the young couple. In this section, I will explore the opera's perspective on tradition, particularly via the use of parody, and the relationship between music and text within the wider context of Italian neoclassicism and the rhetoric of *italianità*. To start with, the thematic clichés noted above all find their counterparts in the opera's music. The musical portrayal of a thunderstorm bears within it long-standing echoes of the operatic repertoire. Chromaticism and rapid triplets, string tremolos in the lower register and glints of the flute in the upper register all onomatopoeically depict the

¹² This famous definition of fascism as a comic opera was coined by Salvemini (1873–1957) in his lectures at Harvard University in 1943, when he was in exile. The historian called the march on Rome a 'comedy of errors'. Gaetano Salvemini, *Scritti sul fascismo*, ed. by Roberto Vivarelli (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1961), pp. 610–12. Others too, such as the writer Ennio Flaiano, have compared fascism to opera more generally, stressing the theatricality of its political strategies. See Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi, *Fascist Spectacle. The Aesthetics of Power in Mussolini's Italy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); Stefano Biguzzi, *L'orchestra del duce. Mussolini, la musica e il mito del capo* (Turin: UTET, 2003); Patricia Gaborik, *Mussolini's Theatre. Fascist Experiments in Art and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

¹³ Emanuele Senici, 'Verdi's "Falstaff" at Italy's Fin de Siècle', *The Musical Quarterly*, 85 (2001), 274–310.

stormy scenario and inevitably lead us back to Rossini's *Il barbiere di Siviglia* and Verdi's *Otello*, to mention just two precursors (see Example 3.1). Ghedini explicitly evokes these Rossinian and Verdian operatic tropes, which are evident not only on listening but also when comparing the scores, in which can be recognised the use of similar gestural figures, instrumentation and precise descriptive stage directions (*tuoni, lampi, pioggia, vento*, etc.).

The musical score consists of three systems of piano accompaniment. The first system is marked 'Allegro' with a tempo of 80, featuring a 'ff' dynamic and a '(lampi e tuoni)' stage direction. The second system includes a 'dim.' dynamic and a '(tuono, vento)' stage direction. The third system includes a '(pioggia)' stage direction. The score is written in G major (one sharp) and 2/4 time, with a key signature change to F major (two flats) in the second system.

Example 3.1. Giorgio Federico Ghedini, *La pulce d'oro. Un atto in tre quadri* [vocal score] (Milan: Ricordi, 1940), p. 1

Ghedini's turn to tradition was part of a broader cultural attention to the past, which was considered the basis on which to found the new Italian music of the twentieth century—as the title of Casella's article suggested. According to the latter, a spiritual continuity connected the Italian tradition from Monteverdi to Verdi, passing through musicians such as Scarlatti, Vivaldi

and Rossini.¹⁴ From the early decades of the twentieth century, Italian musicians were engaged in the revival of their national musical heritage, especially of that prior to the celebrated epoch of nineteenth-century opera. In addition to linking directly to the origins of the genre, *opera buffa* was an especially prized part of this tradition and seen as a possible Italian antidote to romantic and Wagnerian models. In this exploratory work, *Falstaff* acted as a compendium and a model.¹⁵ Casella himself, complaining about the decadence of comic opera, hailed Verdi's last work as both the culmination of the illustrious Italian tradition and the starting point for new Italian music.¹⁶

The rebirth of the comic genre in Italy during the early decades of the twentieth century was chiefly understood in a nationalistic and aesthetic sense. The tradition of *opera buffa* could shield composers from foreign operatic influences, as well as, amid a general call for objectivity, curbing the sentimental excesses of *verismo* operas, considered by many as a commercial degeneration of the genre.¹⁷ Recovering music's autonomy and the anti-realist roots of opera as *favola in musica*, twentieth-century composers found in *opera buffa* a wealth of musical forms and subjects. They were mainly drawn from the *commedia dell'arte* and the opposing theatrical models of Carlo Goldoni's realism and Carlo Gozzi's *Fiabe teatrali*—the former inspiring many operas by G.F. Malipiero and Wolf-Ferrari, the latter providing the subjects for *Turandot* by Puccini and Busoni, and for Casella's *La donna serpente*.

¹⁴ Fiamma Nicolodi, 'Casella e la musica di Stravinsky in Italia. Contributo a un'indagine sul neoclassicismo', *Chigiana*, 29–30 (1972), 41–67.

¹⁵ Salvetti, 'L'opera nella prima metà del secolo'. According to the Italian writer Massimo Bontempelli, 'after Verdi's *Falstaff*, Italian opera lives on its epigones'. Massimo Bontempelli, *Passione incompiuta. Scritti sulla musica, 1910–1950* (Milan: Mondadori, 1958), p. 203.

¹⁶ See Alfredo Casella, 'La riabilitazione del teatro musicale in Italia', *Musica d'oggi*, 12 (1925), 345–6; Casella, *21 + 26* (Rome: Augustea, 1931); Casella, 'Il neoclassicismo mio e altrui'. According to Emanuele Senici, *Falstaff* was the first opera consciously involved with tradition in a modern way. It is an opera about opera, a meta-opera, reflecting on and questioning as it does the genre's history and aesthetic foundations. Senici, 'Verdi's *Falstaff* at Italy's Fin de Siècle'.

¹⁷ The controversy about *verismo*, epitomised by Fausto Torrefranca's pamphlet *Giacomo Puccini e l'opera internazionale* (Turin: Fratelli Bocca, 1912), was widely felt above all by the Italian composers of the so-called 'generation of the 1880s'.

Italian comic opera of the eighteenth century was also studied and performed. In 1923, the critic and musicologist Andrea Della Corte published *L'opera comica italiana nel '700*, and in the following years was committed to promoting the revival of examples of this 'muted music', such as *L'impresario in angustie* by Domenico Cimarosa, staged at the Teatro Regio of Turin in 1933. Ghedini was part of this cultural turn: in addition to transcribing the music of Gabrieli, Monteverdi, Frescobaldi and Vivaldi, he was also involved in the wider rediscovery of *opera buffa*, collaborating on an anthology of arias and duets from the eighteenth-century, edited by Della Corte in 1925 and including excerpts from operas by Paisiello, Piccinni, Sarti, Pergolesi and Cimarosa.¹⁸

The fascination for this forgotten repertoire and the embedding of the past in new compositions most obviously connects with contemporary practices of neoclassicism, widespread internationally at this time and commonly associated with Igor Stravinsky. As is well known, the term neoclassicism, conventionally simplified as a generic return to the past, is a sort of umbrella term, a cluster-concept, as Taruskin defined it, covering a wide array of characters, musical techniques and aesthetics.¹⁹ Quotation and pastiche, transcription and arrangement, and the use of classical and preclassical forms were some of the possible ways to approach the past in contemporary music.²⁰ Parody, an ancient musical device, involving the use or reference to pre-existing music, as the etymology of the term suggests (*para*-, 'besides, near' + *oîdē*, 'song, ode'), came to be a pivotal technique in twentieth-century neoclassicism. As commentators have long suggested, this modernist turn to tradition had social and political implications, with connections

¹⁸ Ghedini transcribed almost half the pieces of the anthology. *Piccola antologia settecentesca. Ventiquattro arie e duetti inediti o rari*, ed. by Andrea Della Corte (Milan: Ricordi, 1925); Della Corte, *L'opera comica italiana nel '700. Studi ed appunti* (Bari: Laterza, 1923). Before *La pulce d'oro*, Ghedini and Pinelli had collaborated—without ever completing it—on an opera with an 18th-century setting, a sort of moralistic fairy tale with grotesque overtones, as we can read in their letters, in Stefano Parise, *Giorgio Federico Ghedini. L'uomo, le opere attraverso le lettere* (Milan: Ricordi, 2003), p. 133.

¹⁹ Richard Taruskin, 'Back to Whom? Neoclassicism as Ideology', *19th-Century Music*, 3 (1993), 286–302 (p. 288).

²⁰ Consider, for example, Stravinsky's *Pulcinella* (1920) or, in Italy, the emblematic titles of Casella's *Scarlattiana* or G.F. Malipiero's *Cimarosiana*.

being drawn between a return to order in art and reactionary forms of politics, and with Stravinsky's music being frequently associated with fascism.²¹ The Italian politicisation of neoclassicism, perhaps inevitable in a nation where attention to tradition came directly into contact with fascism, was not so straightforward in any case. For all Stravinsky's success as the most performed foreign composer during the fascist period, Italian musicians—with Casella as a figurehead—claimed the existence of an idiosyncratic national neoclassicism, one intrinsically linked to the concept of *italianità*.²²

Italianità was a term much in vogue at the time, demarcating a rather vague ideal of Italianness, one with both aesthetic and political connotations. The post-Unification aim 'to make Italians', by excavating common roots and traits beneath regional differences, was still on Mussolini's agenda.²³ Under the regime, 'Italian' and 'fascist' became synonymous, with *italianità* the umbrella term, encompassing disparate and contradictory positions, and looking both backwards and forwards. This is how *Il Selvaggio*, one of the most widely disseminated magazines in the fascist period, defined the ideal of an 'arci-italianità': 'Italians to the bitter end [...], classic and modern at once, that is, perfect fascists'.²⁴ Musical manifestations of *italianità* tended to be similarly ambiguous and diverse, corresponding to a purely melodic, expressive and vocal character

²¹ Theodor W. Adorno launched a politicised critique of Stravinsky's music in his *Philosophie der neuen Musik* (1949); see also the emblematic title of Taruskin's more recent article, 'Back to Whom? Neoclassicism as Ideology'. Osmond-Smith describes the influence of Stravinsky's 'tough' music on Fascist music-making as 'inescapable', highlighting the mutual admiration between Stravinsky and Mussolini. David Osmond-Smith, Ben Earle (ed.), 'Masculine Semiotics: The Music of Goffredo Petrassi and the Figurative Arts in Italy during the 1930s', *Twentieth-Century Music*, 9.1–2 (2012), 11–37 <<https://doi.org/10.1017/S1478572212000187>> [accessed 4 May 2023].

²² Anna Quaranta, 'Neoclassicismo musicale. Termini del dibattito italiano ed europeo', in *Alfredo Casella e l'Europa. Atti del convegno internazionale di studi, Siena, 7-9 giugno 2001*, ed. by Mila De Santis (Florence: Olschki, 2003), pp. 93–145. The influence of Stravinsky's music in Italy has been widely discussed both by contemporaries and by scholars since. Casella, 'Il neoclassicismo mio e altrui', and Gianfranco Vinay, *Stravinsky neoclassico. L'invenzione della memoria nel '900 musicale* (Venice: Marsilio, 1987).

²³ 'We have made Italy, now we have to make Italians': this Unification clarion call from the late 19th-century is usually attributed to Massimo d'Azeglio.

²⁴ Adriano Seroni, 'Fascismo e riviste letterarie italiane negli anni Trenta', *Studi Storici*, 23.3 (1982), 541–54.

(namely, the so-called *cantabilità*), or otherwise to an ideal of linearity, purity and anti-rhetorical sobriety.²⁵

In Italy, looking to the past therefore meant seeking a national identity based on the pride of the country's historic glories. Tradition was a serious matter, to be confronted with reverence and not with the ironic and dehumanising detachment of Stravinsky. Parody was not an intellectual game, irreverent with respect to tradition, but took on a rhetorical and celebratory character for Italian musicians.²⁶ Casella's *stile littorio*, with its 'constructive' rather than 'ironic' contact with the past, was an example of this ideologically charged neoclassicism.²⁷ Similarly, comic opera was a national milestone to be explored in a cultured way, far from its original service as popular entertainment.²⁸ Against this background, *La pulce d'oro* perfectly accords with wider musical practices of the time. Allusions to tradition recur throughout the opera: as we follow the adventures of the magic flea, the idioms of Mozart, Rossini and Donizetti, among others, echo and reverberate in Ghedini's music. The opera refers to generic forms and past styles, ranging from direct quotation to imitation and allusion. The reception of the opera has sought to make sense of these references. Did they play within the nationalist rhetoric of *italianità* or rather align with the Stravinskian mode of irony? Critical responses have varied over time: from critics at the

²⁵ For Italian discussions of neoclassicism in the contemporary press, see Luigi Rognoni, 'L'estetica di Stravinsky', *Bollettino mensile di vita e cultura musicale*, 9 (1935), 198–202; Fernando Ballo, 'Esperienze della musica moderna', *La rassegna musicale*, 4 (1935), 245–62; Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco, 'Neoclassicismo musicale', *Pegaso*, 2 (1929), 197–204, republished in *Suono, parola, scena. Studi e testi sulla musica italiana nel Novecento*, ed. by Giorgio Pestelli and Virgilio Bernardoni (Alessandria: Edizioni dell'Orso, 2003), pp. 201–11; Mario Labroca, 'Stravinskij musicista classico', *Pegaso*, 1 (1929), 61–4, also republished in *Suono, parola, scena*, pp. 195–99; Massimo Mila, *Compagno Stravinsky* (Turin: Einaudi, 1983).

²⁶ While appreciating his music and disseminating it through Italy, Casella criticised Stravinsky's excesses of technique and appropriationist attitude towards tradition. Nicolodi, 'Casella e la musica di Stravinsky'.

²⁷ In the operatic field, Casella's *La favola di Orfeo*, a one-act opera from 1932, was emblematic of this approach to the past in dealing with the Monteverdian model. See Ben Earle, *Luigi Dallapiccola and Musical Modernism in Fascist Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 103. Earle underlines how, especially from the *Concerto romano* (1926) onwards, Stravinsky's 'ironic distance from the past [was] essentially foreign' to Casella's music; *Ibid.*, p. 109.

²⁸ Guido Salvetti, 'Del "ritorno all'ordine". Le diverse ragioni', in *Il Novecento musicale italiano tra neoclassicismo e neogoticismo. Atti del Convegno di studi (Venezia, 10-12 ottobre 1986)*, ed. by David Bryant (Florence: Olschki, 1988), pp. 67–76; Salvetti, 'L'opera nella prima metà del secolo'.

premiere (A.R.) noting the ‘nostalgic and classicising allusions’ to the melodramatic tradition, to the ‘ironic allusions’ highlighted in later criticism (Piero Santi).²⁹

The relationship between music and text, as repeatedly discussed in the early reviews, is a revealing field to investigate the nature of these allusions and the strongly parodic dimension of *La pulce d'oro* more generally. According to critics, Ghedini's music had the merit of adhering to what happens on the stage, in a ‘constant work of representation’ of characters, gestures and settings, as Andrea Della Corte reported on the opera's premiere.³⁰ Later on, echoing one of the most frequently recurring characterisations of the opera, the critic Franco Abbiati recognised the score as ‘a little treasure’ (*gioiello*), capable of following the Asiatic flea and its story ‘step by step’ and rendering words perfectly intelligible in singing.³¹ In this close adherence between music and text, *La pulce d'oro* fully complied with some of the main yardsticks of *italianità*. In fact, the music's respect for the text had always been the major concern in approaching and evaluating opera in the Italian context; it represented one of the main hallmarks of musical *italianità*, ever since Monteverdi's *seconda prattica* had declared music the servant of words.³²

²⁹ See A. R., ‘Al Teatro CARLO FELICE. Una prima ZANETTO di Pietro Mascagni. Due novità L'INTRUSA di Guido Pannain LA PULCE D'ORO di G. Ghedini’, *Il Lavoro*, 16 February 1940; Piero Santi, ‘Lirica alla radio. Tre opere moderne. La pulce d'oro di G. F. Ghedini’, *Radiocorriere*, 36.7 (1959), 7.

³⁰ Andrea Della Corte, ‘Novità al Carlo Felice. L'intrusa di Pannain. La pulce d'oro di Ghedini’, *La Stampa*, 15 February 1940. In the same vein, the scholar Stefano Parise recognises in the orchestra a twofold capacity of imitating what is on stage (as in the onomatopoeic description of the initial storm) and excavating the humorous verve of the text. Stefano Parise, ‘Profilo di Giorgio Federico Ghedini’ (dissertation, Università degli Studi di Milano, 1992). Dahlhaus identifies a similar adherence in *Le Rossignol*, where Stravinsky's music transforms Andersen's fairy tale into vivid scenic-musical depictions. Carl Dahlhaus, ‘Il teatro epico di Igor Stravinskij’, in *Dal dramma musicale alla Literaturoper* (Rome: Astrolabio Ubaldini, 2014), pp. 173–208 (p. 181).

³¹ Franco Abbiati, ‘Alla Fenice di Venezia. Due opere moderne dirette da Ettore Gracis. «Mondi celesti e infernali» di G. F. Malipiero e «La pulce d'oro» di G. F. Ghedini’, *Corriere della sera*, 3 February 1961, p.6.

³² Portrayed as a national icon in Gabriele D'Annunzio's novel *Il fuoco* (1900), as seen in Chapter 1, Claudio Monteverdi became an ideal reference for the renewal of Italian opera in the twentieth century, aided by the contemporary rediscovery of his work through transcriptions and revivals, and the publication of his *opera omnia*, edited by Gian Francesco Malipiero between 1927 and 1942. In contrast to the Monteverdian emphasis on the text, Stravinsky's music demonstrated a certain disregard for its semantic meaning, prioritising instead the sonic qualities of the words. Massimiliano Locanto, ‘Challenges to Realism and Tradition: Stravinsky's Modernist Theatre’, in *Stravinsky in Context*, ed. by Graham Griffiths (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), pp. 153–61.

However, if we delve into the text of *La pulce d'oro*, considering its form and content, the relationship with the music turns out to be more nuanced. First, Pinelli's libretto, directly derived from the play, is an example of *Literaturoper*. The theatrical text undergoes an obvious process of reduction, but not a metrical adaptation. The prose is primarily reproduced verbatim in the libretto. The writer's intervention is limited to cutting, arranging the distribution of the lines and, only rarely, expanding the text to offer the music some soloistic digressions. The case of a prose libretto was not especially common in Italian opera, apart from a few examples of operas by Franco Alfano (such as *La leggenda di Sakaïntala*, 1921) and works based on texts by Gabriele D'Annunzio, whose poetic prestige apparently resisted any further adaptation.³³

With respect to its content, as already mentioned, Pinelli's libretto displays many staples from the repertoire of both opera and fairy tale. Paradoxically, the 1935 play version was already close to the tradition of *opera buffa*, probably because—as we will see—it also drew on Goldoni's theatre, a common source of inspiration for both prose theatre and comic opera.³⁴ If we try to place Pinelli's libretto—disregarding its theatrical origin—within the aforementioned Italian panorama of comic opera in the first half of the twentieth century, we can see how the opera relied on a variety of comic and fantastical trends. *La pulce d'oro*, in fact, combined the realism and satirical wit of the Goldonian model with the seemingly magical element of the flea and a host of stock characters, ascribable not only to the tradition of the fairy tale, but also to the alternative theatrical model of Gozzi and the *commedia dell'arte*. Within a vaguely popular setting, not defined in space and time, but recognisable in the tavern trope, the characters of *La pulce d'oro* act halfway between everyday people and the masks of *commedia dell'arte*: Lupo Fiorino, the wandering

³³ That was the case, for instance, of G.F. Malipiero's *Sogno d'un tramonto d'autunno* (1913-14), unperformed on stage before the late 1980s. Generally, the relationship between opera and contemporary prose theatre or literature was not very successful at the time. For instance, G.F. Malipiero's *La favola del figlio cambiato*, with a text by Luigi Pirandello, was a complete failure in 1934.

³⁴ Compare *La pulce d'oro* with Wolf-Ferrari's *Il campiello* (1936), a comedy from Goldoni, to find similar tradition: a small number of characters, the tavern setting, a deception, the final farewells and a wedding. By his own admission, Pinelli was neither an operagoer nor a connoisseur of the operatic repertoire.

trickster, recalls Arlecchino's cunning and the exotic bluster of Capitan Fracassa; Lucilla, playing the innocent, is as duplicitous and sly as Colombina;³⁵ Daghe has the pretentious attitude of Dottor Balanzone. Olimpio is the most ambiguous character, in which different types seem to converge, such as the mask of Ruzante: the rough and ignorant peasant, eventually thief and murderer, who laments his own misery and social inferiority. Olimpio's complaints about his labours, 'Son curvo, son curvo, perché porto le secchie' (I am bent over by the load of buckets), align with the servant's role in the *commedia dell'arte* and echo the repertoire of comic opera, from Leporello to Figaro.

In reading Pinelli's libretto, we can see how Ghedini's music engages with both its prose text and comic content, establishing a singular relationship of both adherence—as the critics praised—and ironic distance. Delving into the score, we can see that the clarity of singing results from the balance between voices and orchestra, while the music's responsiveness to the plot is reflected in the fragmentary nature of the score, in both formal and stylistic terms. Fragmentation and montage were typically Stravinskian techniques; but, while in operas like *Mavra* the musical discourse is autonomous, relying on a formal organisation in closed numbers, Ghedini's music is more gestural and variable in closely following the rapid pace of the libretto and its open prose form. Ghedini only recovers the stylistic and expressive features of the closed forms of operatic tradition. Despite the absence of *pezzi d'insieme* typical of the comic genre, the composer adeptly evokes their sense of chaotic excitement through syllabic fragmentation, in a way reminiscent of Rossinian final *concertati*. For instance, when the flea hides under Lucilla's clothes, Lupo Fiorino orders a sack to contain both her and the flea. Everyone echoes his command in unison, turning their words into pure, rhythmic sounds as they mindlessly comply (see Example 3.2).

³⁵ 'You raised me beautiful and a liar', says Lucilla to her parents, thanking them and taking leave. Tullio Pinelli, *La pulce d'oro. Un atto in tre quadri* (Milan: Ricordi, 1940), p. 33.

Fortuna

Daghe

Olimpio

Mirtillo

sac - co! un sac - co! un sac - co! un sac - co!

sac - co! un sac - co! un sac - co! un sac - co!

sac - co! un sac - co! un sac - co! un sac - co!

Example 3.2. Giorgio Federico Ghedini, *La pulce d'oro*. Un atto in tre quadri [vocal score] (Milan: Ricordi, 1940), pp. 45-6

As Salvetti remarks regarding *La pulce d'oro*, in the ongoing dissolution of the operatic form, 'melody is reduced to a gesture' and 'form breaks apart into mutually impenetrable formulas and blocks'.³⁶ This formal fragmentation corresponds to a marked eclecticism and stylistic heterogeneity, the music turning to folkloric motifs, dances, marches, aria-like moments and what in cinematic terms would be called mickey-mousing, with its recent use in silent films to emphasise the mimic and physical component of comedy.³⁷ The eclecticism that had prominently surfaced in the mystical context of *Maria d'Alessandria* now found a more consistent application in comedy. Seemingly combining 'the cult of form, onomatopoeic description, the most inventive baroque and a romanticising musical affection', as we can read in a review of the opera's premiere,³⁸ the heterogeneity of *La pulce d'oro* meets Martha Hyde's updated definition of musical

³⁶ Guido Salvetti, 'L'«antipoetica» di G. F. Ghedini nella musica italiana tra le due guerre', *Studi musicali*, 1.2 (1972), 371-417 (p. 415).

³⁷ In this sense, *La pulce d'oro* seems to put into practice Busoni's words: 'the field of opera ranges from simple songs, marches and dance motifs to more elaborate counterpoints, from singing to orchestra, from the sacred to the profane, and beyond'. Ferruccio Busoni, *Lo Sguardo lieto. Tutti gli scritti sulla musica e le arti*, trans. by Luigi Dallapiccola, ed. by Fedele D'Amico (Milan: Il Saggiatore, 1977), p. 119.

³⁸ A.R., 'Al Teatro CARLO FELICE'.

parody: a complex form of anachronism brought into being by the creative use of a historical clashing of different styles.³⁹

Indeed, several lexical, formal and stylistic elements coexist eclectically in *La pulce d'oro*, layered in an ahistorical manner. The opera ranges nimbly from modes to tonality, from polytonality to a hint of dodecaphony, bringing together elements that are 'incompatible with each other' (Salvetti). This parodic clash serves the comic effect. Returning to the opera's first scene, for example, Ghedini combines the citation from *Otello* with a light-hearted bitonal mazurka, the latter introducing Lupo Fiorino's arrival on the scene. The musical presence of this duplicitous character mainly relies on different passages of atonality, polytonality and even twelve-note construction, as in the recurrent dodecaphonic comment on Lupo Fiorino's paradoxical statements ('everything I say is true, even if it is false'). The effect is estranging and grotesque within the comic context of the play and the neoclassical qualities of the music (see Example 3.3).⁴⁰

³⁹ Martha M. Hyde, 'Neoclassic and Anachronistic Impulses in Twentieth-Century Music', *Music Theory Spectrum*, 2 (1996), 200–235. Hyde ranks parody among the options of musical 'anachronism', as opposed to philological or antiquarian approaches to the past.

⁴⁰ This episodic and mocking use of the series to characterise Lupo Fiorino's devious words was probably a sidewise glance at Dallapiccola: the latter's embrace of the twelve-note method, which he was the first to deploy in Italy, aroused the hostility of many, including Ghedini. Something similar happens in Petrassi's *Il Cordovano*, where the series matches the line 'Pass me the chamber pot' with an explicitly mocking intent, as the composer himself admitted. See Petrassi's interview in Parise, 'Profilo di Giorgio Federico Ghedini', p. 571.

The image shows two pages of a musical score. The top page features a vocal line for Lupo Fiorino in 4/4 time, with lyrics 'È tut - to ve - ro ciò ch'io di - co; an -'. The piano accompaniment includes a prominent eighth-note pattern. The bottom page continues the vocal line with lyrics 'chese è fal - so!' and includes a section marked 'Moderato' with a tempo of 63 and a section marked 'Un poco animato'. The piano accompaniment features a string section marked 'string:.....' and a final section marked 'ff'.

Example 3.3. Giorgio Federico Ghedini, *La pulce d'oro. Un atto in tre quadri* [vocal score] (Milan: Ricordi, 1940), p. 19

In this parodic dimension, the music in *La pulce d'oro* does not assimilate the past so much as emphasise the anachronistic gap, with a sense of distancing irony. The opening storm, for instance, an omen of the drama to come and the inner disturbance of the characters in *Otello*, is downsized and overturned here in the prosaic context of Olimpio's tavern. Ghedini does not here recover older forms or quote from tradition, but rather evokes the spirit of *opera buffa*, that is, in Raymond Fearn's words, a 'subtle atmosphere of wit and irony' beyond mere 'far-fetched plots involving deceit, disguise and come-uppance'.⁴¹ The allusions to tradition in this ironic context are decontextualised and juxtaposed in a sort of stylistic patchwork, matching as they do the libretto's bromides and acting together as an effective means of comedy. Even the opera's

⁴¹ Fearn, *Italian Opera since 1945*, p. 25.

lyrical moments, while alluding to traditional aria forms and to the expressivity of *cantabilità* (the vocal offshoot of *italianità*), become mere instruments of humour.

‘Piccola mamma’ (*Andantino*, Scene I, rehearsal mark 43), Lucilla’s quasi-aria in the first scene of the opera, exemplifies this ironic use of conventions and epitomises the twofold relation of adherence and distance between music and text. It is a sort of closed number that halts the continuous flow of music with Lucilla’s heartfelt song addressed to her parents over a sober accompaniment (see Example 3.4).⁴² The prose text is set as a kind of aria, but without resorting to established operatic forms. The gap between the previous recitative and more expansive singing is explicitly conventional. But all is not what it seems: a dissociation between music and text takes place. What might seem like a lyrical moment in the music is actually the unfolding of a cold sophistry, with which Lucilla insistently tries to convince her parents to let her spend the night with Lupo Fiorino. ‘Non c’è niente di male’ (‘there is nothing wrong with it’), is the refrain continuously repeated in this varied strophic form, matching Lucilla’s peroration in her repetitive, pedantic and increasingly emphatic tone. The melody sounds simple and monotonous; Lucilla’s vocal style is chanting and almost child-like, an arioso without any excesses of lyricism and virtuosity. The musical phraseology is regular and periodic, levelling out the continuous prose of the text: consisting of antecedent and consequent, it fits the logic and the structure of the syllogism. The first semi-phrase is generally linear and diatonic, the second more varied and with a chromatic accompaniment: Lucilla’s cunning seems to lie in this ambiguity between apparent innocence and hidden malice. Ghedini’s music excavates the paradoxical content of the text, while detaching itself from its literal meaning. The situation is reminiscent of the famous prayer, ‘Oh mio babbino caro’, that Lauretta addresses to her father in Puccini’s *Gianni Schicchi*, but in

⁴² ‘Piccola mamma’ is included as a separate piece in an anthology of arias for soprano taken from twentieth-century operas, published by Ricordi: *Novecento opera. Arie per soprano*, ed. by Maurizio Carnelli (San Giuliano Milanese: Ricordi, 2006).

this case, the pathos is lacking in Lucilla's prose text and restrained expressiveness, her cold detachment contrasting with the apparent lyricism of the music.⁴³

The musical score is divided into two systems. The first system features Olimpio's vocal line in bass clef, 3/8 time, with lyrics "Fer - ma, fer - ma! Si - gno - re, mi-a fi -". The piano accompaniment is in treble and bass clefs, 3/8 time, with dynamics *ff*, *Andante* (♩ = 63), *p*, and *f*. A measure number 43 is indicated. The second system features three vocal lines: Lucilla (treble clef, 2/4 time, lyrics "Pic -"), Fortuna (treble clef, 2/4 time, lyrics "I - o non vo - glio, si - gno-re!"), and Olimpio (bass clef, 2/4 time, lyrics "- glia è u - na ra-gaz - za o - ne - sta!"). The piano accompaniment continues in bass clef, 2/4 time, with dynamics *p*, *f*, and *dim.---*.

⁴³ Lucilla's words: 'Little mama, what are you afraid of? I know what you are afraid of, but don't worry, the flea will fly if he takes the sack off. And if he doesn't take it off, then there's nothing wrong with it.'

p dolce, con finta ingenuità

Lucilla

3

- co - la mam - ma, di che co - sa hai pa - u - ra?

Andantino ♩ = 63-66

uguali

p

Lucilla

Io so be - ne di che co - sa hai pa - u - ra. Ma

Lucilla

se mi to - glie il sac - co, la pul - ce può fug - gi - re,

p

Lucilla

e se non me lo to - glie, non c'è nul - la di ma - le. Se mi

Example 3.4. Giorgio Federico Ghedini, *La pulce d'oro. Un atto in tre quadri* [vocal score] (Milan: Ricordi, 1940), pp. 50-1

This typically modernist divorce between music and action had already been theorised by Ferruccio Busoni in his aesthetics at the beginning of the century, resulting in what Aleksandr Benois called the ‘destruction of the synthesis’ of opera.⁴⁴ The music asserts and simultaneously denies the situation on stage, so as to reveal the ‘pleasant lie’ of art itself, according to Busoni—and, in this case, unmasking Lucilla’s lie as well. Something like what happens in ‘Piccola mamma’ occurs repeatedly in Busoni’s *Arlecchino*, when, for instance, the Abbot lyrically sings the praises of Chianti wine from Tuscany within a conventional duet. In Busoni’s opera, traditional forms and situations are recovered in an alienating and neutralising sense, with the music distancing from and sometimes clashing with the contents of the words. This was the closest model for *La pulce d’oro*’s parodic gap between music and text, as well as between present and past.⁴⁵ Ghedini’s music maintains a relationship of dissociation and complementarity with the scene, exactly as theorised by Busoni.⁴⁶ But, if this alienated doubling of music and stage served for Busoni to mark opera’s congenital improbability and its anti-realist distance from life, here in *La pulce d’oro* it assumes a markedly comic value. On the one hand, Lucilla’s aria mocks operatic tradition while alluding to it, turning its sentimentality into ridicule. On the other hand, Ghedini’s music effectively stresses that dissociation between thinking one thing, saying another and doing yet another, which is a typical comic mechanism. This incongruity, in fact, achieves an ironic effect,

⁴⁴ Ferruccio Busoni, *The Essence of Music and Other Papers*, trans. by Rosamond Ley (London: Rockliff, 1957). Benois is quoted for the anti-operatic tendencies of modernism in Marina Frolova-Walker, ‘Russian Opera. Between Modernism and Romanticism’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century Opera*, ed. by Mervyn Cooke (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 181–96 (p. 181).

⁴⁵ The early 1940s were the time for the rediscovery of Busoni as an opera composer, through the staging of his works (*Arlecchino* in 1940 and *Doktor Faust* at the 1942 Maggio Musicale in Florence), the dissemination of his writings, edited by Guido M. Gatti and Luigi Dallapiccola, and the publication of monographs, such as those by Guido Guerrini.

⁴⁶ As has been shown, Busoni also influenced other composers of the time: Bernardoni finds similarities with some of G. F. Malipiero’s works, while the same lineage from *Falstaff* to *Arlecchino* was the key to reading Casella’s *La donna serpente* in its 1942 staging, for critics such as Rognoni and Ballo. Bernardoni, *La maschera e la favola nell’opera italiana del primo Novecento* (Venice: Fondazione Levi, 1986), pp. 39–53; Luigi Rognoni, ‘Lettera da Milano’, *La rassegna musicale*, 11 (1942), 294–7; Ferdinando Ballo, ‘La stagione di opere contemporanee a Milano’, *Musica*, 2 (1943), 220–35.

approaching the concept of humour as defined by the Italian playwright Luigi Pirandello, that is, as a ‘feeling of contrast’.⁴⁷

Within the multifaceted panorama of Italian neoclassicism, *La pulce d'oro* seems simultaneously to touch on and evade key musical identifiers of *italianità*, such as the references to the past and the music’s commitment to the text, as was pointed out by the critics at the premiere. Yet, its underlying irony dampens any tone of nationalist rhetoric, seemingly embracing the objective aesthetics of Busoni and Stravinskian alienation. As recalled by his pupil Niccolò Castiglioni, Ghedini never embraced neoclassical attitudes similar to Casella’s, opting instead for an instinctive approach to music-making rather than an ideological one.⁴⁸ The allusions to tradition in *La pulce d'oro* do not seem nostalgic, insofar as they do not attempt to resemble the past, but rather exploit it with critical detachment and to comic effect.⁴⁹ The composer Luciano Berio, another future pupil of Ghedini, later distinguished between a true neoclassical stance, one properly ironic in maintaining a critical distance from the past—and thus, not necessarily reactionary—and the fascist ideal of classicism, which took the past literally as a model of immutable order.⁵⁰ In this sense, Ghedini’s opera sits firmly within the neoclassical stance, the one represented by Busoni or Stravinsky, while interpreting it in an idiosyncratic manner. Precisely the emphasising of the libretto’s comedy in Ghedini’s music, distances *La pulce d'oro* from both the more celebratory aspects of Italian neoclassicism and the purely musicological

⁴⁷ Moreover, as Henri Bergson said in his famous essay *Le Rire*, ‘laughter has no greater foe than emotion’; quoted in John Parkin, ‘The Power of Laughter: Koestler on Bergson and Freud’, in *Laughter and Power*, ed. by John Parkin and John Phillips (Bern: Lang, 2006), pp. 113–44 (p. 118).

⁴⁸ Parise, ‘Profilo di Giorgio Federico Ghedini’, p. 548.

⁴⁹ Conversely, according to Massimo Mila, Ghedini approached tradition with utmost seriousness and reverence in his transcriptions of Frescobaldi and Monteverdi, in stark contrast with Stravinsky’s ‘refined pastime’ of *pastiche*. Mila, in [Ricordo e testimonianze su G. F. Ghedini], in Conservatorio di musica ‘Giuseppe Verdi’ di Milano, *Annuario dell'anno accademico 1964-65*, ed. by Guglielmo Barblan (Milan: Conservatorio di musica ‘Giuseppe Verdi’, 1965), pp. 205–40 (p. 235).

⁵⁰ See Patrick Szersnovicz’s interview with Luciano Berio (1996), in Berio, *Interviste e colloqui*, ed. by Vincenzina Caterina Ottomano (Turin: Einaudi, 2017), pp. 347–55. In this way, Berio waters down the ideological connection between neoclassicism and fascism.

recovery of past forms and idioms.⁵¹ The music's parodic aspect, expressed in terms of stylistic and historical heterogeneity, not only adheres to the text, but also matches the ambiguous and multilayered meaning of the play. As we will see, drawing on the broader meaning of the term, parody in *La pulce d'oro* is not only the musical technique that melds past and present, but also embodies the opera's thorny relationship between fiction and reality, as an allegorical means.

History behind the Lie

The marriage of the young couple is a conventional end to a seemingly light-hearted story, and yet the libretto leaves us with more questions than answers. Was it all a deception? Were Lucilla and Lupo Fiorino accomplices from the start? Did the flea actually exist? 'If you believed it, it exists; if you didn't believe it, it is just a fairy tale', is Lupo Fiorino's suggestion at the end of the opera. This final remark, as a sort of moral of the story, suspends the narrative and broadens the perspective of the tale, opening a metatheatrical reflection, as happens at the end of many other comic operas, such as *Falstaff*, *La donna serpente* and *Arlecchino*. The magic flea triggers a multifaceted reflection on what is real and what is fake, or what is believable and what is not, which is left as an open question in the opera. We might then ask, is *La pulce d'oro* indeed just a fairy tale?

Starting from Pinelli's labelling of his oeuvre as in the vein of 'magic realism', we can investigate how the opera presents the relationship between fiction and reality in the light of this contemporary trend of Italian culture under fascism. Comparisons can be drawn with contemporary literature, and particularly comic journalism, which provided an alternative and pedestrian reading of 'Italianness', compared to the bombastic nationalistic rhetoric of *italianità*. The comedy and the ambiguity of the opera's plot hinges precisely on the blurring of reality and

⁵¹ In other works, Ghedini displayed a more serious approach to tradition, especially towards the revered Italian pre-classical repertoire; thus, some critics defined *La pulce d'oro* as a 'vacation', a particularly striking choice of words in the ominous year 1940.

fiction. This dualism underlies not just the fairy tale of *La pulce d'oro*, but also the opera's topicality in 1940, mirroring in a certain satirical sense the regime's strategy of ambiguity. Far from being merely facetious, as we will see, *La pulce d'oro* was interpreted as grotesque by some critics, confirming the unsettling prominence of comedy in times of crisis, as both escapism and disguise of the tragic: 'If humour comes into play in dealing with history, it is almost always when coping with the most serious, even threatening situations: violence, terror, war, social, political and psychological tensions of all kinds appear to be the preferred subjects for humorous arrangement'.⁵²

Since the debut of the spoken version of Pinelli's play in 1935, critics had picked up on the semantic ambiguity of the work, drawing reference to wider philosophical trends in twentieth-century thought in the process. One critic wrote: 'It is clear that the symbolic meaning of the comedy rekindles Pirandello's problem of appearance and reality'.⁵³ The critic was right: behind the play's jokey surface, the conceptual core resembles one of the recurrent motifs in the works of Pirandello, who was one of the most celebrated Italian dramatists of the time: 'Nothing is true | and everything can be true. | Just believe it for a moment, | and then no more, and then again, | and then always, or never again', the prince says in *La favola del figlio cambiato*, written in the same years as the play of *La pulce d'oro*, as a libretto for music by G. F. Malipiero.⁵⁴ The union of this modernist philosophical reflection and the comic content of the fairy tale produced a peculiarly modern sense of humour in *La pulce d'oro*, which did not go unnoticed by critics.

⁵² *Humour and Laughter in History: Transcultural Perspectives*, ed. by Elisabeth Cheauré and Regine Nohejl (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2014), p. 7.

⁵³ 'Il teatro sperimentale fei G.U.F. inaugurato con "La Pulce d'oro" di Pinelli', *Corriere della sera*, 10 November 1935.

⁵⁴ 'Ma niente è vero e vero può essere tutto; | basta crederlo in un momento, | e poi non più e poi di nuovo, | e poi per sempre, o per sempre mai più', in Luigi Pirandello and Gian Francesco Malipiero, *La favola del figlio cambiato. Tre atti in cinque quadri* (Milan: Ricordi, 1934), Act III, sc. v.

As mentioned above, there was nothing immediately innovative or timely about the opera's plot. The flea itself belongs to the typical kind of comic expedient, whereby fantastic or magical elements are often combined with daily reality as a way of using cunning and deceit to produce comedy. This is the case—to isolate just two examples—of the magic love potion passed off by the phony doctor Dulcamara in Donizetti's *L'elisir d'amore*, as well as the fake fairies and elves waiting for Falstaff to make fun of him. However, unlike these historical examples, the comedy and even the happy ending of *La pulce d'oro* are neither cathartic nor definitive. As one critic noted, beneath a veneer of bonhomie, the opera's fairy tale betrayed 'wretched and philosophically bitter situations'.⁵⁵ Comic opera, flourishing in the age of Enlightenment, inevitably acquired a different meaning in the twentieth-century context. Resulting from a time of 'ruin and destruction', to borrow Casella's words, straightforward comedy was clearly not possible, with *La pulce d'oro*'s acerbic aftertaste noted as one of the opera's most topical aspects. As another critic remarked: 'the troubled mood of the contemporary public no longer fits the simple and sincere smile capable of soothing our souls; today, comedy is never separated from something acrid and bitter that turns our laughter into a grotesque smirk'.⁵⁶

The critics' isolation of a 'grotesque' element suggests recourse to a specific mode of comedy.⁵⁷ A much-theorised term at this time, the grotesque was often construed as the introduction of an

⁵⁵ 'Situazioni tristanzuole e filosoficamente amare', cit. in Franco Abbiati, 'Alla Fenice di Venezia. Due opere moderne dirette da Ettore Gracis'.

⁵⁶ 'Il genere comico, che un tempo era rappresentato in musica dalla commedia od opera buffa gloria e vanto del popolo italiano, trova oggi il suo equivalente nel grottesco. La sensibilità del travagliato pubblico contemporaneo non è più fatta per il sorriso semplice, candido, sincero, che sfocia in una risatona a piena bocca rasserenatrice degli animi; oggi il comico nella vita non va mai disgiunto da un alcunché di acre, di amaro che s'annida al fondo del calice giocondo e finisce per mutare la risata in una smorfia grottesca.' Quoted in Stefano Rebaudi, 'Tre opere e tre successi ieri sera al "Carlo Felice": "Zanetto" di Mascagni – "L'intrusa" di Pannain – "La pulce d'oro" di G. F. Ghedini', *Corriere mercantile*, 16 February 1940. See also A. R., 'Al Teatro CARLO FELICE'.

⁵⁷ In a recent study of Ghedini's operas, scholar Andrea Lanza draws a comparison between the grotesque and surreal comedy of *La pulce d'oro* and Shostakovich's *The Nose* (1928). Andrea Lanza, "... una stesura che ho voluto secca e avara di parole...". Ghedini e il teatro d'opera: uno sguardo d'insieme', in *Giorgio Federico Ghedini: dallo spirito torinese alle suggestioni europee. Atti del convegno, Torino, 22 gennaio 2016*, ed. by Giulia Giachin (Turin: Edizioni del Conservatorio, 2017), pp. 79–98. It is noteworthy that the concept of the 'grotesque' also appears in Adorno's criticism of Stravinsky's music.

unnatural or absurd incursion that is both unsettling and inexplicable.⁵⁸ *La pulce d'oro*'s comedy seemingly accords with these stock definitions. The prodigious insect serves as a comic gimmick, but it is also a somewhat surreal element that interrupts an otherwise more realistic context. The grotesque, in fact, is linked to paradox and a reversal of reality, as a 'force working on the truth, rummaging through it, so as to find the false in the true, the unnatural in the natural, the absurd in the logical'.⁵⁹ In this sense, the comedy of *La pulce d'oro* is at one with the paradoxical combination of reality and fiction, epitomised by the phantom flea of Lupo Fiorino. The opera here leads us to the oxymoronic formula of 'magic realism', as Pinelli defined his narrative approach, that is, a magical and fabulous transfiguration of reality, which runs through his production from the spoken version of *La pulce d'oro* to his later screenplays.⁶⁰

The term magic realism has been used to describe very different artistic expressions in the twentieth century, but ones that are united in having the intrusion of a fantastic element within an apparently realistic situation, with the magical serving as an alternative approach to such reality.⁶¹ According to Maggie Ann Bowers, magic realism is difficult to delimit due to its encroaching on a variety of genres (such as the fantastic, surrealist or allegorical) and the evolution of meaning through different translations and contexts.⁶² From the post-expressionist art of the Weimar Republic to Latin American literature of the second half of the twentieth century, magic realism took on different forms and meanings as a transnational phenomenon. In Italy, the term *realismo*

⁵⁸ See Wolfgang Johannes Kayser, *The Grottesque in Art and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981) and Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1968).

⁵⁹ Silvio D'Amico, 'La maschera e il volto di Luigi Chiarelli', *Tribuna*, 2 June 1916.

⁶⁰ The 'invention of the authentic' was how Fellini defined this aesthetic attitude. Demetrio Salvi, *Tullio Pinelli: l'intervista ritrovata. I misteri della scrittura e quarant'anni del miglior cinema italiano raccontati da un grande sceneggiatore* ([S.l.: independently published], 2014), Kindle ebook; Federico Fellini, Tullio Pinelli and Augusto Sainati, *Ciò che abbiamo inventato è tutto autentico. Lettere a Tullio Pinelli* (Venice: Marsilio, 2008).

⁶¹ *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, ed. by Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995); Maggie Ann Bowers, *Magic(al) Realism, New Critical Idiom* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

⁶² Bowers lists the German *Magischer Realismus*, the Italian *realismo magico*, the Latin-American *Lo real maravilloso* and *realismo mágico*. Consequently, she distinguishes between 'magic realism', 'magical realism' and 'marvellous realism'. Bowers, *Magic(al) Realism*.

magico was introduced by the writer and composer Massimo Bontempelli, who in 1927 theorised this literary mode on the pages of his well-known cultural magazine «900», defining it as a means of revealing the deepest universal meanings of reality, precisely through the disruption and estrangement effect of magic.⁶³ The artist's purpose was to invent new collective myths. Playing on the interface between fiction and reality, Bontempelli's works came close to Pirandello's themes, although without metatheatrical implications. For Bontempelli, the magic element served to express the existential alienation of modern man and the absurd, extreme consequences of this; such is the case with *Nostra Dea* (1925), in which the protagonist models her behaviour on the clothes she wears, and *Minnie la candida* (1927), who commits suicide in the tragic impossibility of distinguishing real human beings from robots.⁶⁴

However, even the case of Italian magic realism is not univocal and limited to Bontempelli's work. Its main ingredient—the mix of the mundane and the extraordinary—could be found in different forms, from Giorgio De Chirico's metaphysical art in World War I period to Italo Calvino's narratives of half a century later. In navigating among such different expressions, magic realism should be addressed—according to Bowers—by evaluating, case by case, how and with what kind of reality a magic realist work engages, in which perspective it presents the magical element and what role it attributes to this. From these assumptions, we can see how, in a slightly different manner from Bontempelli's mythographic ambition, Pinelli's magic realism in *La pulce d'oro* seemingly deals with reality in a more concrete, rather than metaphysical or existential way.

⁶³ Bontempelli (1878-1960) played a key role in fascist culture. His «900» was intended as part of the fascist project of renewal, as a 'return to order' after decadence and futurism, which were both considered expressions of the *fin de siècle* crisis of modernity, based on formalism, materialism, nihilism and bourgeois individualism. Bontempelli's «900» became the centre of the most internationalist and progressive instances of fascist culture, in opposition to the nationalism of *Strapaese*, as represented in the rival magazine «*Il Selvaggio*». Patricia Gaborik, 'La Donna Mobile: Massimo Bontempelli's *Nostra Dea* as Fascist Modernism', *Modern Drama*, 50 (2007), 210-32.

⁶⁴ See *Letteratura italiana del Novecento. Bilancio di un secolo*, ed. by Alberto Asor Rosa (Turin: Einaudi, 2000); Casadei and Santagata, *Manuale di letteratura*; Massimiliano Tortora, 'Modernismo e modernisti nelle riviste fasciste', in *I modernismi delle riviste. Tra Europa e Stati Uniti*, ed. by Edoardo Esposito and Caroline Patey (Milan: Ledizioni, 2019), pp. 73-93; Ruth Ben-Ghiat, *Fascist Modernities: Italy, 1922-1945* (London: University of California Press, 2001).

The comic tone of the opera dampens the philosophical commitment of Bontempelli's magic realism. The situation portrayed by Pinelli at Olimpio's tavern is quotidian and recognisable until the incursion of Lupo Fiorino and his magic flea. Unlike in other forms of magic realism, where the supernatural element is included and unanimously accepted as an ordinary occurrence within the fictive reality, the existence of the flea is questioned by the characters themselves within the fairy tale and always remains on the verge of illusion and trick. In this sense, *La pulce d'oro* gets closer to the fantastic genre, which relies precisely on a wavering between belief and non-belief in the extraordinary event, leaving the public in doubt about the fictional element.⁶⁵

In Ghedini's opera, opposing perspectives on the magic power of the flea, that of the sceptical Verna and the credulous Olimpio, coexist. The intrusion of the magic flea plays a role similar to that of the exotic or strange animals—such as crocodiles and turkeys—bursting into middle-class living rooms in the short stories of the contemporary Italian writer Alberto Moravia's *Racconti surrealisti e satirici*.⁶⁶ In the latter, the mix of everyday life and surreal elements acquires a satirical value: after an initial surprise, the characters accept the absurd presence of these animals, in order to be integrated into society and not risk looking stupid or provincial. The live crocodile worn as a coat or the turkey as a suitor for the daughter of a small trader—embedded in reality and social norms as they are and forcibly assimilated by the characters—reveal all the absurdity of contemporary society and ridicule people's intellectual limitations, with their conformism and ambitions of social climbing.⁶⁷ Written between 1935 and 1945, Moravia's tales were contemporary with Pinelli's *La pulce d'oro* and referred to Italian society in the veiled form of the

⁶⁵ Bowers uses Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* (1898)—later adapted into Benjamin Britten's opera (1954)—as an example of the fantastic genre, exploring the ambiguity surrounding the governess's narrative of encountering ghosts and questioning her sanity. Bowers, *Magic(al) realism*.

⁶⁶ Alberto Moravia, *Racconti surrealisti e satirici* (Milan: Bompiani, 1982).

⁶⁷ Irena Prosenc, 'Moravia e il realismo magico', in *Bontempelliano o plurimo? Il realismo magico negli anni di "900" e oltre*, ed. by Patrizia Farinelli (Florence: Le lettere, 2016), pp. 163–73.

apologue. This comparison within the same late-fascist context also brings the fairy tale of *La pulce d'oro* closer to the categories of satire and allegory.

If we read the opera in an allegorical key, *La pulce d'oro* has many points of contact with the contemporary Italian situation. Written as it was in 1935, the fairy tale was conceived at the peak of both the bombastic propaganda and the mass consensus of fascism. This was the same year the regime had fundraised for its colonial enterprise in Africa, asking Italians to sacrifice the gold of their wedding rings for the imperialist cause and promising glory and exotic treasure in exchange. The consequences were disastrous. 'È morto alla guerra | È morto alla guerra | L'uomo più ricco | Di tutta la terra | Non torna mai più' (he died in the war, the richest man on earth, never to return), is the grotesque and ominous refrain that Olimpio and his hosts sing in unison, as they dream of getting rich through the magic power of the exotic flea.⁶⁸ As happens in Pinelli's fairy tale, Italians at the time pleaded poverty, deceived by the promises of a charismatic individual, who actually happened to be a swindler.⁶⁹ Lupo Fiorino's far-fetched story, promising wealth through his magic flea, brings out the worst in people. Nobody sees the flea, but everyone wants it at any cost, obstinately believing the incredible as long as it is attractive. Any discordant voice, such as that of Verna, is silenced by force.⁷⁰

While *La pulce d'oro* could be read, then, as an apt metaphor for the contemporary situation and the regime's lies, the satirical charge of Pinelli's text—as in Moravia's stories—targeted Italian society under fascism more than being an overt political critique of the regime itself: mocking Olimpio's credulity more than Lupo Fiorino's profiteering astuteness. Pinelli's idiosyncratic magic

⁶⁸ Pinelli, *La pulce d'oro*, p. 24.

⁶⁹ In this allegorical parallel, even Lupo Fiorino's eccentric fish recipe at the beginning of the opera evokes the autarchic cookbooks distributed by the regime during the 1930s.

⁷⁰ Verna is chained and threatened by Olimpio to prevent him from reporting the alleged murder of Lupo Fiorino. It is worth noting that under the regime's press control, the so-called 'veline'—typewritten directives sent to newspaper editors with instruction on which news to emphasise and which to suppress—mandated minimising crime reporting as much as possible. Riccardo Cassero, *Le veline del duce* (Milan: Sperling & Kupfer, 2004), p. 8

realism brings out not the naivety of Bontempelli's special characters in the face of a paradoxical reality, but the ignorance and guile of common people, with Lucilla a sort of parodic version of the candid Minnie.⁷¹ The characters of *La pulce d'oro* are indeed ordinary people, recognisable archetypes of Italian society and comical in their very being. In the earlier play version, the parodic allusions to fascist Italy and its contradictions are even more explicit. The merchant Daghe, one of the patrons of Olimpio's inn, for example, plays the role of the Enlightenment thinker, in defence of reason and freedom, but his behaviour completely contradicts his principles: 'Voi non potete, sol perché siete forte, impedire la libertà di critica' (Just because you are strong, you cannot prevent freedom of criticism), he claims of Lupo Fiorino, while he is complicit like all the others in the misdeeds of the story.⁷²

The parodic intermingling of magic and the mundane in *La pulce d'oro* thus triggers a reflection on the nature of being Italian, an identity that could deflate the conceited version of fascist rhetoric. Take the example of Olimpio, portrayed as a simple man— 'a good-natured person' on the surface⁷³—yet not innocuous, willing to floor a man in defence of his own interests—whether it involves Lucilla and the flea as symbols of family and wealth.⁷⁴ His being narrow-minded and uncritical is potentially dangerous. Olimpio's stick, as the fascist *manganello* (truncheon), could be read as the expression of a deep-rooted aptitude to violence in Italian society, something repressed but ready to emerge at any moment, especially in difficult times.⁷⁵ Olimpio is

⁷¹ The protagonist of Bontempelli's *Minnie la candida* is jokingly made to believe that everyone is a robot, hewing to the idea tragically to the point of insanity and suicide. Silvana Cirillo, 'Fantastici, surrealisti e realisti magici', in *Le forme del realismo. Dal realismo magico al neorealismo*, ed. by Nino Borsellino and Walter Pedullà (Milan: Rizzoli, 2000), pp. 146–221.

⁷² Tullio Pinelli, *La pulce d'oro, I padri etruschi, Lotta con l'angelo, Il ciarlatano meraviglioso, La sacra rappresentazione di Santa Marina* (Rome: Editori & Associati, 1996), p. 18.

⁷³ 'Bonaccione e accomodante', quoted in Della Corte, 'Novità al Carlo Felice'. As we will see in the final chapters, 'Italiani brava gente' emerged as the exculpatory trope in the post-war era to reconcile with the fascist past.

⁷⁴ According to historians such as Edward C. Banfield and Paul Ginsborg, familism stands as one of the intrinsic characteristics deeply embedded in Italian society. See Antonio M. Chiesi, 'Familismo amorale e capitale sociale', *Quaderni di Sociologia*, 44 (2007), 195–99 <doi:10.4000/qds.943> [accessed 23 May 2023].

⁷⁵ The repressed violence of Italian society is a cornerstone of another work on fascist Italy: Moravia's novel *Il conformista* (1951).

representative of the Italian type, as the journalist Leo Longanesi described it in 1941: a ‘ferocious and domestic animal’, whose beliefs could be stronger than reality itself.⁷⁶ ‘And how could it be otherwise?’—Olimpio states in Pinelli’s spoken original—‘Because, if it were otherwise, I would be the silliest man in the world, and the power of the golden flea would be a fairy tale’.⁷⁷ He acknowledges the truth without believing it. The mundane and yet dangerous authoritarianism, as well as the slowness of late-fascist society, are condensed in the caricatural character of Olimpio, a clumsy and frustrated *pater familias*, the master who is also a servant: ‘Io sono il padrone e io porto le secchie’ (I am the master and I carry the buckets).⁷⁸ At the opera’s end, while everyone resumes their wandering, Olimpio proudly remains at home and ‘that’s what matters’, to sanction the uselessness of any experience and the resignation to utter immobility.⁷⁹

This critical reading of fascist Italy in *La pulce d’oro* is in keeping with some of the main theoretical and literary interpretations of Italian fascism from that time.⁸⁰ For many theorists and writers, direct witnesses of the events, fascism was not only a temporary political phenomenon, but also (if not primarily) a human and social one—one that indelibly marked the Italian character. Accordingly, Italians themselves had to answer for the dictatorship, as if fascism was a way of being and living rather than a political ideology, the most acute manifestation of Italians’ chronic diseases and vices (such as transformism, individualism, cultural small-mindedness and social immobility), following Piero Gobetti’s conception of fascism as ‘the autobiography of the

⁷⁶ Leo Longanesi (1905–57), journalist and caricaturist, quoted in *Risate di regime. La commedia italiana, 1930–1944*, ed. by Mino Argentieri (Venice: Marsilio, 1991), p. 71.

⁷⁷ ‘E come potrebbe essere diversamente? Ché, se fosse diversamente, io sarei l’uomo più sciocco del mondo, ed il potere della pulce d’oro sarebbe una favola.’ Quoted in Pinelli, *La pulce d’oro*, p. 27.

⁷⁸ Woven into the fabric of the fairy tale, the juxtaposition between the elders and the cunning, cynical youthful characters vividly illustrates the generational divide, which was pivotal in late-fascist society and remained a recurring theme in Ghedini’s works from *Re Hassan* to *Le Baccanti* and beyond.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

⁸⁰ See, for, example the historical interpretations of Gaetano Salvemini and Piero Gobetti, as well as the reflections and work of a diverse range of Italian novelists, such as Ignazio Silone, Alberto Moravia, Vitaliano Brancati, Carlo Levi, Carlo Emilio Gadda and Giorgio Bassani. See Antonio Tricomi, ‘Fascistissimi sempre. Il fascismo nella letteratura italiana’, *E-Review: Rivista degli Istituti storici dell’Emilia-Romagna in Rete*, 6 (2018) <<https://doi.org/10.12977/ereview143>> [accessed 11 Nov. 2021].

nation’.⁸¹ Novels such as *Fontamara* (1933) by Ignazio Silone or *Il Conformista* (1951) by Moravia fit into this interpretation, depicting on the one hand the ignorance and backwardness of fascist Italy, and on the other Italians’ desire for conformity and repressed violence.

The way *La pulce d’oro*’s satire recast the contradictions and stereotypes of Italian society via comedy mirrored the contemporary humorous press. After the suppression of press freedom in 1926, satire and direct criticism of the regime became impossible. Humorous journalism, however, continued to develop with great public success,⁸² carving out a space not so much for blatant opposition, but rather as an alternative to the rhetoric of propaganda—in a manner very similar to *La pulce d’oro*. As Adolfo Chiesa put it, such journalism offered ‘an oasis of reality in a world dominated by the rhetoric of heroism, monuments, imperial eagles’,⁸³ in which the contradictions of society were presented under the banner of caricature and paroxysm.⁸⁴ This was the case of the humour of Giovanni Mosca, Cesare Zavattini and Achille Campanile—to mention a few—who used a certain surrealism to transfigure a reality that could not be talked about directly, demonstrating its absurdity through irony, just as it happens in Moravia’s stories and Pinelli’s fairy tale.⁸⁵ The vicious circle of rhetoric within fascist society was itself the object of satire: in a cartoon from the popular journal *Marc’Aurelio*, Mosca ridiculed both the emptiness of the clumsy rhetorician’s speech and the complicity of his audience, ready to get excited no matter what he says (see Figure 3.2). Similarly, the story of the flea in Ghedini’s opera satirically reveals

⁸¹ Marco Salotti, *Al cinema con Mussolini. Film e regime 1929-1939* (Recco: Le mani, 2011).

⁸² Consider the growing circulation of humorous magazines such as *Bertoldo* or *Marc’Aurelio*.

⁸³ Adolfo Chiesa, *La satira politica in Italia* (Rome: Laterza, 1990), p. 89.

⁸⁴ Leonardo Battisti, ‘Ridere nel “regno della noia”. Intrattenimento e umorismo nella pubblicistica del ventennio fascista’, in *Le forme del comico. Atti delle sessioni parallele del XXI Congresso dell’ADI, Firenze, 6–9 settembre 2017*, ed. by Francesca Castellano, Irene Gambacorti and Giulia Tellini (Florence: Società Editrice Fiorentina, 2019); Leonardo Battisti, *Il romanzo umoristico negli anni del fascismo. Affermazione e crisi di un genere letterario* (Canterano: Aracne, 2019). See also Stephen Gundle, ‘Laughter under Fascism: Humour and Ridicule in Italy, 1922–43’, *History Workshop Journal*, 1 (2015), 215–32 <<https://doi.org/10.1093/hwj/dbv007>> [accessed 11 Feb. 2021]; Efharis Mascha, ‘Mocking Fascism: Popular Culture and Political Satire as Counter-Hegemony’, in *Studies in Political Humour. In between Political Critique and Public Entertainment*, ed. by Villy Tsakona and Diana Elena Popa (Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2011), pp. 191–213.

⁸⁵ Ernesto G. Laura, ‘I percorsi intrecciati della commedia anni ’30’, in *Risate di regime*, pp. 109–40.

the credulity of the others more than Lupo Fiorino's own prowess, and that was what could be laughed at and reflected upon, allowing the public to laugh at themselves. As Fellini later declared about the same *Marc'Aurelio*: 'the anti-fascist aspect was not so much in the idea, but in the desecration of language which aimed blatantly to contradict the bombastic rhetoric of the regime'.⁸⁶ The presentation of a prosaic reality was in itself an alternative to the grandeur of official propaganda, with Olimpio serving as a dampening counterpart to the image of the Italian hero and genius. 'Sordid, cowardly, superficial and ignorant characters' were depicted to embody the mismatch between the haughty rhetoric of the regime and the lived situation.⁸⁷

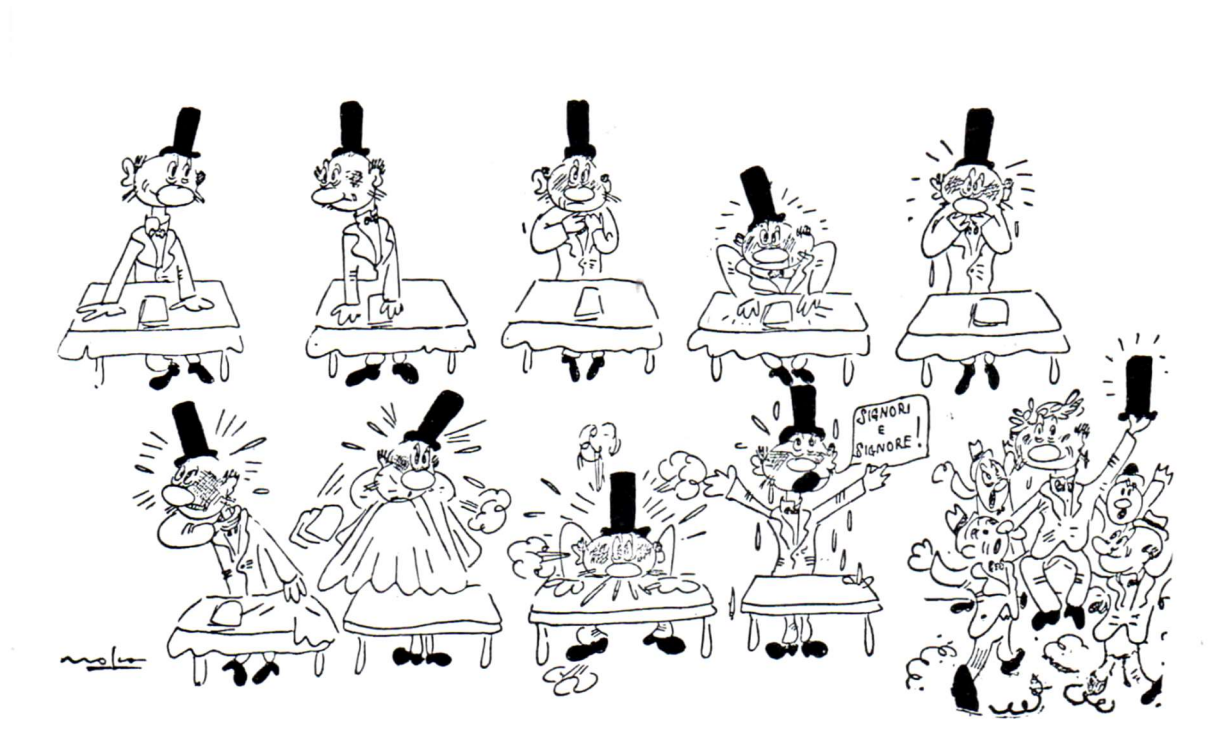


Figure 3.2. Cartoon by Giovanni Mosca, *Marc'Aurelio* (1935), representing a speaker in difficulty who, after much hesitation, manages to win an ovation with a simple 'Ladies and Gentlemen!'.

The comedy of this humorous vein was based on the rampant cynicism of Italian society under fascism, coming from the continuous mismatch between words and facts, desires and their failure

⁸⁶ Chiesa, *La satira politica*, p. 103.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 101.

to come true.⁸⁸ Like the protagonist of Moravia's *Il conformista*, who is forced to choose between 'verità e pane' (truth and bread) in the context of late-fascist Italy, the characters of *La pulce d'oro* are forced to believe the absurd out of necessity.⁸⁹ Faced with the tale of the flea, both Verna's stubborn disbelief as well as the equally stubborn Olimpio are somewhat defeated. In Pinelli's magic realism, the magic flea bursting into everyday life remains stuck between mistrust and credulity, as typical of the fantastic genre in literature, but also—allegorically—as recurring in a society, such as the contemporary Italian one, constantly immersed in the ambiguity between what is real and what appears to be, or, more precisely, between what could be true or fake.

Following this allegorical reading, the fairy tale of *La pulce d'oro* stages the core mechanism of totalitarian society, as described by Hannah Arendt: a 'mixture of gullibility and cynicism', where totalitarian mass leaders could make people believe that 'everything was possible and nothing was true'.⁹⁰ The magic insect of *La pulce d'oro* epitomises the lie of totalitarian propaganda, as an instrument of power and domination over people, and exposes the contradictions and paradoxes it generates as much in society at large as in the world of the fairy tale. Cheating, hypocrisy and inconsistency, in Arendt's words, do not aim to replace the real world with a totally fake one, but rather to destroy the common sense of truth versus falsehood.⁹¹ So too does Lupo Fiorino blur the boundary between fiction and reality. In *La pulce d'oro*, pretence is the recurring theme, as it is in other works of the fascist period: just think of Moravia's *La mascherata* (1941), a novel about power as a contagious disease, set in a phantom South American dictatorship;⁹² or Thomas

⁸⁸ Mino Argentieri, 'Dal teatro allo schermo', in *Risate di regime*, pp. 65–96. Franco Ferrarotti, 'Sogni di potenza e amnesia sociale indotta', in *ibid.*, pp. 3–18.

⁸⁹ Alberto Moravia, *Il conformista* (Milan: Giunti, 2011), p. 10.

⁹⁰ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Meridian Books, 1968), p. 382.

⁹¹ Dallapiccola, who directly witnessed and endured fascist propaganda, affirmed that 'a lie can be transformed into truth'. Cit. in Roberto Illiano and Massimiliano Sala, 'The politics of spectacle: Italian music and Fascist propaganda', *Muzikologija*, 13 (2012), 9–26 (p. 13) <<https://doi.org/10.2298/MUZ120325010I>> [accessed 19 January 2023].

⁹² Moravia presents a cynical and corrupt world at all levels, where paradoxically the tyrant, Teresio, makes a better impression than his subjects. Similarly, in *La pulce d'oro* almost all those in Olimpio's tavern are worse than Lupo

Mann's *Mario and the Magician* (1929), a short story that condenses fascist Italy into the grotesque spectacle of an illusionist, Cipolla, a charlatan who comes from afar, capable of hypnotising everyone with his silver tongue and tricks, just like Lupo Fiorino.⁹³

At this point, the question arises whether this double-reading of *La pulce d'oro* is reflected in any of the contemporary sources or—if it is not a forced interpretation—it could only be made explicit in retrospect. While identifying the opera's intermingling of reality and appearance, critics of the time made no mention of any concrete reality external to the fairy tale, let alone the contemporary fascist one. Furthermore, not only did the censor approve Pinelli's text, but its play version was successfully performed in one of the key theatrical spaces officially promoted by the regime, that of the GUF (Gruppi Universitari Fascisti, or Fascist University Groups, the student wing of the PNF), which ran an experimental theatre in Florence. If we consider that Pinelli came from a Turinese milieu of renowned anti-fascist intellectuals, as seen in the Introduction, things apparently do not add up. The playwright declined all the obligatory signs of formal adherence to fascism (including refusing his wedding ring for the African campaign), at first as a passive dissident, and later becoming actively involved in the Resistance.⁹⁴ Ghedini was himself never openly supportive of fascism and became particularly intolerant in the regime's last years, as did many of his contemporaries. 'The great phrases and maxims have often led nations to ruin',

Fiorino: they are greedy, hoodwinked and violent. Alberto Moravia, *La mascherata*, ed. by Marino Biondi (Florence: Giunti, 2012).

⁹³ 'Perhaps more than anywhere else the eighteenth century is still alive in Italy, and with it the charlatan and mountebank type so characteristic of the period. Only there, at any rate, does one still encounter really well-preserved specimens'; thus does Thoman Mann introduce Cipolla in *Death in Venice, and Seven Other Stories*, trans. by Helen Tracy Lowe-Porter (New York: Vintage Book, 1989), p. 147. One of the magician's powers is his verbose rhetoric: "'Parla benissimo", asserted somebody in our neighbourhood. So far, the man had done nothing; but what he had said was accepted as an achievement, by means of that he had made an impression.' Quoted in Mann, *Death in Venice*, p. 151.

⁹⁴ Pinelli never took up party membership, thus renouncing his right to vote; he did not send his children to state schools, so as to prevent them from taking part in fascist youth groups.

Ghedini stated in 1943, quoting Cavour, aware of the harmful power of the regime's propaganda, in a way particularly relevant for our argument about *La pulce d'oro*.⁹⁵

The reasons for these seeming contradictions could be found in the complex relationship between culture and the regime, from which it is possible to reconcile the dictatorial context with the critical reading of the opera here proposed, and the unfavourable political positioning of its authors. If we deal with the reception in a wider perspective, for instance, we should recognise that the critics' disregard of any allegorical implication was not just due to obvious reasons of political expedience and censorship, but also to the philosophical background underlying their critical judgement. Benedetto Croce, the father of Italian neo-idealism that was in vogue for almost half a century, invited critics to evaluate art from a purely aesthetic point of view, regardless of any historical, technical or stylistic element.⁹⁶ Crocean aesthetics left no room for allegory in its ideal of authentic art, one based on unity, intuitive expression and autonomy. Establishing that there was 'no double bottom in art, but only one', satire and irony were also excluded, as false aesthetic labels as much as allegory.⁹⁷ In his later critique of Vladimir Propp's essay on 'The Historical Roots of Fairy-tales' (1946), Croce argued that it made no sense to seek the origin of folk (and fairy) tales in history.⁹⁸ Therefore, following this precept of aesthetic purism, critics could only take the fairy tale of *La pulce d'oro* at face value. The Crocean principle of the autonomy of art may have served as a form of resistance, protecting culture from the

⁹⁵ Quoted in Ghedini's letter to Carlo Pinelli (4.9.1943) in Parise, *Giorgio Federico Ghedini*, p. 208.

⁹⁶ For Croce, poetry and art lived in a meta-historical and eternal dimension. According to the Italian philosopher Cesare Luporini, 'in Italy there was not only the fascist dictatorship, but also the dominance of idealism [...] Croce controlled Italian culture, and this was a real paradox with respect to fascism.' Cesare Luporini, quoted in Stéphanie Lanfranchi, 'Fascismo e resistenza della critica letteraria', *Textes et contextes* [Online], 6 (2011) <<http://preo.u-bourgogne.fr/textesetcontextes/index.php?id=301>> [accessed 18 December 2021]. Croce's hegemony lasted until the 1950s, thanks to his reputation as an anti-fascist intellectual. See also Casadei and Santagata, *Manuale di letteratura*, p. 66.

⁹⁷ Benedetto Croce, *Breviario di estetica* (Bari: Laterza, 1913), p. 39. Comedy was excluded not only from Crocean aesthetics but also from the opposing D'Annunzian perspective.

⁹⁸ Propp's essay was translated into Italian as early as 1949. See Alberto M. Cirese, 'Introduction to the Historical Roots of Fairy-tales by Vladimir Ja. Propp', *Russian Literature*, 1 (1982), 33–44.

interference of fascism and the danger of its politicisation, but at the same time it justified the isolation and recurring disengagement of Italian intellectuals from contemporary political life.

This margin of ambiguity was where a certain pact of non-aggression between culture and the regime developed, such that an equivocal work like *La pulce d'oro* could evade censorship.⁹⁹ The ‘fuzzy’ ideology of fascism—as Umberto Eco defined its ambiguity—and the contradictory nature of its politics (an ‘imperfect totalitarianism’), were among the reasons for the regime’s success in lasting twenty years.¹⁰⁰ The evasive strategies of fascism were particularly evident in culture. As seen in the previous chapters, a fundamentally pluralistic policy attempted to reconcile different tendencies and to blend modernity with tradition.¹⁰¹ The regime’s totalitarian control of culture was effectively guaranteed not only by repression, but also by economic subjugation and promotion. A certain strategic tolerance was not foreign to a desire for control, but rather a means of achieving it in a totalising way, incorporating and thus disarming even dissidents. The regime aimed as much to shape the masses as to co-opt the intellectual elites, granting them small-scale concessions, which gave the illusion of a certain liberty without undermining the mass consensus. Cultural initiatives were targeted as either mass entertainment or elite art, and the same work could have two distinct and possible levels of interpretation, despite the prejudices of Crocean aesthetics.¹⁰² The regime succeeded in absorbing diverse intellectual forces within its

⁹⁹ Lanfranchi, ‘Fascismo e resistenza’. In the case of *Maria d'Alessandria*, instead, the subject matter and protagonist appeared to draw the censor’s attention for potentially being disrespectful to public decency.

¹⁰⁰ Umberto Eco, *Il fascismo eterno* (Milan: La nave di Teseo, 2018). The literature on the ideology and policies of fascism and its contradictions is huge. In particular, with regard to fascist cultural policies, comedy and censorship, see Falasca-Zamponi, *Fascist Spectacle*; Nicola Fano, *Tessere o non tessere. I comici e la censura fascista* (Florence: Liberal libri, 1999); *Risate di regime*, Alessandro Faccioli, *Leggeri come in una gabbia. L'idea comica nel cinema italiano (1930–1944)* (Turin: Kaplan, 2011); David Bruni, *Commedia anni trenta* (Milan: Il Castoro, 2013); Steven Ricci, *Cinema and Fascism: Italian Film and Society, 1922–1943* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008); Gundle, ‘Laughter under Fascism’.

¹⁰¹ A chameleon-like manner which Gaborik also sees reflected in *Nostra Deda*’s mania for changing clothes. Gaborik, ‘La Donna Mobile’.

¹⁰² A better-known example of these two distinct levels of reading—from which the regime strategically benefited—was *Nerone* (1930), a film by the comedian Ettore Petrolini. It was a parody of imperial Rome and its notorious emperor, but the fame of the actor and his formal party membership allowed its release. For the mass consensus, it was apparently an exaltation of fascist rhetoric linked to the myth of Rome; for the few who could access a deeper level of interpretation, it was a demonstration of liberality on the part of the regime.

dense and capillary network of institutions. The ‘container’, that is, the fascist institution, was often more relevant than its content, as in the case of the spoken version of *La pulce d’oro* being premiered precisely at the GUF theatre, despite Pinelli’s well-known aversion to fascism.¹⁰³ The GUF itself usefully served the regime as a controlled relief valve for the younger and more critical forces of Italian culture: university students were encouraged to express their ideas as long as they took on the fascist label.¹⁰⁴ As a result, the intellectual elites, even the regime’s opponents, were rendered socially isolated, economically dependent and thus to an extent politically neutered.

In this complex scenario, we can understand how the ambiguity of *La pulce d’oro* was at one with that of the late-fascist context, where precisely the regime’s strategy of ambiguity allowed a similarly ambiguous opera to survive and be successful. The two possible readings of the opera, alternatively disengaged and satirical, exemplify the dual role that comedy could play under fascism.¹⁰⁵ First, the light-heartedness of the opera’s plot, rather than clashing with the troubling times, instead responded to an increased need for diversion and entertainment.¹⁰⁶ This was also the period in which ‘light’ genres were rampant more than ever in Italian cinema, such as with the boom of the so-called *Telefoni bianchi* films—playful comedies, set at a remove from the difficult daily life of Italy.¹⁰⁷ *Panem et circenses* (literally, ‘bread and circuses’) was the winning formula for

¹⁰³ Pinelli himself recounted the significant episode of his debut in Florence with *La pulce d’oro*, when Giorgio Venturini, director of the GUF experimental theatre, had to provide him with a veteran badge in place of fascist party membership. A similar contradiction had already surfaced with *Re Hassan*, where the official and bombastic nature of its staging clashed with the anti-rhetorical and disillusioned content of the opera.

¹⁰⁴ As the journalist Ruggero Zangrandi recalled in his famous *Il lungo viaggio attraverso il fascismo*, ‘for us [in the GUF] there could be everything in fascism’. Quoted in Giuseppe Gigliozzi, ‘Cultura e letteratura nel ventennio fascista’, in *Le forme del realismo*, pp. 282–307 (p. 295). Actually, the GUF became the cradle of antifascism, where ‘antibodies to the regime developed’: in Gigliozzi’s words: ‘the revelation starts precisely within the fascist stage’.

¹⁰⁵ Vito Zaggarro, ‘La commedia non riconciliata’, in *Risate di regime*, pp. 275–88.

¹⁰⁶ The production of comic films and operetta increased under fascism and both were the most popular genres in Italy between 1930 and 1945. Supposedly apolitical, entertainment was a fundamental part of the propagandistic imperative to distract and depoliticise the Italian people. See Faccioli, *Leggeri come in una gabbia*; Gianfranco Casadio, Ernesto G. Laura and Filippo Cristiano, *Telefoni bianchi. Realtà e finzione nella società e nel cinema italiano degli anni quaranta* (Ravenna: Longo, 1991).

¹⁰⁷ Flourishing precisely in the late 1930s, the *Telefoni bianchi* comedies usually had mechanical plots, modelled on foreign works or remakes that set marital infidelity in fictitious environments (often in Budapest). The ‘elsewhere’ represented in those films justified any immorality shown because it was taking place somewhere far from Italy, while also offering an escape from reality. Salotti, *Al cinema con Mussolini*.

the alliance between power and people, via sustenance and distraction, just as the Romans had first foretold. The more *panis* became scarce, the more *circenses* became indispensable. At the end of the 1930s, the regime asked cultural and media outlets to provide as much light entertainment as possible, to provide diversion from current hardship. Fiction was more effective than any explicit propaganda, such as that provided by the Istituto Luce's documentaries.¹⁰⁸ During fascism, 'portraying poverty or turbulent events set in Italy was strictly forbidden'.¹⁰⁹ Reality had to be disguised and sweetened: encased in an exotic, fantastic or historical elsewhere.¹¹⁰ Comedy, fun and laughter were fundamental allies of power for its survival, and *La pulce d'oro*, with its comedic fairy tale, abstract enough and devoid of any concrete reference to the present, fitted this official and advantageous role of comedy under the regime.

Second, laughter and fairy tales could also symbolically deal with a thorny reality that could otherwise not be questioned, the only alternative outlet being to retreat into hermeticism and the pursuit of supposedly pure art. Allegory, denied by official aesthetics, afforded one of the few possible means of expressing any form of criticism or dissent under the dictatorship, tolerated by the regime as long as it avoided any blatant critique.¹¹¹ As a critic commented on another allegorical work of the time, Vittorini's *Conversazione in Sicilia* (1941), 'deciphering is not essential to a naïve reader', that is, to that mass audience on which the regime's consensus was built.¹¹² In a similar way, the 'fine and effective humour' of *La pulce d'oro* disguised any possible allegorical

¹⁰⁸ An overview of film production under fascism shows that entertainment for leisure greatly predominated over explicit ideological propaganda. Paolo Russo, *Breve storia del cinema italiano* (Turin: Lindau, 2002).

¹⁰⁹ Giovanni Falaschi, 'Alla scoperta dell'Italia e degli Italiani. Zavattini e altri autori (1944-1963)', *Cuadernos de Filología Italiana*, 14 (2007), 173-85 (p. 173). As Falaschi argues, the rise of post-war neorealism originated from the unveiling of the real country after the falsehoods of propaganda.

¹¹⁰ Consider the contrasting cases of two novels contemporary to Ghedini's opera, both allegorically referencing fascist Italy but set in different locations. Moravia's *La mascherata* (1941) was initially accepted because it displaced the dictatorship geographically. In contrast, Vittorini's *Conversazione in Sicilia* (1941) was suspected by the regime due to its concrete and recognisable Sicilian setting. As Falaschi notes in his introduction to Vittorini's novel, 'it was enough to set the events elsewhere for everything to be tolerable'. Elio Vittorini, *Conversazione in Sicilia*, ed. Giovanni Falaschi (Milan: Rizzoli, 2019).

¹¹¹ Fano, *Tessere o non tessere*.

¹¹² Giaime Pintor, 'Nome e lagrime', *Prospettive*, 16/17 (1941), 20-21.

implication of the opera in a subtle and elitist manner.¹¹³ In sum, *La pulce d'oro* met important prerequisites for politically correct comedy under fascism, being openly amusing, subtly satirical and with any critique left inexplicit enough to render it politically harmless. 'There is only one moral; what I say is all true, even if it is false!', was the metatheatrical gist of the opera, echoing the regime's rhetoric in an inevitable if unintentional way.

Not just a Fairy Tale

In the words of the writer Italo Calvino, fairy tales are needed to reveal, explain and make sense of the world.¹¹⁴ Comedy is intrinsically linked to the present, as a 'geographically and historically determined' genre, able to grasp and represent its contradictory and paradoxical aspects.¹¹⁵ *La pulce d'oro*, as a comic fairy tale, was no exception. Like Verdi's *Falstaff*, with its modern take on the tradition of comic opera, *La pulce d'oro* addressed the crises of the genre and of the historical moment. According to the reading of the opera put forward here, *La pulce d'oro*'s comedy did not flourish despite the contemporary moment but precisely because of it. The opera transformed the pervasive disillusionment and moral pessimism of the late-fascist era, which *Re Hassan* depicted in tragic terms, into a comedy. The apparent mismatch between the lightness of *La pulce d'oro* and its troublesome context can be understood with the opera's critical stance being reconcilable with fascism under the common denominator of ambiguity. The parodic heterogeneity of the music and the overlapping of fiction and reality in the text matched the cultural heterogeneity and political ambiguity of the contemporary moment, setting forth 'the

¹¹³ 'Non è una grossa comicità che ne consegue, ma piuttosto un genere di "humour" di sottile presa e di immancabile effetto'; quoted in Abbiati, 'Alla Fenice di Venezia', p. 6.

¹¹⁴ Quoted in *Letteratura italiana del Novecento*, p. 421.

¹¹⁵ See *Humour and Laughter*; Fabrizio Cassanelli and Guido Castiglia, 'Una plausibile didattica della comicità', in *Il teatro del fare. Educazione-teatro-comicità per l'infanzia e le nuove generazioni. Appunti e idee per la formazione teatrale nella scuola* (Corazzano: Titivillus, 2011); Faccioli, *Leggeri come in una gabbia*; Fano, *Tessere o non tessere*; Zagarrio, 'La commedia non riconciliata'.

destruction of the opera's cohesion and the moral coherence it represented, no longer sustainable in the historical situation of the twentieth century'.¹¹⁶

La pulce d'oro brings together the tradition of comic opera with contemporary issues and cultural trends. Neoclassical references to the past and the most modern sense of the grotesque emerge through the contours of the fairy tale. The opera recovers what Fearn defines as 'the essence of opera buffa', that is, a 'lightness of touch which is capable of conveying the spectator through an otherwise quite absurd narrative'.¹¹⁷ At the same time, the twentieth-century themes of illusion and theatricality—the controversial relationship between reality and its representation—are at the centre of the opera, cast in the light of allegory and satire. *La pulce d'oro* is not so much concerned with questioning the ontological boundaries of reality itself so much as with investigating history through its comic and fantastic transfiguration. If the recourse to the unlikely and unbelievable, according to Beatrice Alfonzetti, is the 'banner of twentieth-century theatre, expressed through the short circuit of the grotesque, humour, lyricism, magic realism, satire', *La pulce d'oro* epitomises some of these contemporary concerns and attitudes in an idiosyncratic way.¹¹⁸

Parody served as a synthetic definition of the opera's engagement with both contemporary reality and tradition. *La pulce d'oro* touched on and interpreted currents of contemporary culture, blurring their edges in a way that made the opera difficult to categorise, but also in a way that matched the complexity of the late-fascist moment. Contemporary currents such as neoclassicism in music and magic realism in literature came into contact in *La pulce d'oro* under the banner of comedy. Against the backdrop of cultural nationalism, Ghedini's music turns to tradition via an ironic lens, while Pinelli's magic realism intersects with the fantastic genre, allegory and social satire.

¹¹⁶ Quoted in Guido Salvetti, 'L'«antipoetica» di G. F. Ghedini', p. 415.

¹¹⁷ Fearn, *Italian Opera since 1945*, p. 25.

¹¹⁸ Beatrice Alfonzetti, quoted in Emanuele Franceschetti, '«Un senso d'eccitato tramonto». Il teatro musicale in Italia nel secondo dopoguerra (1945-1961)' (doctoral thesis, Sapienza Università di Roma, 2021), p. 136.

From both Ghedini's music and Pinelli's text, an alternative version of *italianità* emerges, less celebratory than that flaunted by contemporary fascist rhetoric.

In this sense, as in a game of distorting mirrors, comic opera not only confronts twentieth-century history, but enacts it metaphorically. *La pulce d'oro* unmasks the somewhat absurdist and darkly comic side of late-fascist Italy in trouble, with reality almost exceeding fiction. As Chiesa notes, 'the maximum of ridicule, to compete with the best humorous journal, was reached by the official attitudes of the regime', the ridiculousness residing in the failure of its rhetoric when faced with historical reality.¹¹⁹ 'The spectacle is farcical, yet sneering is forbidden', as Gianfranco Pedullà's writes in his epigraph to the era.¹²⁰ The satirical comedy of *La pulce d'oro* stages precisely the intrinsically grotesque—and thus comic—essence of fascism, whereby what would be ridiculous inspired respect and fear, and what would be fake became true. In *Il comico nei regime totalitari* (1954), the Italian writer Vitaliano Brancati argued that not recognising the comic in the dictatorship was the definitive test to measure the intoxication of a people, while laughter was a punishment for those few who remained sober.¹²¹

In conclusion, resuming Casella's pessimistic words with which we began, we can assert that Italian comic opera did not die out despite the tragic course of the twentieth century, but rather assumed a different, more embittered mode. Indeed, comedy and opera both survived on the Italian stage throughout the twenty years of dictatorship and beyond, to yet another global war. *La pulce d'oro* continued to be staged and, if we look at new theatrical works in the twenty years following its premiere, we can see emerging commonalities: the 'concern with the perfection of

¹¹⁹ Chiesa, *La satira politica*, p. 81. The 'unmasked fiction' is at the centre of the main tragi-comical readings of fascist Italy. See also Sara Laudiero, 'Ridere del fascismo: allusioni e demistificazioni narrative', in *Le forme del comico*, pp. 1055-62; Walter Pedullà, 'Comico e grottesco nella narrativa del Novecento', in *Le forme del realismo*, pp. 107-45.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 139. Pedullà also references Gadda, Fenoglio and D'Arrigo regarding their interpretation of fascism as a tragicomedy.

¹²¹ Battisti, *Il romanzo umoristico negli anni del fascismo*.

musical craftsmanship' that Fearn detects in Goffredo Petrassi's *Il Cordovano* (1949); the parodic references to operatic conventions in Mario Peragallo's *La gita in campagna* (1954); the recourse to stylistic heterogeneity for the purposes of social satire in Gino Negri's *Il circo Max* (1959); the recurring sense of the grotesque and the faltering line between fiction and reality as in Giulio Viozzi's *Allamistakeo* (1954). While Pinelli's magic realism continued to flourish in Fellini's films, opera encountered magic realism again in two works by Riccardo Malipiero, based on plays by Bontempelli: *Minnie la candida* (1942) and *La donna è mobile* (1954, from *Nostra Dea*).¹²²

Just as in *La pulce d'oro*, with parody and comedy going hand in hand, the ironic use of the past and the absurd remained effective means to look critically at the troubles and contradictions of the post-war present. Twenty years after *La pulce d'oro*, against a dramatically different historical context, the premiere of a new work—Berio's *Allez Hop!* (1959)—displayed striking affinities with Ghedini's opera, combining as it did magic realism, musical eclecticism and a parodic and satirical air. In Calvino's libretto, another special flea, on the run from a circus, paradoxically turns the world upside down, epitomising the contemporary moment of post-war crisis.¹²³ This transparent parody matches a musical collage of old and new, high and low, where the mannerism of operatic conventions becomes an object of and not only a means of irony. The words of the critic Fedele D'Amico in his review of *Allez Hop!*, 'I compiti delle pulci' (The tasks of fleas), apply equally well to Ghedini's flea: 'Even if the deeds of the flea arrived on stage with perfect clarity, this sort of music kept them in a problematic state, reminding us that a great uncertainty still reigns, even among moralists, about the tasks of fleas in history'.¹²⁴ Premiering at one of the pivotal turning points in the Italian twentieth century, *La pulce d'oro* simultaneously

¹²² Here, dodecaphony—the emblem of commitment in the post-war period—took on a typically grotesque connotation within the comic context.

¹²³ Harriet Boyd[-Bennett], 'Staging Crisis: *Opera aperta* and the 1959 Venice Biennale Commissions', *The Opera Quarterly*, 30 (2014), 49–68.

¹²⁴ Fedele D'Amico, *I casi della musica* (Milan: Il Saggiatore, 1962), p. 310.

looked back on the tradition of *opera buffa* while also exemplifying the contemporary moment and auguring the future, the prodigious flea's work still incomplete.

CHAPTER 4

ITALIAN BACCHAE: *LE BACCANTI* THROUGH THE 1940s

‘Le disgraziate *Baccanti*’¹

Following his ventures into mystical, historical and comic subjects, Ghedini now turned his attention to the realm of myth and classical tragedy, drawing inspiration from Euripides’ *Bacchae*. Unlike the preceding three operas, which were released in rapid succession (one per year) from 1937 to 1940, the composition of *Le Baccanti* underwent a protracted and troubled process. Spanning the challenging years of the war and its aftermath, its creation coincided with what is often referred to as Ghedini’s modernist phase in the 1940s. As Massimo Mila described, ‘from *Architette* in 1940 to the 1948 *Concerto funebre per Duccio Galimberti*, Ghedini distinguished himself as a modern, contemporary musician. Despite being born in 1892, he seamlessly aligned with the subsequent generation of composers, including Petrassi and Dallapiccola’.² *Le Baccanti*’s inception in 1941 stemmed from a commission by Minculpop, yet the opera did not grace the stage until 1948. In the intervening years, Ghedini (see Figure 4.1) navigated a series of personal challenges and creative endeavours, all against the backdrop of significant upheavals that were reshaping Italy’s political landscape.³

¹ Ghedini’s words from his letter to Carlo Pinelli (3.1.1944), in Stefano Parise, *Giorgio Federico Ghedini: l’uomo, le opere attraverso le lettere* (Milan: Ricordi, 2003), p. 212.

² Mila in [Ricordo e testimonianze su G. F. Ghedini], in Conservatorio di musica ‘Giuseppe Verdi’ di Milano, *Annuario dell’anno accademico 1964-65*, ed. by Guglielmo Barblan (Milan: Conservatorio di musica ‘Giuseppe Verdi’, 1965), pp. 205-40 (p. 236).

³ Ghedini was among the opera composers commissioned by Minculpop in 1941, as documented in Roberto Zanetti, *La musica italiana nel Novecento*, 3 vols (Busto Arsizio: Bramante, 1985), I, p. 659. The roster also included Alfano, Casella (*Coriolano*), Lualdi, Malipiero (*La vita è sogno*), Mulé, Pick-Mangiagalli, Rocca (*Monte Ivnor*), Wolf-Ferrari (*Il cuculo a Tebe*) and Zandonai. Contrary to a reductive portrayal of the regime as purely repressive during its second

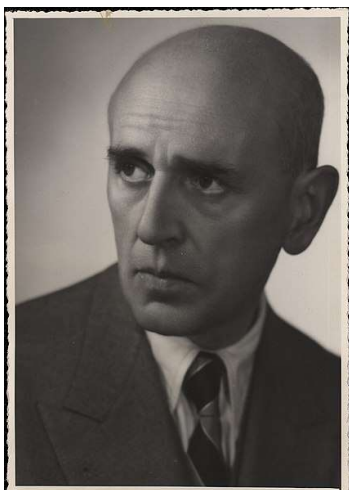


Figure 4.1. Giorgio Federico Ghedini (1948) - Archivio Storico Ricordi

Following the initial two years of war, the armistice of 8 September 1943 plunged the country into turmoil and civil strife. Diverse factions, once held together under the ambiguous umbrella of fascism, now engaged in open confrontation, laying bare profound ideological and societal divisions.⁴ Working under difficult circumstances as an evacuee,⁵ Ghedini completed the first two acts of the opera prior to 1943, continuing to edit and polish them while composing the third act. In 1945, despite the urging of Carlo Gatti, the superintendent of the Teatro alla Scala, Ghedini opted not to debut *Le Baccanti*, citing that he had yet to finalise the last act. Indeed, Ghedini believed that the timing--amidst the tumultuous final stages of the bloody war of Liberation--was unfavourable for the premiere of his new opera, given the nation's moral and material exhaustion.⁶ In 1946, in a twist of fate, the score for the entire third act was lost, compelling the composer to undertake a rewrite.⁷ Due to insufficient funds, the potential premiere of *Le Baccanti*

decade, this confirmed fascism's promotional and pluralistic policies, even during the declining years and imminent collapse of the dictatorship.

⁴ Even many intellectuals from the so-called progressive or moderate faction of fascism openly embraced anti-fascism, actively engaging in the armed Resistance against the hardline loyalists of the regime.

⁵ Specifically, Ghedini resided for three years in Borgosesia, a locality within Piedmont that would later become embroiled in the Resistance and suffer the atrocities of the civil war.

⁶ Instead of *Le Baccanti*, Ghedini opted for his already well-known comic opera *La pulce d'oro* to be performed in Milan on 18 May 1945, just after the end of the war; Italy had been officially liberated on April 25 of the same year.

⁷ In a letter to Carlo Pinelli dated 28 January 1946, Ghedini mentioned the fact without specifying the circumstances of the loss but nevertheless launched a radio appeal in a hopeful attempt to recover it. Parise, *Giorgio Federico Ghedini*, p. 258.

at La Scala was once again postponed from the 1946-47 season. Ghedini continued refining the opera until nearly 1948, humorously dubbing the endeavour his 'Duomo di Milano' due to the fatigue and concerns it entailed.⁸ Throughout the 1940s, the extensive work on the opera was interspersed with diverse compositional pursuits, ranging from transcriptions of older music to Ghedini's first exploration of the twelve-tone system.⁹ Notable works from this period include the acclaimed *Concerto dell'albatro* (1945) and the heartfelt *Concerto funebre per Duccio Galimberti* (1948), both exemplifying Ghedini's concertante use of instruments and voices, a hallmark of his work during this phase.¹⁰ *Le Baccanti* embraced a synthesis of these diverse experiences, with Ghedini's modernist musical language meeting Euripides' ancient subject.

As the composer foresaw back in 1944, 'after so much work, [the opera] will be either a miscarriage or something sublime'.¹¹ *Le Baccanti* proved challenging not only in its composition but also in its performance and reception, drawing a discernible parallel between the composer's struggles and the subsequent critiques it faced.¹² Despite Ghedini's considerable efforts, the premiere of the opera at La Scala, when it eventually came to pass in 1948, fell short of expectations, and was met with a tepid reception from the audience and mixed reviews from critics. Apart from a radio broadcast in 1955, *Le Baccanti* had only a second and last staging at La Scala in 1972, exactly 24 years after the premiere, as a homage to the composer who had died in 1965.

⁸ The construction of the Milan Cathedral, which began in 1386, endured for more than five centuries, with final touches continuing into the 1960s, earning it a reputation as an endless enterprise.

⁹ See, for instance, the 1945 *Canoni* for violin and cello, and the following solo concerts for piano (1946) and violin (1947). From the same period are the *Concerto spirituale «De l'Incarnazione del Verbo Divino»* (1943), *Sette ricercari* (1943), *Musica notturna* (1947), along with the transcription of Monteverdi's *Magnificat* and Bach's *The musical offering*.

¹⁰ Tancredi Galimberti, the brother of a friend of Ghedini, was a renowned partisan from Cuneo and a member of Giustizia e Libertà. He was assassinated by the Nazi-fascists in 1944 and was proclaimed a national hero after the war.

¹¹ See Ghedini's letter to Attila Poggi (26.9.1944) in Parise, *Giorgio Federico Ghedini*, p. 222.

¹² Ghedini was aware of the opera's complexity, commenting that it was 'uncomfortable to play and to listen to', from his letter to Carlo Pinelli (3.9.1944), in Parise, *Giorgio Federico Ghedini*, p. 216.

Untangling the reasons for the opera's failure is complex. Ghedini pointed out various unforeseen obstacles, such as the illness of many soloists and chorus members, insufficient rehearsal time and inadequate direction, all of which would have undermined the premiere of such a demanding work. As he emphasised, 'the fact that the opera did not fall apart was truly a miracle'.¹³ The critics, both in 1948 and 1972, remained divided, evaluating Ghedini's work as learned yet pretentious and eclectically flawed, musically commendable but ultimately disappointing and ineffective in terms of dramaturgy. For some, the opera represented the pinnacle of Ghedini's artistic evolution; for others, however, it was seen as a decaying amalgam of D'Annunzio's classicism, Stravinsky's primitivism and Strauss's expressionism.¹⁴ There were those who considered *Le Baccanti* a chaotic and crowded opera, and those who deemed it too static, suggesting it leaned more towards oratorio than opera, prioritising music over theatricality—something perhaps evidenced by its later concert version for radio broadcast.¹⁵ Certain critics attributed blame to the traditionalist tendencies of the audience at La Scala, while others accused the opera itself of being aloof and overly clamorous to be readily appreciated. Prior to scrutinising the usual focus of Italian opera critics—the alignment of music and text—, considerable attention was devoted to the correlation between *Le Baccanti* and Euripides' tragedy, which remained a recurring concern throughout the opera's reception. Many criticised both the ambitious choice and the execution of this demanding subject: the libretto by Tullio Pinelli was accused of betraying the original spirit of the text, while the music was deemed ineffective in

¹³ From Ghedini's letter to Carlo Pinelli (23.3.1948), in Parise, *Giorgio Federico Ghedini*, pp. 277–78. The premiere at La Scala was staged with the collaboration of Fernando Previtali (conductor), Vittore Veneziani (chorus master), Orazio Costa (director), Nicola Benois (art director), Felice Casorati (set designer).

¹⁴ Giulio Confalonieri, '[Review of the Premiere of *Le Baccanti*]', *Tempo*, 22 February 1948. All press clippings from the premiere mentioned here have been generously supplied by the Teatro alla Scala archive in Milan.

¹⁵ Roberto Zanetti, 'Una delle opere più significative del compositore. Tornano con successo dopo 24 anni «Le Baccanti» di Ghedini alla Scala', *Avanti*, 22 February 1972. A similar observation of a certain ambiguous theatricality was noted in the press reviews of Dallapiccola's *Il Prigioniero* (1950), described by Mila as a form of 'teatro oratoriale', where 'the physical presence of the actors and stage ends up as a cumbersome surplus, and all the dramatic substance of the action is transmitted through the music'. Massimo Mila quoted in Ben Earle, 'Dallapiccola and the Politics of Commitment: Re-Reading *Il Prigioniero*', *Radical Musicology*, 2 (2007) <<http://www.radical-musicology.org.uk>> [accessed 14 July 2023] (para. 2 of 83).

capturing the Dionysian enthusiasm in sound. To begin my reflection on *Le Baccanti*, I will focus on its widely disputed content. I explore why and how Ghedini confronts and sets Euripides' text, aiming to understand the significance the opera might have assumed in 1940s Italy and within the broader twentieth-century revival of Dionysian themes. As this exploration will show, the opera reveals a multifaceted and meaningful interplay between art and history, with Euripides serving as an ever-present touchstone during a time of crisis.¹⁶

Euripides in the Twentieth Century: The *Bacchae* in Operatic Guise

Ghedini was encouraged to set Euripides' tragedy to music by his friend Vittorio Gui, a renowned conductor, who believed that the composer's temperament made him well-suited for such an endeavour.¹⁷ On this occasion, as before, Tullio Pinelli was enlisted to work on the opera's libretto, tasked with adapting the original text and recasting it in a prosaic and concise form—'a skeletal framework to arrange sound material', as demanded by Ghedini.¹⁸ The structure followed the familiar format of three acts and four scenes, similar to that of *Maria d'Alessandria* and *Re Hassan*.¹⁹

Without interruption between the Prologue and Act I, Dioniso bursts into the city of Thebes, dragging everyone into the possession of his new cult. Penteo, the young king of the city,

¹⁶ During a period of general crisis for the polis, characterised by the waning democracy of Athens, the decline of traditional religion and the emergence of sophism in the 5th century BC, Euripides' works served as a reflection of these turbulent times. According to Friedrich Nietzsche, they compromised the spirit of tragedy and its classical balance. More generally, in the history of literature, Euripides emerged as a recurring reference point during times of crisis. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. and ed. by Douglas Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

¹⁷ Giorgio Federico Ghedini, 'Note su «Le Baccanti» e su altri lavori', *Agorà*, II.1 (1946), 23–25. Vittorio Gui (1885–1975) was a prominent Italian conductor of his era, acclaimed both in Italy and abroad for championing lesser-known works in prestigious institutions like the Teatro di Torino or the Maggio Musicale Fiorentino. Despite never joining the party and endorsing Croce's antifascist manifesto, Gui managed to establish a distinguished career during the regime.

¹⁸ As Ghedini expressed it: 'Una tela e non un libretto [...] semplice abbozzo di drammatiche situazioni, una scheletrica impalcatura su cui disporre la materia sonora'. Quoted from 'Le Baccanti' [Programme note], in *Teatro alla Scala, stagione 1947-1948* (Milan: Teatro alla Scala, 1947).

¹⁹ Pavese described Pinelli's text as 'un bel librettone solido'. Stefano Parise, 'Profilo di Giorgio Federico Ghedini' (dissertation, Università degli Studi di Milano, 1992), pp. 577–78.

arrogantly refuses to recognise him as a god and rejects the collective ecstasy that has also seized his mother Agave, the old king Cadmo and the wise seer Tiresia. Penteo orders the arrest of Dionisio, disguised as a necromancer. Yet, an earthquake shakes the palace, setting the god free. A cattleman informs Penteo of the Maenads' frenzied activities on mount Kithaeron, and Dionisio persuades him to dress up as a bacchante to infiltrate their gatherings (Act II, Scene I). The god leads Penteo to the mountain's peak, only to unleash the Maenads upon him, seeking vengeance for the outrage. In the throes of Dionysian fervour, his mother Agave, deceived, severs Penteo's head, mistaking him for a lion (Act II, Scene II). News of the young king's death reaches Thebes. Agave triumphantly bears his head atop a thyrsus, until her father Cadmo brings her to recognise the horrifying reality. Dionisio enacts his revenge, condemning all and fulfilling their preordained destiny (Act III). 'This new libretto is very, very difficult!', Ghedini complained as soon as he began working on the opera.²⁰ Euripides' tragedy presented a true challenge, which the composer openly acknowledged in both his public declarations and private letters—often with a touch of pride, emphasising the non-conventional and non-operatic nature of the text.

Actually, the *Bacchae* was not a novel subject in twentieth-century music theatre. From Karol Szymanowski's *Król Roger* (1924) to Hans Werner Henze's *The Bassarids* (1966), interpretations of the *Bacchae* have been as varied as Euripides' last and most enigmatic tragedy, which lends itself to multiple readings.²¹ As is known, the relation between classical theatre and music theatre dates back to the origins of opera, conceived by the Florentine Camerata as a revival—albeit with some misinterpretation—of ancient tragedy. Since then, classicism has consistently served as an ideal

²⁰ Cited from Ghedini's letter to Carlo Pinelli (17.8.1941), in Parise, *Giorgio Federico Ghedini*, p. 166.

²¹ Here is a list of other twentieth-century operas inspired or alluding to Euripides' tragedy: *Die Bakchantinnen* (1931) by Egon J. Wellesz; *Die Heimkehr des Dionysos* (1938) by Edwin Geist; *Revelation in the Courthouse Park* (1961) by Harry Partch; *Backanterna* (1991) by Ingmar Bergman and Daniel Börtz; *BAKXAI* (1992) by John Buller; *Bacchae* (1995) by Theodore Antoniou; *BAKXAI* (1996) by Arghyris Kounadis. Largely neglected in the history of musical theatre, Euripides' *Bacchae* saw a significant resurgence in the twentieth century. See Roberto Russi, *Le voci di Dioniso. Il dionisismo novecentesco e le trasposizioni musicali delle "Baccanti"* (Turin: EDT, 2008).

reference point for opera, frequently invoked to validate and revitalise the genre across its history.²²

While serving as a prevalent source in the operatic repertoire, myth garnered heightened symbolic significance in the twentieth century, particularly under the lens of psychoanalytical studies, which revealed it as a timeless key to understanding human nature.²³ In particular, the myth of Dionysus resonated strongly with the spirit of the time, epitomising phenomena such as the emergence of the irrational and unconscious, the traumatic irruption of the new against the old, the rise of the masses and the controversial relation with the individual.²⁴ As the god of theatre and music, Dionysus was seemingly called upon to rescue music theatre in a moment of great crisis for the genre. *The Bacchae* emerged more prominently than ever in the twentieth century, acting as a metatheatrical reflection on the mystical origin of theatre rooted in the rites of Dionysus. Ghedini's *Le Baccanti*, a unique case in Italy, aligned with this broader revival of the Dionysian myth and Euripides' tragedy, while also assuming specific relevance within the national context.

In Italy in particular, the legacy of classical culture and ancient theatre was not only evident in physical landmarks, but consistently exerted a significant influence on culture and social dynamics. Since the Renaissance, classical studies had held a privileged position in Italian education, primarily catering to the elite. This exclusivity resulted in cultural classicism becoming synonymous with social classism.²⁵ In the twentieth century, Italian idealism upheld this cultural primacy on a philosophical level, and the implementation of the Gentile reform in 1923

²² For instance, consider the opera reform efforts of both Gluck and Wagner. See Michael Ewans, 'Greek Drama in Opera', in *A Handbook to the Reception of Greek Drama*, ed. by Betine van Zyl Smit (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2016), pp. 464–85 <<https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118347805.ch24>> [accessed 26 February 2021].

²³ Zanetti, *La musica italiana nel Novecento*, II, pp. 1035–1108; Dörte Schmidt, 'Raccontare invece che imitare. A proposito dell'attualità del mito nel teatro musicale contemporaneo', in *Drammaturgie musicali del Novecento. Teorie e testi*, ed. by Marco Vincenzi (Lucca: LIM, 2008).

²⁴ The crowd, seduced by Dionysus, overwhelms Pentheus.

²⁵ Luciano Canfora, *Le vie del classicismo* (Rome: Laterza, 1989), pp. 237–52.

institutionalised it within Italy's enduring educational system.²⁶ The *liceo classico* emerged as the school for the elites and persisted for a considerable period as the exclusive pathway to university education. In parallel, the classics of ancient theatre, long confined to literary study, began to be revived on stage from the 1910s onward. In 1925, at Mussolini's behest, the INDA (Istituto Nazionale del Dramma Antico) was established to organise classical performances at iconic venues across Italy, including the Greek theatre in Syracuse and other sites such as Ostia, Pompei and Paestum.²⁷

In a broader sense, the invocation of the classics shaped the cultural currents of the initial two decades of the century in Italy. The intersection of art and politics, united in anti-bourgeois sentiment, set the stage for the ascension of fascism.²⁸ The critique of parliamentarianism was closely intertwined with the advocacy for an 'aristocratic art', one characterised by individual expression ('life as art') and autonomy from any other purposes ('art for art's sake'), as defined by Romualdo Giani—Ghedini's primary mentor.²⁹ In this vein, *Fedra* (1915) by Gabriele D'Annunzio and Ildebrando Pizzetti stood as an effort to reform opera, returning once more to the classical model and presenting it as a ritual far removed from the popular sensationalism of contemporary *verismo* opera. Diverging from some of the most renowned twentieth-century operas inspired by classical themes, like the contrasting paradigms of Strauss's *Elektra* (1905) and Stravinsky's *Oedipus Rex* (1927), the classicism evident in *Fedra* and within contemporary Italian

²⁶ The Gentile Reform, enacted by Giovanni Gentile in 1923 under Mussolini's regime, sought to centralise and standardise Italian education. It restructured secondary education, prioritising classical studies and the humanities. The reform had a lasting impact on Italian education, shaping it for decades.

²⁷ Archivio Storico Fondazione Inda <<https://www.indafondazione.org/archivio/>> [accessed 11 March 2021].

²⁸ As observed, nationalism and classicism converged in the fascist rhetoric of *romanità*, which was the grandiose revival of the glories of ancient Rome.

²⁹ Romualdo Giani, 'Per l'arte aristocratica', *Rivista Musicale Italiana*, III (1896), 92–127; 756–769.

culture symbolised a quest for artistic ennoblement, closely intertwined with notions of elitism and aestheticism.³⁰

Many critics identified this approach to the classical text in *Le Baccanti*. However, in 1948, it was now deemed superficial and outdated, becoming a primary target of criticism for the opera, accused of debasing its illustrious subject. Although Pinelli's 'free reduction' of the tragedy remained largely faithful to Euripides' text in terms of plot, episodes and characters—with only a few cautious changes compared to other operatic versions of *The Bacchae*—, some critics deemed his adaptation inadequate, disrespectful to the original and unsuitable for music. They found Pinelli's libretto to be stylistically pretentious while simultaneously careless in its apparent simplification and misinterpretation of the tragedy's profound essence—whatever that might be. Critics accused the libretto of dismembering Euripides' work, retaining only a few archaisms and a vainly lofty tone, reminiscent of the D'Annunzian style.³¹ 'Ti cade proprio a perpendicolo', remarks Dioniso in Pinelli's text,³² complimenting Penteo on his Bacchante disguise. This obsolete expression, highlighted in the press reviews as the epitome of the opera's aestheticism, unveils the primary source that Pinelli drew upon for his reimagining of the tragedy. This reference is valuable for probing into the critics' disappointment, assessing the libretto's deviation from the original and grasping the broader perception of the classics in Italy at that time.³³

The text used by Pinelli was the translation crafted by Ettore Romagnoli, a distinguished Greek scholar and expert who had successfully curated several productions of *The Bacchae* in Italy

³⁰ In this vein, we can also consider the contemporary body of songs composed on Greek lyrics by various Italian musicians, including Ghedini's *Cinque canti greci* (1926). There was also a renewed interest in Greek music, evidenced by new studies such as Pizzetti's essay *La musica dei greci* (1914), and references to ancient modes and metres in contemporary compositional practice.

³¹ Teodoro Celli, '[Review of the Premiere of *Le Baccanti*]', *Mattino d'Italia*, 22 February 1948.

³² Tr. 'It fits you perfectly'. It is a refined expression compared to the more common 'cadere a pennello'.

³³ Eugenio (alias Bardolfo) Gara, '[Review of the Premiere of *Le Baccanti*]', *Candido*, 22 February 1948.

between 1912 and 1922, spearheading the revival of classical performances in the peninsula.³⁴ However, at the time of the opera's premiere, Romagnoli's style was considered old-fashioned and rhetorical, especially when juxtaposed with the more recent translations of classics by the poet Salvatore Quasimodo, where the 'very modern poetry of the Hermetics' fused with the Greek one.³⁵ The publication of Quasimodo's *Lirici Greci* in 1940 sparked a broad debate, introducing a novel interpretation of classicism that strayed from the nationalist and celebratory stance of fascist neoclassicism. Quasimodo's style, widely admired among younger Italian composers, was distinguished by its conciseness and modernity, noted as 'free from cumbersome ornamentation of archaeology and culturalism' (Anceschi). Quasimodo employed contemporary language and displayed little concern for metrics, contrasting with Romagnoli's translations. Interested in ancient Greek music, the latter conducted in-depth studies on rhythms and metrics, striving in his translations to seamlessly integrate ancient metres into Italian verse.³⁶ Romagnoli himself composed incidental music and choruses for several performances of classical works he curated. In his interpretation of *The Bacchae*, he perceived music not merely as an accompaniment but as intrinsic to the tragedy's content, viewing Euripides as a precursor to opera: 'hardly any subject could be more suitable than the *Bacchae* for great musical effects'.³⁷

The success of the tragedy in twentieth-century music theatre seemingly confirms Romagnoli's words, contrasting with Ghedini's expressed difficulty with its non-operatic nature. The

³⁴ The *Bacchae* in Romagnoli's version were staged in 1912 at the Teatro Verdi in Padua, at La Fenice in Venice and at the Politeama Rossetti in Trieste; in 1913 at the Teatro del Popolo in Milan, the Teatro Romano in Fiesole and the Stadium in Rome; in 1914 at the Verona Arena. After the war, the tragedy was resumed in 1921 at the Teatro Greco in Syracuse and in 1922 at the Carlo Felice theatre in Genoa. Romagnoli defined the tragedy as 'the harbinger' of classical representations in Italy. Euripide, *Le Baccanti; Ione*, trans. and ed. by Ettore Romagnoli (Bologna: Zanichelli, 1930).

³⁵ Manara Valgimigli, 'Poeti greci e lirici nuovi', *Fiera Letteraria*, I.8 (1946), 1–2. Salvatore Quasimodo (1901–1968) was a Sicilian poet associated with hermeticism, as well as a critic and translator of classics and modern authors, including Aeschylus, Shakespeare and Neruda. He was awarded a *laurea honoris causa* from the University of Oxford and the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1959, in recognition of his 'ardent' and ever-present classicism.

³⁶ Sara Troiani, 'Tra esegesi e regia: le traduzioni di Ettore Romagnoli per il dramma antico', in *Ritmo, parole e musica: Ettore Romagnoli traduttore dei poeti. Atti del seminario di studi, Rovereto, 9 Aprile 2019*, ed. by Patricia Salomoni (Rovereto: Scripta, 2021), pp. 17–43.

³⁷ Euripide, *Le Baccanti*, p. 21.

controversial relationship between *Le Baccanti* and the Euripidean source involved the challenge of adapting both form and content. This required transitioning from tragedy to opera and interpreting the ancient text in a completely different context. Dahlhaus would describe this challenge as an aesthetic and spiritual dissonance between the two genres, stemming from their distinct cultural premises, dramatic techniques and potential meanings.³⁸ The role of the chorus and the use of narration in ancient theatre were significant issues for opera composers, often requiring structural changes. These elements sometimes brought opera closer to the forms of oratorio. A notable example is Stravinsky's *Oedipus Rex*, where the static and anti-dramatic nature, combined with the narrator's interventions, transformed the tragedy into a purely musical action.³⁹ In *Le Baccanti*, Ghedini sought to adapt the tragedy more closely to operatic conventions, a decision that drew considerable criticism. The chorus was integrated into the drama, functioning as a character and losing its original role as a metatheatrical commentator. Agave's role was expanded to match the operatic prominence typically associated with a soprano. Her piercing scream upon recognising Penteo's head in her hands drew comparisons from some critics to Tosca and Santuzza. This was cited as an example of the perceived 'veristic poverty' through which Ghedini allegedly undermined the composure of Euripides' text.⁴⁰ Furthermore, without resorting to oratorio-like approaches, the authors of *Le Baccanti* felt compelled to convert narration into onstage drama. This transformation is particularly evident in the second act, where the original lengthy monologue of the messenger is reimagined into episodes and dialogues entirely crafted by Pinelli. The spectators could witness the ascent of the Kithaeron and hear the

³⁸ Carl Dahlhaus, 'Euripide, il teatro dell'assurdo e l'opera in musica. Intorno alla recezione dell'antico nella storia della musica', in *La drammaturgia musicale*, ed. by Lorenzo Bianconi (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1994), pp. 291–308.

³⁹ Some commentators on Ghedini's theatre drew parallels between *Le Baccanti* and Stravinsky's *Oedipus Rex*, particularly focussing on vocality—the versatile use of voice aligned with each character, ranging from Agave's expressionist singing to the affinity between Penteo and Oedipus, as well as between Dioniso and Tiresias. Angiola Maria Bonisconti, 'Il teatro musicale di Giorgio Federico Ghedini', *Musica d'oggi*, 4.5 (1961), 194–200; Giovanni Ugolini, 'Il teatro di Ghedini', *La Scala*, 1962.149 (1962), 27–33.

⁴⁰ Celli, '[Review of the Premiere of *Le Baccanti*]'. The expanded presence of Agave—in all the acts of *Le Baccanti* rather than just at the end as in the original tragedy—is a recurring motif in many operas based on the *Bacchae*, as well as the scene of exorcism, which frequently assumes significant prominence.

off-stage voices of Dioniso and Penteo. The idyllic scene of the *Bacchae*, with their playful semi-chorus games, unfolded before both Penteo and the audience.

The tragedy's enduring significance was used as a yardstick by critics in their judgement of Ghedini's opera, and the latter was seen as disappointing as a result. Critics, such as Giulio Confalonieri, one of the opera's staunchest detractors, lamented the opera's perceived failure to capture and convey the 'mystery of Dionysus'.⁴¹ As Ghedini himself acknowledged, portraying the figure of the god posed the greatest challenge, given its elusive and multifaceted nature throughout the opera. Dioniso had to embody traits of imperiousness, bewitchment, sarcasm, persuasion, vengeance and tragic immobility simultaneously.⁴² In broader cultural history, Dionysus is indeed the ineffable god of contradictions and ambiguities, enigmatically embedded in the symbols of his myth. These include the controversial theme of identity, represented by the mirror, the mask and the stranger; the interplay between the masculine and the feminine, exploring androgyny and disguise; the contrast between old and new, encompassing generational comparison and historical progress; the duality of mind and body and the human middle position between the animal and the divine.⁴³ This symbolic and semantic richness of the myth made the Dionysian impulse highly relevant and popular in the twentieth century, leading to equally contradictory interpretations. The abstract and surreal 'fable' of *Le Baccanti*, as envisioned by Pinelli and Ghedini, seems to remain suspended before the profound depths of both the myth and the tragedy of Dionysus.⁴⁴ While staying true to Euripides' original, the opera displeased contemporary critics with philological concerns.

⁴¹ Confalonieri, '[Review of the Premiere of *Le Baccanti*]'.
⁴² Ghedini, 'Note su «*Le Baccanti*»'. In contrast to other works on the same subject that emphasise Pentheus, his humanity and psychological complexity, *Le Baccanti* centres around Dionysus: the opera opens with his sudden epiphany and ends with a unanimous invocation to the void left by his vanishing.

⁴³ Massimo Fusillo, *Il dio ibrido. Dioniso e le «Baccanti» nel Novecento* (Bologna: Il mulino, 2006).
⁴⁴ Pinelli's detailed captions aim to depict an 'absolutely unreal world', to 'lead the listener outside of any earthly contingency'. Cit. from Ghedini, 'Note su «*Le Baccanti*»', 23-25 (p. 23).

At the same time, from today's perspective, *Le Baccanti* appears to forsake a more contemporary interpretation of the text compared to the other operas on the same Dionysian theme. In the opera, the religious premises of the myth were muted, and the twentieth-century psychoanalytic readings of the tragedy were missing.⁴⁵ For instance, as with the later *Billy Budd*, any allusion to the sexual dimension was entirely absent. The opera glossed over themes of voyeurism, homosexuality and incest, which can be subtly discerned in the original through the ambiguous relationship between Pentheus, the seductive Dionysus and his mother. These themes, explicitly suggested in the operatic interpretation by Szymanowski or Henze, were notably overlooked in *Le Baccanti*.

At its premiere, Confalonieri harshly dismissed the opera as 'a real empty-handed enterprise' or a fool's errand, criticising what he perceived as abuse and naïveté in its treatment of Euripides' text.⁴⁶ Critics not only scrutinised the outcomes but also questioned the underlying intentions of the opera's authors, accusing them of approaching the tragedy with a contrived and snobbish intellectualism, ultimately compromising its authenticity. However, considering the significant obstacles faced during its development, especially within the context of wartime, it seems unlikely that the opera's creation was merely an intellectual endeavour, as many critics implied. The arduous composition of *Le Baccanti*, pursued over years despite numerous challenges, could not have been solely an inert display of aestheticism or another experiment blending opera and classical theatre in the manner of D'Annunzian classicism, devoid of engagement with the tumultuous reality of the 1940s.

⁴⁵ In the opera's prologue, Dioniso emerges as a newly born god rather than a returning figure, thereby entirely disregarding the mythological foundation of the tragedy—a crucial element emphasised in Henze's *The Bassarids* with its theme of divine revenge.

⁴⁶ 'Un'autentica manata nel vuoto'. Confalonieri, '[Review of the Premiere of *Le Baccanti*]'.

First and foremost, it is important to recognise that, despite the widespread acclaim of *The Bacchae* in the twentieth century and the strong influence of classicism in Italy, the decision to adapt this tragedy by Euripides was far from straightforward during the late stages of fascism. According to the APGRD (Archive of Performances of Greek and Roman Drama), following its success in the 1910s, the most recent performance of the *Bacchae* in Italy at the Greek theatre of Syracuse dated back to 1922 and it would not be staged again until 1950.⁴⁷ Even in schoolbooks, a similar time gap existed between the 1920 edition by Ammendola and the 1958 edition by Scazzoso.⁴⁸ The opera's novelty within the Italian context was underscored by this deliberate absence of *The Bacchae* from both *livei classici* and INDA's theatres. This intentional omission was not accidental but rather stemmed from the enduringly subversive nature of the tragedy, which retained its controversial implications even after centuries, resonating challengingly within the dictatorial context. Indeed, *The Bacchae* directly contradicted the official values promoted by the regime, staging as it did a horde of women who abandoned their domestic roles to follow a foreign and effeminate god; while, conversely, Euripides' *Alkestis*, frequently appearing in fascist textbooks, embodied the idealised woman dedicated to her family and willing to sacrifice herself. Furthermore, certain aspects of the contemporary Italian situation potentially found echoes within the tragedy, such as the manipulation of the masses by tyrannical forces. Indeed, it was Mussolini himself who, fitting perfectly into this context—asserted that the masses tend to be feminine and love strong men.⁴⁹

In summary, the *Bacchae* presented a challenging subject at a particularly delicate juncture, making it hard to reconcile this choice with the notion of a disengaged opera. Some critics, assessing it years after its composition in the completely different post-war context, perceived *Le Baccanti* as

⁴⁷ Archive of Performances of Greek & Roman Drama <<http://www.apgrd.ox.ac.uk/>> [accessed 11 March 2021].

⁴⁸ Marina Marsilio, 'Le Baccanti nella letteratura scolastica del Novecento', in *Studi e materiali per le Baccanti di Euripide: storia, memorie, spettacoli*, ed. by Anna Beltrametti (Como: Ibis, 2007), pp. 465–71.

⁴⁹ Emilio Ludwig, *Colloqui con Mussolini* (Milan: Mondadori, 1932), p. 65.

overdue and lacking vitality.⁵⁰ The aspiration to bring the ancient tragedy into resonance with the contemporary moment was a mutual aim of the creators behind *Le Baccanti*. This intention was overtly expressed by Ghedini, as we will explore, and somewhat implicitly rooted in Pinelli's background.⁵¹ Their commitment to Euripides was shaped by their exposure to Turin's rich cultural milieu. Pinelli received his education in classical studies from Augusto Monti, a renowned writer and professor at the Liceo classico 'Massimo d'Azeglio' in Turin, known for his steadfast opposition to fascism from its inception. A cohort of young intellectuals and fervent antifascists rallied around the charismatic figure of Monti. Notable among them were the writer Cesare Pavese—who was a classmate and close friend of Pinelli—, as well as Leone Ginzburg and Franco Antonicelli, the music critic Mila, the philosopher Norberto Bobbio and the publisher Giulio Einaudi. During the years when *Le Baccanti* was being composed, Pinelli himself was actively engaged in the Resistance movement.⁵² Described as a 'classical master of modernity' by Piero Gobetti, Monti used classical studies to instil students with values of humanity, critical thinking and civic responsibility. He presented classicism as a timeless lens through which to interpret and understand current reality.⁵³ He endorsed the idea of treating 'the ancients as contemporaries', a principle that Pinelli could apply in his adaptation of Euripides' *Bacchae*.

⁵⁰ Also consider the anti-Hellenic propaganda propagated by the regime before and during the Italian campaign in Greece from 1940 to 1941. This propaganda sought to pit the two nations against each other in the present, mirroring the historical victory of the Romans over the Greeks. Fascist Italians claimed sole inheritance of classical culture, while denigrating modern Greeks as 'perfectly Balkanised' in a racist manner. Alessandra Coppola, 'L'immagine della Grecia in età fascista', *Anabases. Traditions et réceptions de l'Antiquité*, 23 (2016), 169–74 <doi:10.4000/anabases.5641> [accessed 20 February 2021].

⁵¹ 'I was wondering if such a subject could still capture interest today', was Ghedini's premise to the composition of *Le Baccanti*. Ghedini, 'Note su «Le Baccanti»'.

⁵² Monti did not engage in explicit antifascist propaganda during his lessons. However, he felt a sense of partial responsibility for the political struggles of his students, many of whom were oppressed or even imprisoned by the regime, much like himself. Augusto Monti, *I miei conti con la scuola. Cronaca scolastica italiana del secolo XX* (Turin: Einaudi, 1965).

⁵³ Augusto Monti, *Scuola classica e vita moderna* (Turin: Einaudi, 1968). Pinelli defined Monti as 'a true master of literary taste and civic character'. See Demetrio Salvi and Tullio Pinelli, *Tullio Pinelli. L'intervista ritrovata. I misteri della scrittura e quarant'anni del miglior cinema italiano raccontati da un grande sceneggiatore* (Malebolge, 2014), Kindle ebook.

In correspondence with Ghedini, Pinelli shared the text of the opera's concluding act, along with his vision for its musical essence. He envisioned a 'reconciliation of classical and Dionysian singing set to a novel rhythm', culminating in the final chorus where Bacchantes and Thebans unite in supplication to the cruel Dioniso.⁵⁴ The chorus vividly portrayed the clash of 'two antagonistic worlds', the Dionysian and the Apollonian, which lies at the heart of *Le Baccanti*, as affirmed by Ghedini during the opera's presentation in 1946.⁵⁵ This interpretation of the tragedy, notably absent from Romagnoli's commentary, directly alluded to Friedrich Nietzsche's theory and its reception in Italy, influenced by D'Annunzio's misinterpretation and the translations championed by Benedetto Croce and the Turin publisher Fratelli Bocca at the turn of the century.⁵⁶ In his famous essay *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), Nietzsche accused Euripides and the Socratic rationalism he epitomised of disrupting the aesthetic-ontological equilibrium between the Dionysian and the Apollonian—two irreconcilable yet complementary forces fundamental to classical tragedy. This disruption, according to Nietzsche, signalled the genre's decline.

This thesis was boldly challenged by Giani in his work *Gli spiriti della musica nella tragedia greca* (1913), where, by revaluating Euripides' unitary conception of music and poetry, the mentor of the young Ghedini contended that 'Greek tragedy did not perish devoid of music, as Nietzsche claimed, but crawling with songs'. This viewpoint resonated with Romagnoli's assessment of the musical potential within Euripides' tragedy.⁵⁷ Ghedini was familiar with this essay and planned to reference Giani's perspective on the chorus and dance in tragedy, envisioned as an 'animated

⁵⁴ Ghedini reported Pinelli's words in his letter to Pinelli's brother Carlo (06.01.1943), in Parise, *Giorgio Federico Ghedini*, p. 176.

⁵⁵ Ghedini, 'Note su «Le Baccanti»'. These conflicting realms, both inherent within human nature, stood in stark opposition to the complex relationship between the divine and the human, a central theme that resides at the heart of Euripides' tragedy.

⁵⁶ Gaia Michelini, *Nietzsche nell'Italia di D'Annunzio* (Palermo: S.F. Flaccovio, 1978); Gherardo Ugolini, 'D'Annunzio e il dionisiaco', *ITALIENISCH*, 36.2 (2014), 33–51.

⁵⁷ Romualdo Giani, *Gli spiriti della musica nella tragedia greca* (Turin: Fratelli Bocca, 1913). Giani was directly involved in the initial Italian translations of Nietzsche's texts, including *Also sprach Zarathustra*, which was published for Bocca in 1906.

sculpture’, in the director’s notes for *Le Baccanti*.⁵⁸ Guided by both Monti and Giani, the creators of *Le Baccanti* approached Euripides’ text with a deeper purpose than mere translation into opera. They sought to interpret it through the lens of the ever-present conflict between the Dionysian and Apollonian forces. Upon arriving at this preliminary conclusion, one might question what drew Pinelli and Ghedini’s attention to this conflict. How did it manifest within the opera, and how did it develop into a relevant interpretation of *The Bacchae* in Italy during the 1940s? The response encompasses various currents: the aesthetic clash between old and new, the manifold echoes of historical contingencies, and a moral and existential contemplation of the human condition.

Hermes after Apollo and Dionysus

‘A fatal bond binds the forces we cherish. Each inevitably pulls the other in its wake. You cannot venerate one while rejecting the other’, cautioned the elder Cadmo to his grandson Penteo, who remains stubborn in his refusal to recognise the new god.⁵⁹ Accordingly, the content of Euripides’s tragedy was selected, organised and adapted by Pinelli and Ghedini to highlight the Dionysian-Apollonian dualism with perfect symmetry, evident from the outset of the first act, both musically and dramatically. The two authors devised a male chorus of Thebans to counterpoise the female Maenads’ chorus, akin to the final purification rite performed by the priests of Thebes, serving as the dramatic and musical counterpart to the unrestrained initial bacchanal. When presenting the opera to his initial audiences and emphasising the enduring significance of its theme, Ghedini advocated for an aesthetic interpretation. He portrayed Dioniso as the ‘pioneer of new songs’ and Apollo as the epitome of tradition, depicting them as

⁵⁸ Ghedini’s letter to Carlo Pinelli (3.9.1944) Parise, *Giorgio Federico Ghedini*, pp. 216–17. Ghedini drew inspiration from Giani’s essay to compose the incidental music for Euripides’ *Iphigeneia in Tauris* in 1938. He also composed incidental music for INDA’s classical representations of Euripides’ *Medea* (1949), *Aeschylus* (1950), *The Trojan Womens* (1952).

⁵⁹ ‘Un vincolo fatale lega le forze che adoriamo. | L’una trascina l’altra. | Non puoi l’una adorare e l’altra rinnegare’. Tullio Pinelli, *Le Baccanti. Un prologo, tre atti e cinque quadri* (Milan: Ricordi, 1948), p. 18.

symbols of becoming against stasis, rapture opposed to reason.⁶⁰ This dialectic between the old and the new also surfaced in the critics' discourse, encompassing the debated encounter of the opera with its audience, as well as the controversial interplay among the ancient subject, the conventional libretto and the modernist musical style. As mentioned earlier, criticism was not solely directed towards Pinelli's work; Ghedini's music also faced significant scrutiny. In the subsequent discussion, I will examine in greater detail the reasons behind this criticism.

The prevailing sentiment in the press reception was that Ghedini had merely stumbled upon Euripides' text as a canvas for composing good music—a notion echoed by Mila as 'a subject encountered by chance'—without truly engaging with the deeper thematic substance it contained.⁶¹ Ghedini's rigorous technique and compositional control appeared to only scratch the surface of the enigmatic essence of the tragedy, thereby diminishing the fiery mythos of Dionysus. The prolonged duration of work seemed to have tempered the creative momentum, resulting in an opera that, while controversially innovative in 1948, felt outdated by 1972. It is as if the timing of the opera, poised on the elusive boundary between old and new, failed to fully embrace either, ultimately falling short of both.⁶² Similarly, the composer was regarded, both by birth and stylistic approach, as 'the youngest of the old and the oldest of the young Italian musicians'.⁶³ In the 1940s, despite being of middle age, Ghedini—much like Cadmus—appeared to embrace the Dionysian spirit of renewal, experimenting with dodecaphony and, in a profoundly Nietzschean manner, selecting dissonance as an existential metaphor of the era.⁶⁴

⁶⁰ Ghedini, 'Note su «Le Baccanti»'.

⁶¹ Massimo Mila, 'L'opera di Ghedini alla Scala. Tornano «Le Baccanti»', *La Stampa*, 23 February 1972.

⁶² 'A classic example of operatic premature aging', as stated by critic Mario Pasi during the 1972 staging of *Le Baccanti*. Mario Pasi, 'L'opera di Ghedini ripresa alla Scala. «Le Baccanti» ibernata', *Corriere d'informazione*, 22 February 1972.

⁶³ 'All'avanguardia come il più giovane dei vecchi e il più vecchio dei giovani musicisti italiani', cit. in '[Review of the Premiere of *Le Baccanti*]', *Gazzetta Sport*, 22 February 1948.

⁶⁴ Nietzsche defined musical dissonance as a metaphor for existence, considering it aesthetically justified. Russi, *Le voci di Dioniso*; Marco Maurizi, *La vendetta di Dioniso. La musica contemporanea da Schönberg ai Nirvana* (Milan: Jaca Book, 2018). Ghedini had a cautious and reductionist approach to dodecaphony, viewing it as a technical and expressive tool rather than a comprehensive compositional system.

During this complex aesthetic phase, how did the composer convey the dynamic interaction between the Dionysian and Apollonian in *Le Baccanti*, and what were the musical implications of this interpretation? Out of the clash between these two archetypal principles, a third appeared to emerge in *Le Baccanti*: that of the aristocratic Hermes, referred to as the ‘new god of music’ by critic Giannotto Bastianelli, symbolising the twentieth-century deity of intellectualism.

The opera stood as the apex of Ghedini’s modernist phase, as observed by Franco Abbiati, a music critic from the *Corriere della Sera*. In this way, *Le Baccanti* seemed to mark something of a turning point in Ghedini’s career, symbolising as it did a clash between tradition and innovation. According to Abbiati, ‘avvenirismo’ (extreme modernism) appeared to triumph over convention, with a ‘violent and disruptive technicality’ metaphorically severing the head of opera, akin to Agave’s tragic act upon her son Penteo.⁶⁵ The critic Piero Santi described it as a ‘sound fury’ and a ‘musical demon’, identifying the Dionysian elements in *Le Baccanti* with Ghedini’s modernist use of timbre.⁶⁶ Rhythm and sound were the musical coordinates of the opera. Many, including the composer himself, acknowledged a certain ‘weakness of melodic invention’. As G.M. Gatti put it, ‘an unpleasant coldness surrounds [Ghedini’s works] and makes them staccato and inhuman, like a landscape seen through a crystal’.⁶⁷

Other critics, including Massimo Mila in 1972, highlighted the music’s lack of expressivity, criticising the composer’s apparent detachment from the drama and his ineffectiveness in engaging the audience. Combined with the melodic shortcomings, these criticisms amounted to a

⁶⁵ Franco Abbiati, ‘[Review of the Premiere of *Le Baccanti*]', *Corriere Della Sera*, 22 February 1948.

⁶⁶ Piero Santi, ‘Le Baccanti: opera in un prologo e tre atti’ [Programme note], in *Teatro alla Scala, stagione 1971-1972* (Milan: Teatro alla Scala, 1971).

⁶⁷ Guido Maggiorino Gatti, ‘Current Chronicle: Italy’, *The Musical Quarterly*, XXXIV.2 (1948), 268–71 <doi:10.1093/mq/XXXIV.2.268> [accessed 26 July 2022]. In a letter to Carlo Pinelli as early as 1944, Ghedini remarked, ‘if the opera lacks, it will be due to a deficiency in inspiration, poetry and melodic imagination. These are qualities I don’t possess abundantly, and even if I did, I would hesitate to showcase them for fear of appearing overly emphatic and redundant’; from a letter dated 19.9.1944, in Parise, *Giorgio Federico Ghedini*, pp. 218–19.

metaphorical beheading of traditional *melodramma*.⁶⁸ This somewhat anti-operatic aloofness also led to a perceived Dionysian impotence, with the opera criticised for its supposed inability to capture the Dionysian fervour in musical expression. ‘The Bacchic impetus is completely missing’, lamented Andrea Della Corte (critic for *La Stampa*), echoing the sentiments of many others regarding *Le Baccanti*.⁶⁹ In Ghedini’s music, the Dionysian manifested in various forms throughout the opera, reflecting the multifaceted nature of Dionysus. These ranged from wild and exotic to ecstatic, encompassing not only the deity himself but also his followers, such as Agave and the Maenads. Rhapsodic and melismatic singing, as demonstrated by Agave’s estrangement from reality, characterised the Dionysian rapture (see Example 4.1), while shouting and obsessive instrumental ostinatos conveyed the tribal aspect of the Maenads’ invasion, as seen in the Stravinskian-like scene of the goat sacrifice (Act I, 27). Repetition, emblematic of both ritualistic fervour and divine fixation, permeated the opera, spanning both aspects of the Dionysian. This pervasive repetition, as we will delve into later, shaped musical sections defined by recurring elementary gestures.

⁶⁸ Luigi Gianoli, ‘[Review of the Premiere of *Le Baccanti*]’, *Italia*, 22 February 1948; R.G., ‘[Review of the Premiere of *Le Baccanti*]’, *Corriere Di Milano*, 22 February 1948; Mila, ‘L’opera di Ghedini alla Scala. Tornano «Le Baccanti»’.

⁶⁹ Andrea Della Corte, ‘Una novità di G.F. Ghedini alla Scala “Le Baccanti”. Atmosfera diffidente ed esito contrastato’, *La Stampa*, 21 February 1948.

alquanto liberamente
(con un grido di gioia vitale) *p* *f* (scattando, con ebbrezza)

Agàve

Co - m'è cal - do il so - le!

LE MENADI
(Contr.)

I BACCANTI
(Ten.)

Largo ♩ = 42

Andante mosso ♩ = 76
alquanto liberamente

(Vc.) *pp col canto* (Archi) *ff* (VI.) *pp*

mf (Gc)

Agàve

Example 4.1. Giorgio Federico Ghedini, *Le Baccanti. Un prologo, tre atti e cinque quadri* [vocal score] (Milan: Ricordi, 1948), p. 24

This portrayal of the Dionysian in Ghedini's music appears inconsistent and academic, serving merely as an illustration that fails to fully immerse and involve the audience in the Dionysian rapture.⁷⁰ More aligned with Ghedini's rational approach, the distinctly Apollonian sections were regarded as the most effective parts of the opera. This was exemplified by the purification rite mentioned by Della Corte. This segment stands as an old-fashioned, classicising interlude amidst the opera's dissonant and harsh music. It features baroque-like grace notes from the flute and harp, vocal arpeggios, a Gregorian-like melopoeia of the priests, and even a clear A-major harmony accompanying the word 'Apollo' (see Example 4.2). Together, these elements present the most obvious and conventional representation of the Apollonian. However, it would be reductive to reduce the aesthetic confrontation between the Dionysian and the Apollonian to merely a stylistic contrast between a 'hostile and baffling language'—marked by polytonality and polyrhythms—and outdated traditional formulas.⁷¹ According to Rubens Tedeschi, reviewing the opera for *L'Unità* in 1972, the two main characters, Penteo and Dioniso, along with their respective embodiments of tradition and novelty, became intertwined. Stylistically and dramatically, each character exhibited traits that were both old and new.⁷² In the dialectic between the static and the principle of renewing, *Le Baccanti* assumed an ambiguous stance: Ghedini seemed 'unequivocally on the side of renewal', as stated by Abbiati and other critics, while simultaneously warning against Dionysus as both a seducer and a destroyer.⁷³ His music sought to enact the Dionysian impulse of dismantling tradition, or what little remained of it, through its modernist vigour. Yet, it seemed to lack the Dionysian power to seduce and emotionally engulf the audience.

⁷⁰ 'One leaves the theatre without any disturbances'. Pasi, 'L'opera di Ghedini ripresa alla Scala'.

⁷¹ 'Linguaggio ostico e sconcertante', cit. in R.G., 'Lettera da Milano', *La Rassegna Musicale*, 2 (1948), 138–41.

⁷² Rubens Tedeschi, '«Le Baccanti» alla Scala. Intempestivo «omaggio» a G.F. Ghedini', *L'Unità*, 22 February 1972.

⁷³ Sinah Kessler, 'Perfide, Schöne Gottheit. Ghedinis Oper "Le Baccanti" an Der Mailänder Scala', *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, 18 March 1972.

I Sacerdoti
Bassi

chiaro e ppp

A - pol - - - lo, _____

poco cedendo

(Fl.)

pp (A)

p

pp

Example 4.2. Giorgio Federico Ghedini, *Le Baccanti. Un prologo, tre atti e cinque quadri* [vocal score] (Milan: Ricordi, 1948), p. 93

This rational and detached treatment of the Dionysian myth, along with the blending of Nietzsche's opposing principles, suggests the emergence of a third pathway amidst Apollo and Dionysus within *Le Baccanti*: the way of Hermes. After the reign of Dionysus in the nineteenth century, Hermes was appointed as the deity of art in the twentieth century, as postulated by Giannotto Bastianelli in his incomplete work *Il nuovo dio della musica* (1927). According to the Florentine critic, Dionysus had served as the guardian of nineteenth-century art, inspiring the pathos, anarchy and emphasis characteristic of Romanticism, usually depicted as a demagogue swaying the masses. Conversely, Hermes, credited as the inventor of the zither and a shrewd master of trickery, stood as the driving force behind the cerebral and elitist tendencies evident in the varied expressions of contemporary art. As the masses increasingly blurred into indistinction, art in the twentieth century grew more individualistic and fragmented, resembling, in the words of Bastianelli, a literal 'tower of Babel'.⁷⁴ Each artist, repelled by the masses yet simultaneously

⁷⁴ Giannotto Bastianelli, *Il nuovo dio della musica*, ed. by Marcello De Angelis (Turin: Einaudi, 1978), p. 177. Bastianelli (1883-1927) was a musician, musicologist and critic from Florence, who contributed to significant periodicals of his

overlooked by them, pursued their own path under the guidance of the new god. Hermes epitomised modern intellectualism, representing the new and radical rationality of the twentieth century, divergent from the Apollonian ideal of beauty and instead reflecting the ultimate expression of the Socratic spirit, heavily criticised by Nietzsche.⁷⁵ In confronting the profound complexities of this age of extremes, both the human mind and art grappled with unravelling and offering reassurance through the Apollonian illusion of harmony, measure and beautiful forms. This aesthetic rationality of the Apollonian principle, acting as a protective veil against the terrifying Dionysian reality of existence, fell short in the twentieth century. Faced with an overwhelming reality, art distanced itself and embraced intellectualism as a filter—a rationality that, while unable to explain chaos, merely exposed it and attempted to manage and contain it at a formal level.

The figure of Hermes might symbolise the anti-operatic and aristocratic detachment felt in *Le Baccanti*, serving as a key to understanding the composed control Ghedini's music exerts over the heated content of the tragedy. This is not a matter of delimiting situations and characters related to the two opposing spheres (Dioniso-Penteo, Maenads-Thebans, the bacchanal-purification rite), but of understanding how the Dionysian and Apollonian merge in Ghedini's music under the ideal auspices of the new god. Modern materials complemented traditional techniques; a pipe organ met microphones in the orchestration; minimal elements generated mammoth sounds; stasis and clear forms lay beneath the chaotic surface of the opera. This is evident in the second scene of Act II, the centrepiece of the opera, where we also observe the most significant departures of *Le Baccanti* from its original source. Hermes manifests in the remarkably clear way

time, including *La Voce*, *Lacerba* and *Marzocco*. With a discerning focus on the evolution of contemporary culture and music, he authored *La crisi musicale europea* (1912), one of his most acclaimed essays.

⁷⁵ Informed by a limited understanding of Nietzsche's writings and influenced by the prevailing Croceanism of the era, Bastianelli interpreted the Dionysian from an anti-Romantic perspective. However, Nietzsche's concepts held an ontological significance beyond mere aesthetics, with the Apollonian acting as a veil to transform the Dionysian abyss into beauty, serving as an aesthetic justification for existence.

Ghedini orchestrates and structures the unrestrained content of the *sparagmòs*, the brutal sacrifice of Penteo. The scene opens with the ascent on the Kithaeron: the stage plunges into sudden darkness, enveloped in a luminous mist, while the orchestra and off-stage voices evoke the unseen.⁷⁶ A sweeping collective ostinato in the lower instruments, punctuated by scattered high-pitched and percussive sounds, creates a multi-layered texture of repeated patterns. These motifs progressively build upon each other, covering the entire twelve-none aggregate, blending conventional techniques with modern harsh sounds (see Example 4.3).

La scena è avvolta improvvisamente da una tenebra fitta, che si trasforma poi in spessa nebbia,

Pesante ♩ = 66

(Cr. Bt. Pizz. Fg.)

(Trbn.)

ff marcato

(Tam-tam)

i cui colori si fanno sempre più iridescenti e trasparenti.

(Tr)

35

Example 4.3. Giorgio Federico Ghedini, *Le Baccanti. Un prologo, tre atti e cinque quadri* [vocal score] (Milan: Ricordi, 1948), p. 143

⁷⁶ As seen, from *Maria d'Alessandria* onwards, the disembodied-voice technique recurs frequently in Ghedini's operas.

The Maenads' cries, invoking Dionysus with their primitive voices, drift from a distance, compelling the orchestra to pause, with only a sparse drum roll resonating. The scene continues to unfold solely on an auditory level, the stage remaining shrouded in mist: Dioniso and Penteo stand on the slopes of the Kithaeron.⁷⁷ Separated much like the two characters themselves, two harmonic poles—a distinct D major chord in the high register and a third-dyad in the low—merge in a? tremolo string pedal-point (see Example 4.4). Harmonically static yet brimming with tension and dynamism, this arrangement is punctuated by imitative gestures of natural sounds played on the harp and xylophone, evoking Bartók's 'Night Music', as Mila recognised.⁷⁸ The operatic technique of disembodied voices is here combined with the use of electric amplifiers, gradually intensifying as the voices approach closer and closer. Finally, as the mists dissipate, the valley of the Maenads is unveiled.

⁷⁷ This part, featuring the off-stage dialogue between Penteo and Dioniso, was omitted at the premiere.

⁷⁸ Mila, 'L'opera di Ghedini alla Scala. Tornano «Le Baccanti»'. Ghedini admired Bartók's music and possessed scores of his theatrical works.

(VI.)

pp *dim.*

(Ora si odono, echeggianti e lontane, le voci di Pènteo e di Dioniso)

La voce di Pènteo (lontana)* *f pesante*

pp *f*

(Archi, Tp. Gc.)

Largamente spaziato ♩ = 92

È du - ra l'er - ta!

La voce di Diòniso (lontana)*

f *pp*

(Xil.)

(Arpe)

Ba-da! Il sas-so pre - ci-pi-ta nel vuo - to!

* Le voci di Pènteo e di Diòniso vengano possibilmente alterate con amplificatori, posti sul palcoscenico e nella sala del teatro

Example 4.4. Giorgio Federico Ghedini, *Le Baccanti. Un prologo, tre atti e cinque quadri* [vocal score] (Milan: Ricordi, 1948), p. 151

One of the most Apollonian moments of the opera precedes one of its most Dionysian, with the idyllic and the horrific faces of the god appearing in succession to heighten the contrast. The bucolic song of Agave and the Maenads, divided into two semi-choruses, stands as the lyrical exception of the opera. This extensive, strophic piece—almost a closed piece— marks the first and only time the melodic element prevails over the rhythmic and harmonic ones. Yet the off-stage voice of Dionysus calls his Maenads to vengeance, disrupting the idyll. His imperturbable chant on a single repeated note hovers above the increasingly frantic musical turmoil of the chorus and orchestra. Finally, the god triumphantly appears on stage. Though the sacrifice remains unseen, its sonic violence is profoundly striking. The lucid rationality of Hermes contains the wildness of the *spargmos*, orchestrating the Dionysian effect with sophisticated precision.

Ghedini employs a small number of basic elements, layering them gradually to create a texture that becomes progressively intricate and dense. The orchestra pulsates with brief ostinatos, echoing Stravinsky's style, featuring strong accents that build up into an increasingly complex polyrhythm.⁷⁹ The mechanical pace of the orchestra moves in tandem with the apparent freedom of the voices, almost existing independently: the frenetic interjections of the chorus, arranged as four solo voices and two semi-choruses; Agave's distorted and hysterical voice, evoking an expressionist tone; Penteo's off-stage cries; and above all, Dioniso's incitements, commanding attention with a simple yet obsessive semitone oscillation (see Example 4.5). Supported by a microphone, his voice pulls and overwhelms all, escalating to a monumental crescendo before abruptly concluding at the zenith of tension and sound. The scene stands as a compact musical block, described by Santi as a 'timbral episode', featuring clear boundaries and devoid of internal developments, except for the mounting tension and sonic density. This follows a complementary

⁷⁹ See, for instance, the final section of Stravinsky's *Symphony in Three Movements* (1945), composed during the same wartime period.

process of iteration and intensification—‘a true gamble with musical material and form’, as Mila described this compositional attitude. Here, the emphasis lies more on the sonic landscape than on traditional musical discourse.⁸⁰ This musical ‘insistence’, as Santi characterises it, yields an anti-dramatic quality of ‘fixity’ (Restagno), depicting a static and ineluctable sonic image of chaos and becoming.⁸¹ The formidable and inscrutable force of Dionysus is strictly controlled by Hermes, confined and somewhat restrained within clear and structured forms.⁸² The logic of the twentieth-century god of music effectively bridged and transcended the aesthetic divide between the Apollonian and Dionysian.

⁸⁰ Piero Santi, ‘Ghedini e il suo teatro timbrico’, in *Ghedini e l’attività musicale a Torino fra le due guerre. Atti del convegno in occasione dell’Anno Europeo della Musica (Torino, 14-15 gennaio 1986)*, ed. by Teatro Regio (Turin: Teatro Regio, 1986), pp. 15–26. Mila, ‘L’opera di Ghedini alla Scala. Tornano «Le Baccanti»’.

⁸¹ See Enzo Restagno, ‘Dopo 24 anni alla Scala Le Baccanti di Ghedini’, *Alto Adige*, 12 March 1972; Santi, ‘Le Baccanti: opera in un prologo e tre atti’.

⁸² In this context, certain critics drew parallels to the contemporary paintings of Sirone and De Chirico.

Penteo

ma - dre! son io! son

Dioniso

Ven - det - ta!

I. Sopr.

ff Di - o - ny - sos! E - vi - us! Jac - che! *marc.*

II. Sopr.

ff Di - o - ny - sos! E - vi - us! Jac - che! *marc.*

QUATTRO
VOCI
SOLISTE

III. Sopr.

Eu, eu, e - voè!

IV. Cont.

Eu, eu, e - voè!

I. Semicoro

Sopr.

ff Di - o - ny - sos! E - vi - us! Jac - che! *marc.*

Contr.

ff Di - o - ny - sos! E - vi - us! Jac - che! *marc.*

MENADI

Sopr.

Eu, eu, e - voè!

Contr.

Eu, eu, e - voè!

II. Semicoro

Archi

ten.

(Subito si scorge Penteo che si inerpica, come pazzo di terrore,
sulle rupi del fondo.)

Penteo

Pèn - teo!_

Dioniso.

Su, su, su, su,

Eu, eu, e - vo - è! Di - o - ny - sos!

Eu, eu, e - vo - è! Di - o - ny - sos!

Di o ny - sos! Di - o - ny - sos!

Di o ny - sos! Di - o - ny - sos!

Eu, eu, e - vo - è! Di - o - ny - sos!

Eu, eu, e - vo - è! Di - o - ny - sos!

Di o ny - sos! Di - o - ny - sos!

Di o ny - sos! Di - o - ny - sos!

(pp)

(Bt.)

f

Example 4.5. Giorgio Federico Ghedini, *Le Baccanti. Un prologo, tre atti e cinque quadri* [vocal score] (Milan: Ricordi, 1948), pp. 176-177

‘Una fatica di guerra’: The Opera’s Unresolved Conflict⁸³

The refined and restrained essence attributed to Hermes in *Le Baccanti* was precisely the quality that led to accusations of the opera’s elitist nature, a nature that clashed with both its own grand scale and the populist tradition of venues like La Scala.⁸⁴ In other words, the focus on Hermes might have contributed to its initial failure to captivate the audience during its premiere.

According to Bastianelli, in fact, the aristocratic and intellectual artistry of Hermes necessitated small theatres and discerning audiences finely attuned to each artist, to fully appreciate and comprehend the subtleties of their work.⁸⁵ As a matter of fact, Bindo Missiroli had advised Ghedini to consider presenting *Le Baccanti* at the Maggio Fiorentino, recognising it as a more suitable and specialised venue for such a complex opera, compared to La Scala.⁸⁶ As Marcello Abbado recounted, while initiatives like the Pomeriggi Musicali were rejuvenating the repertoire and audience for instrumental music after the war, the ‘La Scala audience attended opera performances expecting to hear familiar repertoire works. Consequently, they were disappointed when confronted with Ghedini’s works’.⁸⁷

However, when seeking to understand the reasons behind the relative failure of such a large-scale work, it becomes apparent that both the venue and the timing were ill-suited for *Le Baccanti* in 1948. In this regard, the delayed premiere did not help the opera’s timeliness. Aside from the noted lack of coherence between the initial acts and the final one, a consequence of its prolonged development—as pointed out by several critics—this wartime opera appeared less topical in the

⁸³ Ghedini’s own words in Angiola Maria Bonisconti, ‘Stagione lirica della RAI Mito e Teatro. “Le Baccanti” di Ghedini’, *Radiocorriere*, 26.27 (1949), 5–6.

⁸⁴ Recall the booing that ensued during the 1939 staging of *Maria d’Alessandria*, as well as the endeavour to modernise the Milanese audience with the 1942 *Stagione di opera contemporanea*.

⁸⁵ Bastianelli, *Il nuovo dio della musica*, pp. 136–38.

⁸⁶ In the post-war era, grappling with significant economic challenges, opera houses found themselves heavily reliant on established repertoire staples, often relegating new productions to festivals like those in Venice and Florence’s Maggio Musicale.

⁸⁷ Quoting from Abbado’s interview in Parise, ‘Profilo di Giorgio Federico Ghedini’, p. 533. As the subsequent chapters will elaborate further, the Pomeriggi Musicali Orchestra commenced its operations in 1945, dedicated to promoting contemporary pieces alongside classical repertoire.

immediate aftermath of the war. It might have resurfaced uncomfortable questions unresolved by the war's conclusion or the transition to the Republic. As Ghedini emphasised, *Le Baccanti* primarily represented a 'war effort', inextricably 'tied to so many sad and tragic events', serving as a reflection or testament to them, rather than offering an escape.⁸⁸ Reconsidering these themes during the year of the first Italian republican elections, which signified the dissolution of national unity among parties under the antifascist banner, broached the sensitive subject of memory and accountability. This involved reworking, or even removing, portrayals of the dictatorship, war and Resistance experience. Entering a crucial juncture, *Le Baccanti* thus offers a fascinating perspective on the contentious interplay of continuities and disruptions during Italy's 1940s, extending beyond the broader relevance of the Dionysian in the twentieth century. Believing that a historicising reading of the opera can provide insight into its disappointing premiere, I will now map further *Le Baccanti's* inevitable and non-univocal connections with Italy's specific historical circumstances. This exploration will begin by examining the opera's resonance with the realities of totalitarianism, the war and the imminent sense of change pervading contemporary discourse.

First and foremost, the categories of the Apollonian and Dionysian effectively captured two contradictory and complementary facets of the fascist regime: repression and the call to order on the one hand, juxtaposed with the calculated promotion of invasion and irrationality through the manipulation of collective myths and mass rituals on the other.⁸⁹ As the writer Ignazio Silone aptly pointed out in his *La scuola dei dittatori* (1938), dictatorship thrives by perpetuating 'endemic disorder'.⁹⁰ As early as 1948, Dioniso in *Le Baccanti* was associated with a cruel yet captivating

⁸⁸ From Ghedini's letter to Carlo Pinelli (03.01.1944), in Parise, *Giorgio Federico Ghedini*, p. 212. As the writer Italo Calvino later recalled, during the wartime period, 'one found himself immersed in history without any choice'. *La generazione degli anni difficili*, ed. by Ettore A. Albertoni, Ezio Antonini and Renato Palmieri (Bari: Laterza, 1962), p. 76.

⁸⁹ Consider the so-called *Scuola di mistica fascista*, which originated within the Milanese GUF in 1930 and remained active until 1943. This school advocated for and nurtured a spiritual interpretation of fascism, transcending its political dimensions.

⁹⁰ Ignazio Silone, *La scuola dei dittatori* (Milan: Mondadori, 1994), p. 99.

force that ‘pervades men and women, destroying their own lineage’.⁹¹ However, it was not until the opera’s reception outside of Italy in response to the 1972 La Scala performance that it was more explicitly interpreted as a commentary on the ‘seduction of people’ in totalitarian contexts. Dioniso, embodying the essence of a vitalistic force, rose as a destructive leader of the masses, inciting men to turn against themselves with ferocity.⁹² The war could be seen as the culmination of these destructive forces. The fascist inclination for violence was intensified by the nefarious alliance with Nazism, perceived by many as a true wave of Dionysian fury sweeping over Italy.⁹³

Recognising Dioniso as both the tyrannical seducer of the masses and the embodiment of Freudian Thanatos, representing the spirit of self-destruction engulfing Italy during those years, we could align *Le Baccanti* with a literary work from the same period: Emilio Gadda’s *Eros e Priapo*. Written precisely between 1941 and 1945 yet published only decades later in a censored version (1967), this satirical and violent pamphlet investigated the success of fascism, depicting it as a form of eroticism wielded on the masses by exploiting their most irrational and ‘feminine’ traits. Gadda portrayed fascism as a collective neurosis rooted in the interplay between repression and hysteria. According to Gadda, in fascist Italy, the supremacy of reason, or Logos, gave way to Eros in its most debased form, personified by Priapus.⁹⁴

Returning to Ghedini, the composer had already staged the ruinous end of a civilisation in *Re Hassan*, attributed to the King’s stubbornness—an opera frequently cited by critics as an unparalleled benchmark for comparison with *Le Baccanti* within Ghedini’s operatic oeuvre. However, in *Le Baccanti*, the people were not mere victims of the tyrant’s will; rather, they were

⁹¹ Riccardo Malipiero, ‘[Review of the Premiere of *Le Baccanti*]’, *Popolo*, 22 February 1948; ‘[Review of the Premiere of *Le Baccanti*]’.

⁹² Kessler, ‘Perfide, Schöne Gottheit. Ghedinis Oper “Le Baccanti” an Der Mailänder Scala’.

⁹³ In Roberto Rossellini’s film *Roma città aperta* (1945), the Nazis were not depicted as allies but as invaders to be expelled, symbolising all forms of brutal violence.

⁹⁴ Carlo Emilio Gadda, *Eros e Priapo*, ed. by Paola Italia and Giorgio Pinotti (Milan: Adelphi, 2016).

enmeshed with it, much like the Maenads with Dionysus. Likewise, Italians were entangled with the Duce, as hinted at by Gadda in his pamphlet, prompting scrutiny of collective responsibility in the spread of fascism.⁹⁵ In a similar vein, when commenting on *Le Baccanti*, the critic and musician Riccardo Malipiero emphasised the opera's prevalent choral aspect, deeming it particularly relevant in an era marked by 'collective passions and mass conflicts'.⁹⁶

A further connection to the contemporary context is revealed through the opera's nuanced deviations from Euripides' original text. *Le Baccanti* brought to forefront the tension between the older and younger generations within the tragedy, offering a deeper social interpretation of the Apollonian and Dionysian divide. This portrayal particularly resonated with the generational conflict inherent in Italian society, a prominent issue persisting before, during and after fascism.⁹⁷ In the opera, seeking a perfect symmetry of forces, the authors introduced into the narrative a retinue of young men accompanying Penteo, intended to offset the followers of Dioniso. Handsome, strong, sunburned and hardened by fatigue—literally 'forged in the gym'—they seemingly embodied the ideal of Latin masculinity championed by fascism for its citizens, proudly proclaiming to be the regime of the youth. Indeed, emerging as a youth phenomenon from the generational experience of World War I, with Mussolini becoming the youngest prime minister of a very youthful nation, the rhetoric of youth was pervasive and central to fascism. *Giovinezza* served as the official anthem of the regime.⁹⁸

⁹⁵ In a similar way, Thomas Mann, in his explicit allegory of Italian fascism, *Mario und der Zauberer*, delved into the dynamics of hypnosis and the manipulation of willpower, illustrating how 'people and leader are included in each other'. Reminiscent of Dionysus with Pentheus, the magician in the novel overcomes Mario's scepticism and will, reducing him to a state of 'grotesque bliss'.

⁹⁶ Malipiero, '[Review of the Premiere of *Le Baccanti*]'.
⁹⁷ Ghedini had already tackled this contentious theme of fascist society in his earlier operas, *Re Hassan* and *La pulce d'oro*.

⁹⁸ Fascism presented itself as a revolutionary movement dismantling the old Giolittian ruling class, a theme vividly captured in the satire of the time. 'Chi ride ultimo. Parodia satira umorismi', ed. by Elisabetta Abignente and others, *Between*, VI.12 (2016) <<http://www.Between-journal.it>> [accessed 25 July 2023].

However, even ‘the fascists age’—as indicated by the title of Vitaliano Brancati’s collection *I fascisti invecchiano* (1946)—and thus ‘largo ai giovani’ (‘make way for young people’) was one of Mussolini’s mottos. The focus on generational renewal within the ruling class propelled fascism to assert its monopoly and complete control over the educational system of Italians, aimed at ensuring continuity, mobilisation and consensus for the regime. Young Italians were raised within the confines of fascist institutions, steeped in its myths, and driven by an ardent ambition to validate their worth in warfare, adhering to an ideology that glorified violence and militarism.⁹⁹ Penteo and his companions served as a quintessential depiction of this so-called ‘generation of Mussolini’, epitomising the generational paradox of the regime’s final years. They stood as a representation of young people staunchly defending the established order, driven by disorientation and resistance to the impending change. As a symbol of human arrogance and frailty rather than an Apollonian hero, Penteo shifts blame onto the elderly Cadmo and Tiresia, who are accused of failing to protect their city and civilization. Boldly, Penteo proclaims, ‘our youth will save Thebes’.¹⁰⁰ However, there was also the darker side of the coin, characterised by fear and slaughter, lurking behind this facade of fanatic youthful heroism both in the opera and in

⁹⁹ In the early 1940s, amidst a widespread sense of dissatisfaction, young people stood out as among the few supporters of the war, a sentiment symbolically acknowledged by Mussolini’s appointment of the young fervent fascist and Spanish War veteran, Aldo Vidussoli, as the national secretary of the PNF. However, his leadership was deemed weak and faced criticism from other party hierarchs. For further exploration of the generational dynamics during fascism, consider the following sources: Marina Addis Saba, *Gioventù italiana del littorio. La stampa dei giovani nella guerra fascista* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1973); Ugoberto Alfassio Grimaldi, ‘I giovani degli anni Trenta dal fascismo all’antifascismo’, in *Italia 1945-1975, Fascismo antifascismo. Resistenza rinnovamento*, ed. by Marco Fini (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1975), pp. 183–96; Luca La Rovere, ‘Gli intellettuali italiani e il problema delle generazioni nella transizione al postfascismo’, *Laboratoire italien. Politique et société*, 12 (2012), 97–110 <doi:10.4000/laboratoireitalien.641> [accessed 11 November 2021]; Luca La Rovere, *L’eredità del fascismo. Gli intellettuali, i giovani e la transizione al postfascismo 1943-1948* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2008); Bruno Wanrooij, ‘The Rise and Fall of Italian Fascism as a Generational Revolt’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 22.3 (1987), 401–18; Bruno Wanrooij, ‘Giovani e vecchi nel fascismo italiano’, *Il Politico*, 48.3 (1983), 485–503; *La generazione degli anni difficili*.

¹⁰⁰ ‘La nostra giovinezza salverà Tebe’, in Pinelli, *Le Baccanti*, p. 21. The composer depicted the bravado of Penteo and his followers with a superficial march in Act I (43).

Italy. As Penteo confesses with anguish, ‘yet you don’t know how hard the idea of death is for me. So young I am!’, echoing, in a way, the contemporary carnage.¹⁰¹

In that same vein, Pier Paolo Pasolini expressed in 1942 a sentiment akin to that found in *Le Baccanti*: ‘as we shed the superficial bravado of youth, we will find ourselves dispersed and humble, amidst a crowd that overwhelms us’.¹⁰² The libretto’s subtle alterations and additions to the original text illuminated these contemporary pressing themes of the ‘lost generation’, the ‘betrayed’, and those ‘without masters’—issues that pervaded the heated debate of the post-1943 era.¹⁰³ Throughout the narrative of fascism, the tension between different generations manifested in multifaceted ways: from the conflict between the youthful *arditi* and the entrenched ruling class, to the second generation of fascists accusing their predecessors of quelling revolutionary fervour, to the older generation’s distrust towards the political ideals and commitment of the youth. Following the regime’s collapse, the generational divide erupted as a pivotal theme during the transition to post-fascism, delving into the delicate matters of Italian identity and the ambiguous boundaries between fascism and antifascism. While the intellectual elite had arrived at the Resistance through a gradual process of disillusionment, which had been maturing since the late 1930s, particularly within the pockets of freedom—such as the GUF—strategically provided and monitored by fascism,¹⁰⁴ for numerous young individuals, the war served as the conclusive and painful exposure of the regime’s empty rhetoric. Disillusioned and adrift in the political and existential vacuum created by fascism, young Italians harboured resentment towards their elders

¹⁰¹ ‘E pure tu non sai quanto m’è dura l’idea della morte. Così giovane sono!’, in Pinelli, *Le Baccanti*, p. 31.

Bindo Missiroli had advised Ghedini to remove this controversial phrase due to its inevitable resonance within the surrounding context. See footnote 3 in Parise, *Giorgio Federico Ghedini*, p. 188.

¹⁰² Pier Paolo Pasolini, ‘I giovani, l’attesa’, *Il Setaccio*, III (1942), 1.

¹⁰³ These themes also emerge prominently in films like Pietro Germi’s *Gioventù perduta* (1948) and Michelangelo Antonioni’s *I vinti* (1953).

¹⁰⁴ This was the generation encapsulated by Ruggero Zangrandi’s *Il lungo viaggio attraverso il fascismo*, who took part in the so-called *littoriali della cultura*—competitions among university students addressing various themes with a degree of freedom for discussion and criticism. Born in 1934 and sponsored by Minister Giuseppe Bottai, the *littoriali* stood as a rather unique phenomenon among the totalitarian regimes of the era. Grimaldi, ‘I giovani degli anni Trenta dal fascismo all’antifascismo’.

for failing to perceive the truth earlier. Conversely, the older pre-fascists expressed concerns about the need to democratically re-educate Mussolini's generation. The myth of the *Resistenza*, amalgamating diverse forces and movements under the broad umbrella of antifascism, carried its own complexities. It confronted the paradox of resorting to the same violent methods associated with fascism in the fight against it.¹⁰⁵ Just as fanaticism was evident on both sides of Pentheus and the Bacchae, dictatorship and revolution converged in the twentieth-century Dionysian, symbolising the politics of irrationalism and mass consensus.¹⁰⁶ The journey towards Liberation and the subsequent transition to post-fascist Italy were anything but linear or direct. Against this backdrop, the open-ended conclusion of *Le Baccanti* carried significant resonance.¹⁰⁷

Penteco's demise, felled by his own mother in the midst of the opera, shatters any sense of the natural order, echoing the turmoil of the fratricidal conflict of the time.¹⁰⁸ The final act unfolds with shell-shocked survivors striving to piece their shattered world back together. Agave, tragically regaining her senses, faces the harsh reality, while Dioniso unleashes his brutal vengeance, sparing not even his own devotees. All that is left is to contemplate the ruins of civilisation and plead for mercy, with Bacchantes and Thebans united in their plea, with no glimpse of what lies ahead. The concluding chorus appears to provide a musical resolution to the

¹⁰⁵ See, for example, Elio Vittorini's novel *Uomini e no* (1945), crafted during and about the Resistance and its inherent contradictions, and Italo Calvino's *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno* (1947), which delves into the same theme. In the latter, as voiced by the partisan Kim, it is not lofty ideals but a multifaceted desire for redemption that propels the Resistance: 'for the worker, from his exploitation; for the farmer, from his ignorance; for the petty bourgeois, from his inhibitions; for the pariah, from his corruption'. The lines between factions blur, and individuals readily transition from one side to the other, leaving Kim with numerous uncertainties about the post-war future. Italo Calvino, *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno* (Turin: Einaudi, 1964), p. 147.

¹⁰⁶ In his work *La mascherata* (1941), Moravia, speaking through the voice of Sebastiano, remarked that placing belief in anything—whether the state or the revolution, freedom or authority—was a true 'lack of elegance', displaying an aristocratic wariness towards mass demonstrations. Alberto Moravia, *La mascherata*, ed. by Marino Biondi (Florence: Giunti, 2012).

¹⁰⁷ Alongside the two dialogues between Dioniso and Penteco in the first two acts, the finale of the opera posed one of the most challenging parts to compose, ultimately undergoing five different versions. Parise, 'Profilo di Giorgio Federico Ghedini', pp. 192-210.

¹⁰⁸ In his novel on the Resistance, Vittorini depicted it as an 'uncivil' war, a brutal conflict where even brothers could end up fighting against one another. The writer vividly captured the discomfort and shame felt by Italian soldiers when ordered by the Nazis to kill their fellow partisans—ten Italians for every German killed. Elio Vittorini, *Uomini e no* (Milan: Mondadori, 2014). The emblematic words of Cadmo in the opera, 'if they demand injustice, if they ask you to commit shameful acts, be unjust and vile', encapsulate this moral dilemma. Pinelli, *Le Baccanti*, p. 18.

conflict, yet it leaves the moral and existential enigma unresolved, lingering as a haunting question mark.

The opera's atmosphere of destruction and despair struck a chord with post-war Italy, a nation seemingly awakening like Agave but left utterly devastated and facing the arduous task of both physical and moral rebuilding. In the spirit of reconstruction, there was a simultaneous drive to look forward and the necessity to confront the past without erasure. Elements of both rupture and continuity were intricately woven together, resisting any attempt to simplify them into a single paradigm.¹⁰⁹ The very identity of the nation was at stake, revolving around pressing post-war issues: were Italians to be seen as victims or perpetrators, winners or losers of the conflict? Building upon the redemptive image cultivated by Allied war propaganda to sway Italians against the fascist regime, 'Italiani brava gente' emerged as the exoneration paradigm in the post-war narrative.¹¹⁰ This notion found robust support at the highest echelons, epitomised by Croce's historical reading of fascism as either a brief 'parenthesis' or an external 'germ' contrary to the intrinsic Italian character.¹¹¹ In search of a renewed national identity, Italians transitioned from fascist rhetoric to embrace the new myth of the Resistance, exchanging the regime's era (*ventennio*)

¹⁰⁹ In the historiography of post-war Italy, distinct phases have unfolded: the initial myth of rebirth and complete break from the past in the post-war era, followed by the emergence of revisionist theories in the 1960s highlighting themes such as continuity and the eradication of the past. More recent studies have introduced nuances into the discourse, enriching the dialectic between rupture and continuity. Charles L. Leavitt, "'An entirely new land'? Italy's post-war culture and its Fascist past', *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 21.1 (2016), 4–18 <doi:10.1080/1354571X.2016.1112060> [accessed 7 September 2023].

¹¹⁰ The post-war depiction of Italians as 'brava gente' sought to erase their 'perpetrator traits', including past imperialist and racist policies, under the guise of a presumed inherent goodness. Originating from Anglo-American propaganda during the war years, which aimed to garner popular support and sever ties with the regime by portraying Italians as victims of fascism, this enduring trope was later embraced by all post-war political factions. Its adoption served the purpose of self-redemption and garnering popular consensus. Claudio Fogu, 'Italiani brava gente: The Legacy of Fascist Historical Culture on Italian Politics of Memory', in *The Politics of Memory in Postwar Europe*, ed. by Richard Ned Lebow, Wulf Kansteiner and Claudio Fogu (New York: Duke University Press, 2006), pp. 147–76 <doi.org/10.1515/9780822388333-006> [accessed 6 September 2023]; Paola Gambarota, 'Uomo Qualunque: The Transnational Making of Italian Post-War Populism', *The Italianist*, 39.1 (2019), 44–63 <doi:10.1080/02614340.2019.1586318> [accessed 7 September 2023].

¹¹¹ The debate over whether fascism had been entirely eradicated or still persisted fuelled anti-Crocean controversy among intellectuals and writers like Luigi Russo, Carlo Levi and Umberto Saba. The latter, in rebuttal to Croce's metaphor likening fascism to an illness, characterised it as a cancer deeply entrenched within the Italian body, with lasting repercussions. See Leavitt, "'An entirely new land'?".

with the heroic period of the partisans, known as the *biennio*.¹¹² The depiction of a unified Italy standing against fascism, whether it signalled a genuine rebirth, mere transformism, or a blend of both, carried profound political and psychological significance in the post-war milieu. In this context, while the contemporary *Concerto funebre per Duccio Galimberti* seamlessly fit into this conciliatory and reassuring narrative, *Le Baccanti* remained open-ended and consequently sparked controversy upon its reception.

At the end of the opera, one is left as bewildered as after Euripides' tragic finale. Is Dioniso to be seen as a tyrant or a liberator? Is Penteo—like Italians—a victim or culpable? Which side to choose? The authors' stance was ambiguous, leaving morality in a state of suspension. After the equilibrium of the clash between the Apollonian and Dionysian elements, the opera's authors did not appear to endeavour towards a synthesis nor offer a definitive interpretation. Instead, they allowed the myth to resonate with its myriad potential interpretations—whether aesthetic, historical or existential—each as universal as they were potentially contingent, reflecting a time of significant change and conflicting drives, defying unequivocal unravelling. *Le Baccanti* didn't just serve as a cultured tale; it evolved into a committed and relevant work on both artistic and historical fronts. It was dedicated to bearing witness to a heightened moment of crisis and the contradictory, ever-evolving essence of contemporaneity. In this regard, the sense of detachment and the suspension of judgment could be seen as the opera's most modern and original approach to engaging with both the troubled present and the ancient text of Euripides. *Le Baccanti* remained true to an ideal of provocative and non-cathartic art, one that raised questions without providing easy answers.¹¹³ This renewed topicality of Ghedini's Italian Bacchae makes it a compelling addition to the broader spectrum of twentieth-century Dionysianism, resonating

¹¹² 'Biennio' refers to the two-year period of liberation warfare conducted after the armistice (1943-45).

¹¹³ This also aligns with Nietzsche's conception of art, which rejects the Aristotelian notion of catharsis as moral purification.

particularly within the specific Italian context from which the opera emerged. After the premiere in 1948, Ghedini declared, ‘an unfortunate interlude of my life finishes now with *Le Baccanti*’. Ultimately, the opera drained his enthusiasm for the genre, paving the way for an apparent sudden shift in his musical style.¹¹⁴ Nonetheless, it seamlessly maintained alignment with the moral pessimism that stretched from *Re Hassan* to the subsequent *Billy Budd*.

¹¹⁴ Ghedini’s letter to Carlo Pinelli (23.3.1948) in Parise, *Giorgio Federico Ghedini*, pp. 277–78. Reflecting on the opera during its 1972 staging, the critic Abbiati encapsulated Ghedini’s narrative, describing the post-*Baccanti* music as a radical shift (‘drastica virata’) towards lyricism, after experiencing the inhuman effects of the Dionysian force for renewal. Franco Abbiati, ‘Torna dopo ventiquattro anni l’opera di Ghedini «Le Baccanti» alla Scala’, *Corriere Della Sera*, 22 February 1972.

CHAPTER 5

AMERICA IN POST-WAR ITALY: THE CASE OF GHEDINI'S *BILLY BUDD* (1949)

From the Success of the *Concerto dell'Albatro* to the Failure of *Le Baccanti*: A Backstory

In the midst of Italy's liberation, Mario Labroca recounted how a 'fervour for opera surged alongside the Allied advance' from the south to the north, occupied by Nazi-fascists.¹ After the armistice of 1943, Italy was physically divided by foreign occupation and internally torn by civil conflict, as the remnants of fascism collided with the uncertain promise of the Resistance and the Allied forces.² Recognising the pivotal role of music in bolstering both military and civilian morale, the Psychological Warfare Branch of the Allies took charge of the gradual restoration of the Italian radio network. This strategic endeavour reached its peak with the establishment of RAI (Radio Audizioni Italiane) in October 1944, emerging from the ashes of the former EIAR (Ente Italiano per le Audizioni Radiofoniche). The Allies assumed control over the nascent national broadcaster for a year. The British Council promoted the dissemination of Anglo-American culture in Italy, countering German influence by introducing the works of prominent British artists like Benjamin Britten.³ After the war, Italy faced the monumental task of rebuilding on both material and spiritual fronts and found strong support from the Anglo-American victors. A sense of crisis pervaded Italy, intertwined with a yearning for rebirth. Culture emerged as the

¹ Mario Labroca, *L'usignolo di Boboli. (Cinquant'anni di vita musicale italiana)* (Venice: Neri Pozza, 1959), p. 240. Labroca played a significant role in Italian music culture both before and after the war.

² After the fall of the regime and the signing of the armistice on 8 September 1943, Italy remained divided between the Nazi-fascist Italian Social Republic in the north and the Southern Kingdom, backed by the advancement of Anglo-American forces.

³ Peter O. Roderick, 'Rebuilding a Culture: Studies in Italian Music after Fascism, 1943-1953' (doctoral thesis, University of York, 2010) <<https://etheses.whiterose.ac.uk/997/>> [accessed 5 May 2023].

pivotal arena to restore Italy's international reputation and redefine its national identity, confronting both its contentious past and image abroad. In 1946, Italy was readmitted to the ISCM (International Society for Contemporary Music), and during the same year, the Venice festival—originally established under fascism—resumed with a programme primarily focussed on serialism. This musical language, once contentious during the dictatorship, was now embraced as a symbol of both compositional excellence and moral integrity.⁴

In the quest for a new national self-image, the drive towards internationalism and modernisation appeared to mark a definitive departure from fascism, masking any lingering continuities with it—a simplistic narrative that reduced the regime to autarchic and chauvinistic policies.⁵ Despite the framework of international support and openness, Italian musicians were determined to maintain their voice in the process of 'musical reconstruction', as evidenced by the ongoing debates of the time, where aesthetic and ideological reflections intertwined.⁶ Rather than passively submitting to foreign influences—whether economic or cultural—Italian musicians actively pursued their own approach to addressing the pressing issues in post-war musical debate. These issues encompassed the definition of musical language, the role of the composer in society and their relationship with the public. Opera, as a national emblem, stood symbolically at the heart of

⁴ Guido Salvetti, 'I compositori tra "tecniche" ed "estetiche"', in *Italia Millenovecentocinquanta*, ed. by Guido Salvetti, Bianca Maria Antolini and Società italiana di musicologia (Milan: Guerini, 1999), pp. 259–70. In the post-war period, Ghedini himself experimented with the twelve-tone technique, freely incorporating it into some of his works, including the 1945 *Canoni* for violin and cello, as well as subsequent solo concertos for piano (1946) and violin (1947).

⁵ The music critic Fedele D'Amico sarcastically dismissed the simplistic interpretation of a complete break between fascism and the Republic: 'So, according to you, during fascism, there was autarkic closure, and then, after World War II, there was international openness... but let's not be ridiculous!', quoted in Guido Salvetti, 'Alcuni aspetti della vita musicale nel secondo dopoguerra italiano', *Nuova Rivista Musicale Italiana*, 3 (2000), 407–14 (p. 407).

⁶ 'La ricostruzione musicale' was the focal point of discussion in the inaugural issue of the new journal, *Musica* (March 1946), which addressed the requirements of Italian music and its interaction with external aid. Further significant platforms for discourse included the International Music Conferences, which resumed in Florence after the war starting in 1947, and the first International Twelve-Tone Music Congress held in Milan in 1949.

this challenging reconstruction process, receiving special attention for the restoration of theatres damaged by the war in its immediate aftermath.⁷

This post-war period marked the peak of Ghedini's success as a composer, exemplified by his 1945 *Concerto dell'Albatro*.⁸ Composed during the challenging period of displacement and premiered at the First International Music Festival in Rome a few months after the war had finished, this piece remains his most renowned work. Goffredo Petrassi, who heard the *Concerto* in advance, described it as 'a revelation' and noted, 'we were all amazed'.⁹ Scored for violin, cello, piano and orchestra, with the unexpected inclusion of a spoken voice reciting a passage from Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* in its final movement, the *Concerto* sparked a newfound interest, surpassing the usually polite but somewhat muted acknowledgments often given to the composer.¹⁰ According to the critic Sergio Lauricella, who had penned a profile of Ghedini in the PCI (Italian Communist Party) magazine *Rinascita*, this significant shift in the musician's career was ascribed not only to personal factors but also to the broader historical circumstances.¹¹ As Massimo Mila recalled, 'in Turin, [Ghedini's] interactions with figures such as Pavese, Antonicelli

⁷ 'First bread, then La Scala, then housing': the meaningful reopening of La Scala in May 1946, marked by an inaugural concert conducted by Arturo Toscanini, symbolised a rebirth at a time when the city lay in ruins. Roderick, 'Rebuilding a Culture', p. 37.

⁸ From the *Concerto dell'Albatro* onwards, Ghedini's music could rely on top performers and collaboration with the Suvini Zerboni publishing house. Stefano Parise, 'Una svolta stilistica nel secondo dopoguerra. Giorgio Federico Ghedini', in *Italia Millenovecentocinquanta*, pp. 271–82.

⁹ As soon as travel became feasible between northern and southern Italy, Ghedini eagerly anticipated sharing with his colleagues the compositions he had crafted during the isolation of those tumultuous war years. See Petrassi's interview in Stefano Parise, 'Profilo di Giorgio Federico Ghedini' (dissertation, Università degli Studi di Milano, 1992), p. 569.

¹⁰ Ghedini used the renowned first Italian translation of Melville by Cesare Pavese (1942). Before the *Concerto dell'Albatro*, Tullio Pinelli had adapted the same subject into a libretto for an opera by Alberto Bruno Tedeschi, but Ghedini's interpretation took precedence over that of his pupil Bruno Tedeschi. According to Dario De Rosa, pianist of the Trio di Trieste, the sudden appearance of the narrator, played for the first time by Giorgio Strehler, 'jolted the listener from their seat' and empowered Ghedini's detractors to reinforce their claims of intellectualism. De Rosa's interview in Parise, 'Profilo di Giorgio Federico Ghedini', p. 552.

¹¹ Sergio Lauricella, 'Valore di una posizione', *Rinascita*, III.5–6 (1946), 132–34; Andrea Estero, 'Il musicista come intellettuale nel secondo Novecento italiano: tra politica e ideologia', in *La cultura dei musicisti italiani nel Novecento*, ed. by Guido Salvetti and Maria Grazia Sità (Milan: Guerini, 2004), pp. 337–83.

and Tullio Pinelli instilled in him a profound sense of contemporary values and drew him closer to the ideals of the Resistance'.¹²

In the *Concerto dell'Albatro*, the modern sound of Ghedini's music, coupled with the profound symbolism of Melville's text, was received at the time as making the composition strikingly timely: a 'chant of desolate bleakness, wholly ours and contemporary, where everyone discovers echoes of their own personal pain', as the conductor Gianandrea Gavazzeni claimed.¹³ More generally, while the composer himself refrained from expressing any overt stance, Ghedini's recent compositions seemingly met the human and stylistic demands of the post-war period, characterised as an 'era of conciliation' wherein all political forces rallied under the banner of antifascism.¹⁴ Politically and musically unaligned with any specific or explicit previous trends, Ghedini was now regarded by critics and commentators as adept at synthesising and balancing national and international elements, traditional forms—such as that of the concerto grosso—and a modern musical language, artistic exploration and moral commitment. His later work, the *Concerto funebre per Duccio Galimberti* (1948), dedicated to a partisan hero, definitively solidified the composer's association with the so-called myth of the Resistance, portraying Ghedini as a committed witness to the struggle against dictatorship.¹⁵

However, in that very year of 1948, this positive momentum began to falter, with the wounding failure of *Le Baccanti* coinciding with a watershed moment in Italian history. This convergence marked a point of no return for both the composer and the nation. As tensions mounted

¹² Mila in [Ricordo e testimonianze su G. F. Ghedini], in Conservatorio di musica 'Giuseppe Verdi' di Milano, *Annuario dell'anno accademico 1964-65*, ed. by Guglielmo Barblan (Milan: Conservatorio di musica 'Giuseppe Verdi', 1965), pp. 205-40 (p. 236).

¹³ Gianandrea Gavazzeni, 'La musica di Ghedini', *Letteratura*, 33 (1947), 152-7 (p. 157).

¹⁴ Lauricella, 'Valore di una posizione'.

¹⁵ Fernanda Pivano (1917-2009), a friend of Ghedini and a distinguished writer and translator, recalled Ghedini's special attachment to the *Concerto funebre*. She considered the work an emblem of the composer's political commitment: 'believing that the duty of a musician was to write music, Ghedini did not express his ideas in writings and demonstrated his antifascism through this *Concerto*'. See Pivano's interview in Parise, 'Profilo Di Giorgio Federico Ghedini', p. 581.

between the two emergent Cold War blocs on the global stage, Italy underwent a pivotal transformation. With the promulgation of the Constitution, the inaugural election of the new Republic signalled the disintegration of national unity among antifascist parties. The Christian Democrats (DC) emerged victorious over the Popular Front of Communists and Socialists, securing their position as advocates for amicable relations with the United States and administrators of the financial aid from the Marshall Plan for recovery.¹⁶ In an era when taking sides, both politically and aesthetically, became increasingly imperative, Ghedini's musical synthesis now seemed inadequate and out of step with the times. As noted in the preceding chapter, *Le Baccanti*, essentially a wartime composition with a delayed premiere, failed to meet the expectations of critics, sounding either too advanced or simply derivative. After such a crushing disappointment and confronted with the dilemma of pursuing linguistic research or satisfying the urge to communicate with his public, Ghedini appeared to regress towards more moderate positions, marking what is widely regarded as a significant turning point in his career.¹⁷

Against this complex and evolving backdrop, Ghedini's next opera, *Billy Budd*, the focal point of this chapter, emerged as a completely distinct narrative. Before Benjamin Britten's more widely known adaptation of Melville's novella,¹⁸ Ghedini's *Billy Budd* premiered at the International Festival of Contemporary Music in Venice on 8 September 1949, as part of a double bill alongside Kurt Weill's *Mahagonny*.¹⁹ The staging was directed by Corrado Pavolini, a prominent

¹⁶ As Claudio Fogu suggests, Italy emerged as a crucial battleground for Cold War politics, with the PCI notably standing as the most formidable Communist party in the Western sphere. Claudio Fogu, 'Italiani brava gente: The Legacy of Fascist Historical Culture on Italian Politics of Memory', in *The Politics of Memory in Postwar Europe*, ed. by Richard Ned Lebow, Wulf Kansteiner and Claudio Fogu (New York: Duke University Press, 2006), pp. 147–76.

¹⁷ Parise, 'Una svolta stilistica nel secondo dopoguerra. Giorgio Federico Ghedini'.

¹⁸ Britten was aware of Ghedini's previous adaptation of Melville's novella and his librettists, Edward Morgan Forster and Eric Crozier, honoured Quasimodo by presenting him with a copy of the new *Billy Budd* libretto. Benjamin Britten, *Letters from a Life: The Selected Letters of Benjamin Britten 1913–1976, vol. 3: 1946–1951*, ed. by Donald Mitchell, Philip Reed and Mervyn Cooke (London: Faber & Faber, 2011), p. 5.

¹⁹ Dubbed the 'month of art elites', the 1949 Venice festival was inaugurated with a symphonic concert conducted by Arturo Toscanini. The programme also included Berg's *Lulu* and Monteverdi's *L'incoronazione di Poppea*, as well as a rendition of Bartók's quartets. A.M.B., 'Il Settembre musicale veneziano', *Nuova Stampa Sera*, 15 July 1949, p. 3.

intellectual of the former regime, while the set designs were crafted by the Sicilian painter Renato Guttuso (see Figure 5.1). Renowned for his anti-fascist convictions and active involvement in the PCI, Guttuso's distinctive form of realism served as a poignant expression of social and political commitment in the post-war era.²⁰ *Billy Budd* was acclaimed as the 'best example of opera in post-war Italy' and embraced warmly by the festival audience, who undoubtedly displayed greater readiness and receptiveness to innovations compared to the audience at La Scala, which had recently rejected *Le Baccanti*.²¹ Critics generally favoured the opera over Weill's work, perceiving the latter as frivolous and anachronistic within the context of 1949. Despite premiering just one year after *Le Baccanti* and drawing on a literary source by the same American writer who had inspired the *Concerto dell'Albatro*, *Billy Budd* inaugurated a new phase in Ghedini's career, diverging from both his major operatic setback and his most successful work. But was the opera truly a step backward from the progress made thus far? As we will see in what follows, by merging the tradition of Italian opera with Anglo-American culture, *Billy Budd* explored the genre's boundaries and the contradictions of its historical moment.

²⁰ Corrado Pavolini (1898-1980), brother of the fascist leader Alessandro, distinguished himself as a playwright, critic and poet. He made significant contributions to music theatre, collaborating with figures such as Gian Francesco Malipiero and Alfredo Casella. Notably, Pavolini crafted the libretto for *Il deserto tentato*, Casella's notorious operatic celebration of the invasion of Ethiopia. Renato Guttuso (1911-1987) was a friend of Salvatore Quasimodo, the Sicilian poet credited with arranging the libretto for *Billy Budd*. Guttuso, recognised as one of the most dedicated artists of his time, received the Grand Prix in Venice in 1950.

²¹ Giovanni Engely, *Italy Today. The Yearly Review of Italian Contemporary Life* (Florence: Barbèra, 1951), p. 262.



Figure 5.1. Sketch set for the opera's premiere by Renato Guttuso (from the Archive of the Teatro La Fenice).

A Borderline Opera

*Billy canta, non parla:
voce senza parole canta il mare.
L'uomo è lontano qui dove tu canti.*²²

These lines by the Italian Nobel-laureate poet Salvatore Quasimodo encapsulated the essence of Ghedini's *Billy Budd*.²³ A colleague of Ghedini's at the Milan Conservatoire, where he taught Italian literature, Quasimodo crafted the libretto for *Billy Budd*, transforming Melville's novella into a hybrid form, bridging poetry and narrative—a 'scenic oratorio' as originally envisioned.²⁴ Seemingly economising his efforts, Ghedini swiftly composed the opera in just three months. He opted to set only half of the text to music, assigning the rest to the recitation of a narrator (the Corifeo), whose interventions punctuate the eleven musical pieces comprising the opera. This oratorical form represented a departure from the previous approach seen in *Le Baccanti*, which

²² 'Billy sings, he doesn't speak: / voice without words singing the sea. / Humanity is far distant here where you sing'.

²³ Salvatore Quasimodo (1901-1968) was a Sicilian poet associated with the current of hermeticism. He also served as a critic and translator of both classical and modern authors, including Aeschylus, Shakespeare and Neruda.

Quasimodo was awarded a *laurea honoris causa* from the University of Oxford and the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1959, in recognition of his 'ardent' and ever-present classicism. In 1941, the same year Ghedini joined as a professor of composition, Quasimodo commenced his tenure at the Milan Conservatoire, a position he held for over twenty-five years.

²⁴ The text was initially published with the title 'Oratorio per Billy Budd', *Inventario*, 2 (1949), 109-121.

attempted to convert even the narrative segments of the tragedy into music and scenic action, offering a more streamlined alternative. Fatigued from the substantial effort invested and disillusioned by the results, the composer had grown weary of music theatre. He expressed reluctance about participating in the Venice festival with a new opera, stating, 'I am desperately trying to avoid their invitation'.²⁵ It was Ferdinando Ballo, the artistic director of the festival at that time, who commissioned the opera and successfully persuaded Ghedini to overcome his initial hesitance.²⁶

Billy Budd is a succinct one-act piece, where everything appears downscaled compared to *Le Baccanti*, leading the critic Andrea Della Corte to describe it as 'a work of tiny proportions'. The opera's reduced scale neatly aligned it with the category of 'piccola opera', as outlined by the musicologist Emilia Zanetti in a 1951 article.²⁷ *Billy Budd* showcased several attributes typical of this sub-genre, as identified by Zanetti. These include its brevity, minimalist staging with only a few male characters and a chamber ensemble, Ghedini's refined musical style and reference to conventional forms.²⁸ The notion of 'piccola opera', seemingly rooted in Stravinsky's *Histoire du*

²⁵ Quoted from Ghedini's letter to Carlo Pinelli (26.3.1948) Stefano Parise, *Giorgio Federico Ghedini: l'uomo, le opere attraverso le lettere* (Milan: Ricordi, 2003), pp. 277–78.

²⁶ Ferdinando Ballo (1906-1959) was a musician, musicologist, critic and advocate for musical and cultural initiatives, particularly focussing on the promotion of contemporary art. Through endeavours such as 'I Pomeriggi Musicali' or the Rosa & Ballo publishing house, which specialised in translating foreign modern works, Ballo actively contributed to revitalising the cultural scene in post-fascist Italy. During his direction of the Venice festival, several modern operas were staged, including Italian or world premieres of works such as Stravinsky's *The Rake's Progress*, Berg's *Lulu*, Hindemith's *Cardillac*, Weill's *Mabagonny* and Shostakovich's *Lady Macbeth*.

²⁷ Andrea Della Corte, 'Nuova opera di Ghedini per il Festival di Venezia', *La Stampa*, 28 July 1949, p. 3; Emilia Zanetti, 'La polemica delle piccole opere', *Ulysse*, 5.14 (1951), 160–71. Described as a 'younger sister' of opera by Zanetti, the *piccola opera* genre emerged as a companion to and at times a challenger of opera during one of its most crisis-ridden moments. Introduced into the Venice festivals as early as 1932, the *piccola opera* was seen as a potential remedy for the perceived crisis facing opera and found particular success in the comic genre, serving as a nationalistic revival of the Italian *intermezzo buffo*.

²⁸ Before *Billy Budd*, Ghedini had contemplated crafting an opera with a narrative and chamber-like essence that explicitly referenced Monteverdi's model. The envisioned project, *Il tamburo di panno*, suggested by Carlo Pinelli and inspired by a sixteenth-century Japanese Noh play, featured a historian narrating, voices emanating from the orchestra and mimics on stage, resembling 'a sort of *Tancredi and Clorinda*'. Although Ghedini never brought the opera to fruition, Pinelli adapted the concept into the libretto for the eponymous opera by Orazio Fiume (1961-62). See Ghedini's letter to Carlo Pinelli (01.10.1947) in Parise, *Giorgio Federico Ghedini*, p. 275.

soldat (1918), surfaced in the twentieth century as an alternative approach to revitalise a genre grappling with crisis—the ‘pocket-opera solution’, as the artist Alberto Savinio coined it.²⁹

Besides its reduced dimensions, *Billy Budd* exhibited strong thematic and stylistic similarities with the earlier *Concerto dell’Albatro*. This connection went beyond merely drawing from Melville, encompassing the use of a narrative voice and a stripped-back sonic palette: a ‘mystique of subtle sound’, as the critic Giorgio Vigolo described it, where mysticism converged with a pure and rarefied music.³⁰ While effective and successful in the *Concerto*, this approach proved contentious in a theatrical context, as reflected by the mixed critical responses to the opera. Ghedini’s austere musical style stood in stark contrast with what Antonio Gramsci referred to as the ‘melodramatic taste’, a blend of sentimental and rhetorical emphasis that strongly appealed to the public.³¹

Although departing from the technical virtuosity of *Le Baccanti* in favour of a greater lyricism and clarity—what many perceived as an abrupt regression—, *Billy Budd* fell short of fully meeting the criterion of expressiveness, which was still considered pivotal in the tradition of Italian opera and was quintessentially associated with singing and its communicative power. While some critics praised the opera as a ‘very human story’ (A.M.B.) with a ‘special power of emotion’ (Abbiati) and ‘heartfelt poetry’ expressed through its sober and refined music (Nordio), others perceived a certain frigidity, attributed to Ghedini’s ‘perfect command of compositional technique’ (Gatti).³²

It seemed as though his ‘writing suffered from the illusion that he could evade the realm of

²⁹ Alberto Savinio, ‘Per una tascabile soluzione’, *Sipario*, 2.14 (1947), 9.

³⁰ Angiola Maria Bonisconti, ‘Il “Billy Budd” nella musica di Ghedini’ [Programme note], in *XII. Festival Internazionale di Musica Contemporanea* (Venice, September 1949); Parise, ‘Una svolta stilistica nel secondo dopoguerra. Giorgio Federico Ghedini’.

³¹ Antonio Gramsci, *Letteratura e vita nazionale*, ed. by Valentino Gerratana (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1996), p. 124. Building upon the popular essence of opera, Gramsci expanded the melodramatic attitude—something of which he was deeply critical—to encompass diverse collective expressions beyond the realm of theatre in Italy, including funerals, court cases and politics.

³² A.M.B., ‘Il Settembre musicale veneziano’; Franco Abbiati, ‘Il Festival musicale di Venezia. “Billy Budd” di G.F. Ghedini. “Mahagonny” di Kurt Weill’, *Corriere Della Sera*, 9 September 1949, p. 3; Mario Nordio, ‘Due opere, due mondi al festival dei suoni. Giorgio Ghedini: senso poetico. Kurt Weill: frivole stravaganze’, *Gazzettino Sera*, 9 September 1949, p. 2; Guido Maggiorino Gatti, ‘Current Chronicle: Italy’, *The Musical Quarterly*, XXXVI.1 (1950), 124–30 <doi:10.1093/mq/XXXVI.1.124> [accessed 26 July 2022].

expression' (Gatti). Furthermore, critics claimed that the philosophical character of Melville's novella and the 'perilously poetic' quality of Quasimodo's text, along with the employment of a narrator and the episodic structure of the music, undermined the inherent dramatic and representative essence of the operatic genre. On 9 September, the day after the premiere, major Italian newspapers reviewed the two flagship operas—Ghedini's *Billy Budd* and Weill's *Mahagonny*—performed in Venice, coinciding with the news of Richard Strauss's passing, a convergence seemingly signalling the definitive close of an operatic era. Among the commentators, the composer and critic Riccardo Malipiero went so far as to label both works by Ghedini and Weill as 'two non-operas', were it not for the presence of a stage and an orchestra in the pit.³³

Indeed, as Stefano Parise suggests, with *Billy Budd*, Ghedini appears to have definitively 'lost trust in the pure operatic form', or at least, he was rethinking and questioning it.³⁴ Against the backdrop of an ongoing crisis within the genre, where the most recent works admitted into the canon were already a quarter of a century old, Ghedini was clearly here taking a new tack. The adoption of a subject from Anglo-American literature, the short, chamber dimensions, along with the hybrid form with narration, can be seen as new possibilities for contemporary opera that Ghedini was now exploring in *Billy Budd*—and in the subsequent opera, *L'ipocrita felice*, as well. Emerging from a historical moment of transition, when Italy was still rebuilding its cities and identity with strong overseas support, Ghedini's *Billy Budd* blended the lyrical essence of Italian opera—which traditionally lacked hybrid forms such as *Singspiel*—with the English-language spoken narrative. This encounter, echoing Gramsci's reading, paralleled the convergence of nineteenth-century Italian opera with Shakespearean theatre or English popular fiction during

³³ Riccardo Malipiero, 'Due opere nuove a Venezia. "Mahagonny" di Kurt Weill e "Billy Budd" di Ghedini.', *Il Popolo*, 9 September 1949, p. 3.

³⁴ Parise, 'Una svolta stilistica nel secondo dopoguerra. Giorgio Federico Ghedini'.

another critical juncture in Italian history—the *Risorgimento*—when the nation ardently pursued unity and independence.³⁵ Just as Verdi’s operas played a pivotal role in introducing Shakespeare’s works to nineteenth-century Italy and fostered a sense of national identity, similarly, in the post-war period, opera emerged as a means of introducing foreign culture to Italy and prompting a reconsideration of that identity.

With its transnational character, *Billy Budd* touched on some of the most pressing issues of its time: the intricate relationship between America and post-war Italy, the widening gap between highbrow and lowbrow art, and a profound reassessment of opera, beginning with the interplay between music and text at its heart. Staging Melville in post-war Italy posed a provocative challenge on both operatic and ideological fronts, revealing distinct nuances when compared to the 1945 *Albatro*. In what follows, I will delve deeper into the thorny identity and topicality of Ghedini’s *Billy Budd* in 1949, beginning with an exploration of the chosen subject matter.

Drawing on historical insights provided by Gramsci, Theodor W. Adorno and Fedele D’Amico regarding opera as a socially determined genre based on singing, I will investigate the supposedly ‘un-operatic’ elements of the work, such as its literary text, its ‘anti-theatrical’ form and the reserved and ‘aristocratic’ quality of its music.³⁶ Featuring a protagonist unable to communicate through singing, *Billy Budd*—both in form and content—emerged as a poignant reflection on the crisis within opera and history at large, underscoring the increasingly challenging capacity for human beings to effectively communicate with each another.

³⁵ Gramsci, *Letteratura e vita nazionale*, pp. 125-27. According to the philosopher, in the nineteenth century, Italian opera served as an expression of popular culture with an international scope, addressing the shortcomings of literature and playing a role akin to the tradition of the national-popular novel in English or French contexts.

³⁶ Theodor W. Adorno, ‘Bourgeois Opera’, in *Sound Figures*, trans. by Rodney Livingstone (Stanford University Press, 1999), pp. 15-28.

Staging Melville

Billy Budd, Sailor. An Inside Narrative was the last and unfinished novella by the American writer, published posthumously in 1924. Set aboard the *Indomitable*, a flagship of the British navy, the story unfolds in the late eighteenth century, amid the turmoil of forced conscriptions and mutinies fuelled by the disruptive currents of the French Revolution. Billy is a young foretopman with just one flaw: his stutter. He resembles a Greek ephebe, possessing such beauty and goodness that he incites envy in Claggart, the master at arms. His wickedness is as gratuitous and innate as Billy's naivety.³⁷ Earthly justice can only be restored with the annihilation of both in a destructive chain of events: falsely accused of treason by the jealous master at arms, Billy kills him out of the inability to articulate his innocence, thus compelling Captain Vere to pronounce his death sentence according to martial law.³⁸

The tale of Melville's stammering sailor had resonances with the Italian post-war situation. Just as in *Moby Dick*, the encyclopaedic and allegorical complexity of Melville's prose unveils a deeper layer of meaning. Within the confines of a ship at the mercy of the ocean, human events transcend mere narrative, evolving into an existential metaphor that explores a spectrum of ethical themes. The mystery of malice, the uncertain divide between innocence and guilt, the violent nature of man and the destructive power of words, the cost of civilisation at the expense of naivety, the iniquity of human justice and the terrible crimes it could justify—all these were open issues both in Melville's novella and in the aftermath of the war.³⁹ In other words, Billy Budd's story reopened collective wounds from recent experiences and echoed lingering

³⁷ Quasimodo defined it as *depravazione naturale* in a Puritan sense, aligning with the Protestant reading of Christianity. Similar to Ahab in *Moby Dick*, Claggart is compelled to pursue his obsession, ultimately leading to his own downfall.

³⁸ In Quasimodo's libretto, Captain Vere explicitly states: 'We owe no obedience to nature: we accept orders when wars break out'. Salvatore Quasimodo, *Billy Budd. Un atto dal racconto di H. Melville* (Milan: Edizioni Suvini Zerboni, 1949), p. 15.

³⁹ The exploration of human nature, torn between an intrinsic tendency towards violence and a longing for redemption, was a pervasive theme in novels centred around war and resistance, beginning with Elio Vittorini's *Uomini e no* (1944) and Italo Calvino's *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno* (1947).

existential questions even after the war had ended. The Manichean dichotomy between good and evil—potentially resonating in a highly polarised political context such as the post-war era—was problematised in Melville’s novella. Who bears the greatest responsibility for the tragedy: Claggart’s envy, Billy’s violence, or Captain Vere’s pursuit of justice? The narrative catalysed a profound reconsideration of humanity’s unsettling encounter with the destructive force of hatred and the irrational use of violence, ultimately leading to the tragic annihilation of beauty. Britten’s later adaptation confirmed the timeliness of Melville’s novella, underscoring the artists’ dedication to confronting the pervasive sense of crisis in the post-war period. Meanwhile, society at large sought to evade and suppress the recent traumatic past.⁴⁰

In the Italian context, the relevance of *Billy Budd* acquired distinct ideological resonances, slightly diverging from those associated with the reference to Melville’s *Moby Dick* in the 1945 *Concerto*—perhaps a reflection of shifting political dynamics. Ghedini’s opera emerged at a pivotal juncture, bridging the decline of the ‘American myth’ within Italian literature with the pervasive Americanization in post-war Italian society, driven by the political, economic and cultural influence of the US.⁴¹ The attitudes of Italians towards British and American models had consistently been controversial and ambivalent, fluctuating between fascination and criticism. This duality became more pronounced, particularly with the progressive expansion of American capitalism from the 1920s onwards. On the one hand, America beckoned as a beacon of freedom, wealth and modernity, drawing millions of migrants from Italy at the turn of the twentieth century. ‘The phenomenon of migration has given rise to an ideology’, Gramsci

⁴⁰ Massimo Bagicalupo, ‘Billy Budd fra poesia e musica (1942-1949)’, in *Le traduzioni italiane di Herman Melville e Gertrude Stein*, ed. by Sergio Perosa (Venice: Istituto Veneto di Scienze, Lettere ed Arti, 1997), pp. 89–106. The post-war collision between the enduring trauma of recent events and the nascent affluent society, forgetful and alienated, gave rise to artistic movements like the so-called ‘theatre of the absurd’. This theatrical expression encapsulated the paradoxes, anxieties and communication breakdowns inherent in the era—a manifestation of complete distrust in rationality.

⁴¹ Contemplate the song *Tu vuoi fà l'americano* by Renato Carosone from 1956, where the parody lies in Italians mimicking American attitudes superficially without fundamentally altering their essence.

remarked.⁴² On the other hand, nationalistic fears and moral condemnation arose concerning the perceived cultural invasion, as well as accusations of materialism, coarseness, hedonism and the lack of traditions and ideals among Americans.⁴³ Americanism and anti-Americanism had always run in parallel in Italy, even during fascism. In its early stages, the regime correlated its futurist symbols of youthfulness and machinery with the American image, intending to moderate technological excesses in a 'humanistic Latin manner'.⁴⁴ America could embody the fascist compromise between European legacy and progress.⁴⁵ By the late thirties, as international relations deteriorated and national consensus waned, the British emerged as the foremost political foe,⁴⁶ while America posed a significant cultural challenge on two fronts: first, through the popular success of American consumer products, especially cinema;⁴⁷ and secondly, among

⁴² Gramsci, *Letteratura e vita nazionale*, p. 254.

⁴³ For discussions of the influence and reception of Anglo-American culture and literature in Italy, see: Emilio Franzina, 'L'America', in *I luoghi della memoria. Simboli e miti dell'Italia unita*, ed. by Mario Isnenghi (Rome: Laterza, 1996), pp. 329–60; Saverio Ieva, 'La cultura americana nella critica di Pavese. Mito positivo, mito negativo', *Italies. Littérature - Civilisation - Société*, 5 (2001), 155–66 <<https://doi.org/10.4000/italies.2045>> [accessed 25 July 2022]; Giovanni Sciola, 'L'immagine dei nemici. L'America e gli Americani nella propaganda italiana della Seconda guerra mondiale', *Italies. Littérature - Civilisation - Société*, 5 (2001), 115–34 <<https://doi.org/10.4000/italies.2116>> [accessed 25 July 2022]; Sara Sullam, 'Le traduzioni di letteratura inglese in Italia dal 1943 ai primi anni Sessanta. Una ricognizione preliminare', *ENTHYMEMA*, 7 (2012), 131–50 <<https://doi.org/10.13130/2037-2426/2723>> [accessed 1 January 2022]; Tiziano Bonazzi, 'Americanismo e antiamericanismo', in *Enciclopedia Italiana* [online] <[https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/americanismo-e-antiamericanismo_\(Enciclopedia-Italiana\)](https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/americanismo-e-antiamericanismo_(Enciclopedia-Italiana))> [accessed 26 July 2022]; Virginia Pulcini, 'The English Language and Anglo-American Culture in Twentieth-Century Italy', in *Italy and the USA: Cultural Change through Language and Narrative*, ed. by Guido Bonsaver, Alessandro Carlucci and Matthew Reza, (Cambridge: Legenda, 2019), pp. 31–46; *Chi stramalediva gli inglesi: la diffusione della letteratura inglese e americana in Italia tra le due guerre*, ed. by Arturo Cattaneo (Milan: Vita e Pensiero, 2007).

⁴⁴ The aviator Italo Balbo embodied the fascist balance between man and machine. Emilio Gentile, 'Impending Modernity: Fascism and the Ambivalent Image of the United States', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 28.1 (1993), 7–29; Anna Maria Torriglia, *Broken Time, Fragmented Space: A Cultural Map of Postwar Italy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002).

⁴⁵ Charles L. Leavitt, "'An Entirely New Land'?: Italy's Post-War Culture and Its Fascist Past', *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 21.1 (2016), 4–18 <[doi:10.1080/1354571X.2016.1112060](https://doi.org/10.1080/1354571X.2016.1112060)> [accessed 7 September 2023].

⁴⁶ In the closing years of the war, 'Dio stramaledica gli inglesi' (God damn the English) became a prevalent motto. A reciprocal prejudice, or at least suspicion, also emerged from *Billy Budd's* reception. One article reported the anger of two Englishmen in the audience, who viewed the opera solely as an 'attack on the glorious navy of England'. Bequadro, 'Gatto in scena, ciuco in platea', *Corriere d'informazione*, 23 September 1949, p. 4.

⁴⁷ As depicted in Carlo Levi's *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli* (1945), the simulacra in the backward south of Lucania was the religious representation of the Virgin Mary and the American embodiment of Roosevelt. Faced with a still fragile national identity and a limited sense of the state, America served as a point of reference for Italian peasants, representing the ideal realm of the gigantic, the extraordinary and the seemingly unattainable.

certain intellectuals, through the discovery of American literature from an anti-fascist perspective.⁴⁸

American classics, including Melville's works, paradoxically began circulating in Italy during the years of cultural protectionism and fascist censorship. This unexpected dissemination was facilitated by Italian writers like Cesare Pavese, Eugenio Montale and Elio Vittorini. They took on the task of translating these works, perceiving democratic America as a remedy for the totalitarianism sweeping across Europe.⁴⁹ The Melville quotation in the *Concerto dell'Albatro* seamlessly integrated into this ideological framework of cultural and militant resistance. As recounted by Fernanda Pivano, a prominent translator of American literature during that era and a key collaborator with Ghedini on Melville's novel, 'American literature symbolised, for us during that period, a mode of political, cultural, psychological and moral resistance against fascism (...) Ghedini stood with us, sharing this sentiment'.⁵⁰

During the Liberation, however, the firsthand encounter with Allied troops depicted America in a problematic light, gradually eroding the utopian ideals of freedom and dissent that antifascists had previously associated with it.⁵¹ In the post-war era, as the once-dreamed 'American way of life' began to permeate Italian society in terms of well-being and consumerism, the American

⁴⁸ Consider *Americana*, the anthology of Italian translations curated by Vittorini, swiftly censored by the regime in 1941. According to the music critic Edward Neill, Ghedini's personal library was rich with a diverse selection of American literary works. Parise, 'Profilo di Giorgio Federico Ghedini', p. 563.

⁴⁹ Italian writers deeply admired the so-called American 'mystical realism', characterised by a literary approach to philosophy that begins with the most tangible and mundane aspects of reality, imbuing the realm of the realistic with metaphysical depth. Ieva, 'La cultura americana nella critica di Pavese',

⁵⁰ Quoted from Pivano's interview in Parise, 'Profilo di Giorgio Federico Ghedini', p. 581. Pivano's introduction to American literature came through Cesare Pavese, her mentor at the Liceo d'Azeglio in Turin. Her translations, such as of Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*, implied an antifascist stance, garnering strong opposition from the regime. In the post-war period, reflecting the widespread interest among Italian musicians in Anglo-American literature, her translation of Edgar Lee Master's *Spoon River Anthology* was used by Mario Peragallo for his work, *La collina*, premiered at the 1947 Venice festival. As a pianist and music critic, Pivano maintained a lifelong friendship with Ghedini, sharing the same cultural milieu in Turin and continuing to meet regularly during his later years in Milan.

⁵¹ Consider Roberto Rossellini's neorealist film *Paisà* (1946) for insights into the contentious presence of Americans in Italy and the challenges inherent in communicating with the local population.

myth soured for many Italian intellectuals. Aligned with the Left in opposition to capitalism, mass culture and commodification, intellectuals criticised the American model once hailed as a pinnacle of aspiration.⁵² Capturing this disillusionment, Pavese wrote in his last novel, *La luna e i falò* (1950), that ‘even America ended up in the sea, making it futile to set sail once more’.⁵³ The decline of the American myth coincided with a pervasive sense of pessimism, fostering a collective turn towards spirituality within the realms of culture and art. In this climate, as Salvetti argues regarding Ghedini’s *Concerto funebre*, the resurgence of sacred forms and religious themes could also be susceptible to ambiguous interpretations. It might be seen as a response to the ‘moral upheaval left by the war’ or as a sign of the ‘consolidation of the Catholic regime’ after 1948 election.⁵⁴

Compared to the *Concerto dell’Albatro*, *Billy Budd* was situated within a different yet equally contradictory context concerning the ideological interplay between Italy and Melville’s America. In the post-war era, a complex tapestry of cultural and political dynamics unfolded, encompassing official political Atlanticism following Italy’s NATO accession on 4 May 1949, the growing Americanisation of Italian society, moral concerns voiced by the Catholic Church regarding American customs’ freedom and ideological condemnation from the Italian intelligentsia. With the escalating hostilities of the international scene and the onset of the Cold War from 1947 onwards, music and culture at large became increasingly entrenched in a highly politicised framework. The choice of Melville’s work stood at the intersection of paying homage to the prevailing official culture and presenting an inquiry into the inherent value of victory itself.

⁵² A precise and self-aware depiction of this shift in ideological perspective is articulated by Cesare Pavese in ‘Ieri e oggi’, *L’Unità*, 3 August 1947.

⁵³ Cesare Pavese, *La luna e i falò*, ed. by Wu Ming (Turin: Einaudi, 2020), p. 12.

⁵⁴ Salvetti, ‘I compositori tra “tecniche” ed “estetiche”’, p. 262.

In the wake of the Liberation, Ghedini's disillusioned observation resonated deeply: 'the leader may have changed, but the melody remains unchanged. There is indeed a poignant sense of shame in being Italian'.⁵⁵ Similarly, the multitude of biblical images woven into the novella (such as Adam's innocence, Isaac's sacrifice and Christ on the cross) aptly complemented the contemporary religious resurgence and its ambiguous political significance in post-1948 Italy.⁵⁶ The theme of corrupting modernity, arising from the juxtaposition of Billy's innate goodness and the injustices of human laws, called into question the 'cruel neon-lit optimism' of American society, as described by Pavese.⁵⁷ *Billy Budd* was a highbrow cultural import from America, distinct from what Italians might dismissively label as 'americanata'. This term typically refers to stereotypical consumer products of American popularism, marked by their naive grandiosity and ridiculous exhibitionism, reminiscent of many Hollywood films. Building on Adorno's analogy between opera and cinema and their comparable socio-cultural significance, the flamboyant facet of Americanism might be seen as a contemporary manifestation of Gramscian 'melodramatic taste'—a notion that *Billy Budd* directly confronted.⁵⁸

Operatic and Human Failure

The renunciation of 'melodramatic taste' in *Billy Budd* extended beyond its thematic content to its very form, deliberately steering clear of the traditional operatic convention that relies on audience-pleasing singing above all. Indeed, as we will explore in the forthcoming section, beyond its intricate ties to the Italian context, the choice of Melville's narrative implied a timely reconsideration of opera's conventions, beginning with the libretto and the music, and their

⁵⁵ 'Morale: il capobanda è cambiato ma la sonata è sempre quella. C'è veramente da vergognarsi di essere italiani', from Ghedini's letter to Paolo Canonica (27.5.1945), in Parise, *Giorgio Federico Ghedini*, p. 252.

⁵⁶ Bagicalupo, 'Billy Budd fra poesia e musica (1942-1949)'.

⁵⁷ Pavese, 'Ieri e oggi'. The characterisation of modernity as degeneration was also a key aspect of Anti-Americanism.

⁵⁸ Adorno, 'Bourgeois Opera'. The musicologist drew compelling parallels between opera, a quintessentially bourgeois art form, and cinema. This comparison was particularly evident in their invention ex nihilo, devoid of historical continuity with preceding forms, and in their function of disseminating cultural heritage to the masses.

mutual relationship. Compared to Britten's opera of the same name, Ghedini's Italian rendition of *Billy Budd* seemed to convey a resigned contemplation of a state of crisis more than offering a solution. Taking into account Fedele D'Amico's insights into the power of singing in the operatic genre (crucial, in turn, to opera's social power), and that it had lost primacy on precisely this front to newly emerging genres of popular song. Ghedini's work might be viewed as an embodiment of this crisis—a phenomenon that extends beyond the musical sphere into the social domain. In his exploration of opera's crisis, D'Amico emphasised the role of the human voice as a bridge between individuals and the contemporary moment. He portrayed singing as the most direct and immediate form of communication, contingent upon a social understanding among people. Therefore, according to the critic, opera's crisis was symptomatic of a larger societal unrest, marked by a decline in values and a growing inability for interpersonal communication. Operatic singing, formerly an effective medium for engaging with contemporary society, had lost ground to newly commercialised popular songs, which D'Amico saw as the true successors of opera—rather than cinema—in satisfying the urge to express the present through singing. In contemporary operas, as the critic stressed, singing shifted into being a mere musical object rather than a means of communication. In the absence of a reliable understanding with the interlocutor, composers grew cautious of immediate vocal expansiveness, considering it hypocritical and rhetorical. Their operas displayed an excess of refinement and compositional dedication, somewhat dampening their ability to directly connect with the audience.⁵⁹ Something similar can be discerned in Ghedini's *Billy Budd*.

The story, as mentioned above, is fragmented into eleven brief scenes—described as 'realistic, symbolic, transcendent' by Della Corte—set to music and interspersed with the narrator's

⁵⁹ Fedele D'Amico, 'In che senso la crisi dell'opera', *La Rassegna Musicale*, XXXII (1962), 111–16; Fedele D'Amico, 'Il compositore moderno e il linguaggio musicale', in *Atti del Quinto Congresso di Musica* (Florence: Barbèra, 1948), pp. 11–24.

interventions.⁶⁰ Quasimodo distilled Melville's novella into a concise poetic text, encapsulating the events within the Aristotelian unities of time (spanning one ideal day), place (the *Indomitable*) and action (centred around Billy Budd's gesture). This approach seemingly evoked the structure of an ancient classical tragedy.⁶¹ United by mutual esteem and artistic understanding, Ghedini appreciated the poet's ability to maintain the text's elevated tone, avoiding the temptation of superficial and flashy effects. In his words: 'the scarcity of good librettos is disheartening; it is rare to find a "Quasimodo", capable of reducing a complex subject like *Billy Budd*. Tackling such a frightening tragedy demanded a high-quality poem to prevent trivialising its depth into a mere *giallo*'.⁶² This term, signifying the Italian equivalent of the crime novel, encapsulated the emblem of lowbrow imports from American literature, perceived as infiltrating the operatic genre through the successful works of Gian Carlo Menotti. Quasimodo's touch transforms the narrative of Billy Budd into an abstract myth, a legend where nothing occurs because everything has already taken place. Dialogue is deliberately minimised, limiting the opportunities for communication among the characters.⁶³ The Corifeo explains, comments and acts as an intermediary between the 'inside narrative' and its philosophical abstraction, much like the chorus. The characters are barely sketched, reduced to archetypes, with only two solo pieces to balance the Manichean clash between Claggart's depravity ('Qui la civetta non chiama') and Billy's beauty ('Lontana è Molly

⁶⁰ Della Corte, 'Nuova opera di Ghedini per il Festival di Venezia'.

⁶¹ We encounter the prologue of the Coryphaeus, the chorus's parodos and exodus in a commatic style (meaning, in dialogue with the protagonist), followed by a series of solo episodes and *stasimi*.

⁶² Ghedini's words in 'Incontro con Ghedini', *Gazzetta del Popolo*, 19 November 1959. According to Ghedini, Menotti's operas epitomised the artistic and 'moral' decline of the genre, flirting with the captivating model of *gialli*. This is how he commented on *The Medium*: 'warm public success, negligible music, a *giallo*-like subject cast with great ability [...] engaging on the first evening, but resulting in satiety by the second, almost intolerance by the third'. Cited from Ghedini's letter to Carlo Pinelli (29.01.1951) in Parise, *Giorgio Federico Ghedini*, pp. 292–93. For insights into how the Italian reception of detective stories intersects with operas, such as Britten's *The Turn of the Screw*, see Harriet Boyd-Bennett, *Opera in Postwar Venice: Cultural Politics and the Avant-Garde* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp. 91–118.

⁶³ This tendency, typical of epic theatre, gains enhanced significance here in the opera's reflection on the potential for interpersonal communication among men.

Bristol'). The libretto's symbolic, highly lyrical and anti-narrative nature nullifies the dramatic progression of the plot and freezes its action in a static contemplation.

Critics scrutinised Quasimodo's hermetic style, known for its stark minimalism, elusiveness and musicality. With the waning of the idealist division between culture and politics in the post-war aesthetic discourse, hermeticism seemed inadequate to meet the era's call for engagement, criticised as excessively formalistic, enigmatic and ultimately passive.⁶⁴ Some critics thus faulted Quasimodo's libretto for deviating from Melville's essence towards a more aestheticizing approach, alongside doubts about its suitability for operatic music.⁶⁵ The sophisticated and non-theatrical quality of the text was indeed equally complemented by Ghedini's music, evident right from the opera's outset. The ballad 'Billy in the Darbies', the original core of Melville's novel, was recast by Quasimodo in a few choral lines that cyclically enclose the entire opera. Ghedini's music seamlessly embraced the structure and tone of the text, employing austere and rarefied sounds akin to chamber music, according to what Bonisconti defined as the 'legge del poco'—the principle of restraint. In the opening *Andante calmo*, the dramatic stillness is portrayed by the static motion of a harmonic ostinato played by the muted strings (*pp*), advancing through colouristic chord combinations instead of conventional functional progressions (Example 5.1). Set against the lulling backdrop of a 6/8 metre, a G major perfect triad undergoes subtle distortions and transformations as the inner voices move across four bars. It then returns to its original state, deliberately leaving dissonances unresolved, evoking a somewhat 'Tristanesque' atmosphere, as reported by some critics.⁶⁶ Upon this backdrop, a madrigal chorus featuring five male solo voices intones the verses of the ballad, interweaving with the solo instruments through *hoquetus*. The

⁶⁴ Torriglia, *Broken Time, Fragmented Space*, p. 4.

⁶⁵ Massimo Mila, 'Al Festival musicale di Venezia. Un atto di Ghedini dal Billy Budd di Melville', *L'Unità*, 9 September 1949, p. 3. Conversely, as Montale articulated in his 1949 article, this kind of loose adaptation could be viewed through the lens of 'ingenious infidelities'. Eugenio Montale, 'Buon anno senza perle ai traduttori mal pagati!', *Corriere d'informazione*, 29 December 1949. More broadly, Quasimodo's *Liriche Greche* found success in the musical compositions of Luigi Dallapiccola and Goffredo Petrassi.

⁶⁶ Abbiati, 'Il Festival musicale di Venezia'; Mila, 'Al Festival musicale di Venezia'.

melodic movement is quite simple, rhythmically regular and arpeggio-like—in a manner reminiscent of Beethoven or Bellini. The voices unite on the final hendecasyllable ('L'uomo è lontano qui dove tu canti'), precisely marking the golden ratio within this opening piece.

I Andante calmo ♩ = 60

MARINAI
TENORE I

pp

Non po-te-va par - la - re co-me un uo - mo,

(Archi sord.)

pp e sempre calmissimo

sempre legato

sempre dolciss.

(Fg.)

Example 5.1. Giorgio Federico Ghedini, *Billy Budd. Un atto di Salvatore Quasimodo* [vocal score] (Milan: Edizioni Suvini Zerboni, 1949), p. 7

This ballad resurfaces at the end of the opera, expanding into an antiphonal form, with interjections from both the narrator and Billy Budd himself. Critics at the premiere frequently mentioned and praised these outer lyrical sections, yet they voiced substantial concerns about the opera's dramatic core.⁶⁷ The use of a narrator seemed like as an improper and simplistic solution—a mere pretext that exempted the music from fully engaging with and developing the drama.⁶⁸ Ghedini faced accusations of oversimplifying Melville's narrative and neglecting the unfolding action. His music was often perceived as mere commentary, functioning almost like stage music (as evidenced in the third number, *Scozzese*), or contributing primarily to descriptive effects. This was particularly noticeable in the fifth scene, comprised solely of a few bars of solo percussion to depict a cannonade (see Example 5.2). Here, the operatic trope of the battle was

⁶⁷ According to Gatti and Dal Fabbro, these external pieces were effective precisely because they did not 'deal with dramatic content'. Gatti, 'Current Chronicle: Italy'; Beniamino Dal Fabbro, 'Al Festival musicale di Venezia. Tuoni e cannonate nel Billy Budd di Ghedini', *Milano Sera*, 9 September 1949.

⁶⁸ Mila, 'Al Festival musicale di Venezia'; Mario Rinaldi, 'Il Festival musicale di Venezia. "Billy Budd" di Ghedini e "Mahagonny" di Kurt Weill', *Il Messaggero di Roma*, 9 September 1949, p. 3; Gatti, 'Current Chronicle: Italy'.

stripped of all decorative elements and special effects, offering a raw and unembellished portrayal.⁶⁹ Essentially, Ghedini's work sounded more like incidental music, potentially failing to uphold a fundamental principle of opera: that the music should autonomously develop characters and actions on its own terms.

V Lo stesso tempo del pezzo n° IV (♩ = 40) a pag. 30

[La scena si illumina. Si odono in lontananza colpi di cannone]

Adagio (♩ = 40)

G. Cassa

Timp.

G. Cassa sul palcoscenico

Capit. Vere

[Il Capitano Vere esce dalla sua cabina con un binocolo e guarda sul mare]

Example 5.2. Giorgio Federico Ghedini, *Billy Budd. Un atto di Salvatore Quasimodo* [vocal score] (Milan: Edizioni Suvini Zerboni, 1949), p. 41

In an even more un-operatic way, Ghedini's *Billy Budd* delved into a nuanced exploration of singing as both a medium and the very essence of opera. According to D'Amico, singing defines the genre far more profoundly than mere integration of music and theatre.⁷⁰ The incorporation of a narrative voice in *Billy Budd* undermined the distinctiveness of Italian opera, traditionally centred on pure singing, and edged towards hybrid forms from foreign traditions such as *Singspiel*, ballad opera or *opéra comique*. To some, this element rendered *Billy Budd* a somewhat 'defeatist' opera, as noted by Ugolini. Conversely, critics like Angiola Bonisconti, an enthusiast of Ghedini's music, viewed the inclusion of a reciting voice as an additional avenue for the composer to

⁶⁹ Rinaldi, 'Il Festival musicale di Venezia'; Alessandro Vardàneg, 'Billy Budd a Venezia applaudito non soddisfa. Mahagonny accolto freddamente dal pubblico', *L'avvenire d'Italia*, 9 September 1949. Conversely, critics like Abbiati, known for moderate criticism, appreciated the music's alignment with the drama, interpreting each episode of the text through eclectic musical possibilities.

⁷⁰ D'Amico, 'In che senso la crisi dell'opera'.

enhance his exploration of timbre. This echoed Ghedini's previous *Concerto dell'Albatro*, where the speaking voice introduced only in the final movement, was assimilated primarily as sound rather than for its content.⁷¹ In terms of vocal performances, the opera stood out for its lack of female roles. The vocal style displayed a remarkable versatility, crafted to capture the psychological subtleties of the characters, as commended by Ugolini. This spanned a spectrum from madrigalian polyphony to the aphasia of the stuttering Billy, and from Vere's prosaic *declamato* to Claggart's fragmented singing. As mentioned earlier, 'Lontana è Molly Bristol' represented the only moment in the opera where the protagonist engaged in conventional singing. Against a backdrop of contrapuntal interplay, Billy unveiled his nocturnal song, characterised by dark and pianissimo tones, evoking an intimate and nostalgic ambiance. The song, addressed to the woman desired by all sailors, was imbued with existential concerns.⁷² In this piece, as Emanuele Franceschetti suggests in his analysis, *Billy Budd* pushed the boundaries further by challenging operatic singing as a mode of communication within the theatrical frame. The protagonist, struggling with a stutter, found himself unable to communicate 'operatically', and his sole aria fell into the realm of stage music, ultimately blurring the true essence of Italian opera.⁷³

Beginning from the same source material, it is fascinating to compare Ghedini's opera with Britten's later *Billy Budd*. The significant disparities between the Italian and British versions of *Billy Budd* not only unveiled diverse interpretations of Melville's text, but also presented distinct approaches for navigating the transnational challenges that opera was facing. In their operatic

⁷¹ Bonisconti, 'Il "Billy Budd" nella musica di Ghedini'. As seen, the timbral quality emerges as a notable and often praised aspect in Ghedini's music. Consider expressions like 'demone sonoro' coined by Gavazzeni in reference to the composer, or Piero Santi's definition of Ghedini's operatic production as 'teatro timbrico'.

⁷² The significance of the female character, Molly Bristol, in Quasimodo's libretto served to counter any insinuations of homosexuality, especially from a staunch Catholic perspective; in Italy, any unconventional behaviour was seen as a corrupting American influence. Originally conceived as a choreographic element, Molly Bristol's role revolves around her absence, serving as a fixed idea to gauge man's solitude and his lost happiness.

⁷³ Emanuele Franceschetti, '«Un senso d'eccitato tramonto». Il teatro musicale in Italia nel secondo dopoguerra (1945-1961)' (doctoral thesis, Sapienza Università di Roma, 2021). It is worth noting how, akin to Moraima's onstage singing in *Re Hassan*, these mimetic moments gain heightened prominence in Ghedini's works.

rendition of Melville's novella, Britten and his librettists (Edward M. Forster and Eric Crozier) exuded a grandeur akin to *grand opéra*, coupled with a heightened dynamism that bordered on the cinematic.⁷⁴ The characters were portrayed in a down-to-earth manner, lacking the legendary quality present in Quasimodo's text. Rather than portraying the dichotomy of good versus evil, Britten's *Billy Budd* delved deeper into themes of corrupted innocence and redemption, with Captain Vere's character occupying a pivotal role in the narrative arc. Everything was depicted directly on stage with remarkable effectiveness. Britten's virtuosity and eclecticism invigorated traditional forms such as duets and *concertati*, resulting in captivating music that starkly contrasted with Ghedini's 'unabashedly monotonous' style.⁷⁵ Britten's heightened realism and theatricality, which fostered a more accessible and immediate connection with the audience, were aligned with his intention to ignite social controversy and revitalise the melodramatic form—an endeavour that has indeed stood the test of time.

Conversely, the abstract and epic form embraced in Quasimodo and Ghedini's adaptation transformed Melville's narrative into a hermetic existential metaphor, casting doubt on the very essence of opera as an emblem of Italian culture. The music and text appeared merely juxtaposed, without merging with each other, in line with the dissociative approach typical of modernist theatre.⁷⁶ In a wider perspective, Ghedini's *Billy Budd* echoed the anti-theatrical tendencies of modernism, eschewing the 'melodramatic taste' characterised by rhetorical emphasis and

⁷⁴ Forster, in particular, had a passion for grand opera and played a pivotal role in accentuating the theme of love with its homosexual undertones in *Billy Budd*. Mervyn Cooke, 'Britten's Billy Budd: Melville as Opera Libretto', in *Billy Budd*, ed. by Mervyn Cooke and Philip Reed (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 27–41.

⁷⁵ Malipiero, 'Due opere nuove a Venezia'. The stark stylistic differences between Britten and Ghedini become apparent when analysing the combat scenes in their operas. However, even in the case of Britten's *Billy Budd*, discontent persisted among critics during its Italian premiere at the 1965 Maggio Musicale. They accused his music of hedonism, revealing a sense of disorientation in establishing a reliable canon for opera amidst its ongoing crisis. Antonio Cirignano, 'Il teatro nel secondo dopoguerra', in *Musica in scena. Storia dello spettacolo musicale*, 6 vols, ed. by Alberto Basso (Turin: UTET, 1995), II, pp. 487–533.

⁷⁶ Massimiliano Locanto, 'Challenges to Realism and Tradition: Stravinsky's Modernist Theatre', in *Stravinsky in Context*, ed. by Graham Griffiths (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), pp. 153–61. In the realm of modernist influence, Ghedini's opera could be seen as a fitting complement to Weill's work within the same programme.

flamboyance. The opera also missed what Adorno identified as the genre's delicate balance between the prestige of high art and its popular appeal.⁷⁷ The anti-rhetorical bareness of Ghedini's music and its detachment from the dramatic components hindered the audience's emotional involvement. As the composer himself stated, 'in summary, the public tends to be distant from certain forms of *aristocratic* art, and in *Billy Budd* there is an excess of aristocracy. The subject is too hermetic and the music too bare of rhetoric. In short, the melodramatic aspect is missing'.⁷⁸

Drawing some conclusions, we can see how the encounter with Melville's narrative in *Billy Budd* prompted interrelated reflections that touched upon both the historical moment and the domain of opera. Arising from what Abbiati labelled as a 'healthy fusion of music and its forms with the text and its meanings',⁷⁹ Ghedini's 'non-opera', characterised by its unconventional blend of music and narration, and being predominantly static, can be interpreted as a resigned contemplation on both humanity and opera in the post-war era.⁸⁰ Billy's stuttering served as both an auditory and allegorical cue. 'In a time of sparse reasons to sing', as Adorno observed, Billy's inability to sing in an 'operatic' manner arose as a poignant denunciation of both human incommunicability and operatic failure. In contrast to Arnold Schoenberg's *Moses und Aron*, where singing symbolised earthly corruption, the dichotomy of song and speech in *Billy Budd* encapsulated the struggle between a primal purity and the corrosive influence of civilisation.

⁷⁷ Starting from Barish's *Anti-theatrical Prejudice*, the theatrical is commonly conceived as the expressive, imitative, deceptive and spectacular—an art form tailored for an audience. In this regard, consider also Herbert Lindenberger, 'Anti-Theatricality in Twentieth-Century Opera', *Modern Drama*, 44.3 (2001), 300–317; Alan Ackerman, 'Introduction: Modernism and Anti-Theatricality', *Modern Drama*, 44.3 (2001), 275–83.

⁷⁸ Quoted from Ghedini's letter to Carlo Pinelli (29.03.1954) in Parise, *Giorgio Federico Ghedini*, pp. 315–16. The aristocratic quality of art played a significant role in the contemporary debate on artistic commitment, particularly as it stood in stark opposition to the principles of socialist realism.

⁷⁹ Abbiati, 'Il Festival musicale di Venezia'.

⁸⁰ An apt metaphor for this is evident in the seventh piece of the opera. Abbordafumo, the wise and omniscient old sailor—elevated to an unprecedented role as an internal narrator compared to Melville's novella—expresses this dismay. Helplessly witnessing the inevitable tragedy of Billy Budd, his *cantus firmus* serves as a symbolic yet distant, unheard and powerless accompaniment during Claggart's informing.

‘Voice without words singing the sea’: Billy’s song conveyed the aspiration to reconcile with nature, preserving the ‘memory of a prelinguistic era’ characterised by emotional and immediate communication, as articulated by Adorno.⁸¹ Yet his song remained solitary, and his words faltered, failing to reach anyone. Emerging at a crucial juncture in history, *Billy Budd* provided a moment for contemplation amid a swiftly changing reality, wherein both opera and post-war humanity sought to reconstruct their identities in crisis. Ghedini’s work, with its ambiguous positioning, embraced the American and operatic models only partially, thus simultaneously challenging both in a nuanced manner. With its form straddling the boundaries of poetry and prose, opera and theatre, *Billy Budd* epitomised a unique convergence of American culture and Italian tradition. Staging Melville in a post-war Italian opera was, in a sense, a twofold contradiction with the times: conflicting with both the collective desire to forget the recent past and the emergence of new mass genres and entertainments from America ready to fulfil this desire.

⁸¹ Adorno, ‘Bourgeois Opera’.

CHAPTER 6

A FAIRY TALE FOR TIRED MEN

A Transformative Mask

‘For us, sad and tired man [...] For us left without any hope [...] Do you not have a story for us?’ So asks the five-voice madrigal chorus at the outset of Ghedini’s last opera, and the narrator acquiesces: ‘For the lamest and for the most deprived | there exists a fairytale for everyone in life. | Life teems with stories | and this is for you’.¹ And thus, the uplifting tale of *Lord Inferno* unfolds. Amidst the revelry of London’s demimonde, the dissolute and pleasure-seeking Lord George Hell (a character halfway between Caligula and Falstaff) accompanies his mistress, La Gambogi, to the vibrant performances at Garble’s theatre. Here, a mysterious Dwarf, resembling a grotesque incarnation of Cupid, strikes Lord Hell with his dart, plunging the libertine into a sudden, fervent love for a simple and sweet dancer, Jenny Mere, making her debut on the stage as Columbine. Jenny, aspiring to marry a man of saintly countenance, cannot reciprocate Lord Hell’s affection. Yet, a solution emerges in the form of a mask with angelic features from Mr. Aeneas’s workshop, renowned for supplying masks fit for gods and kings. Disguised as Lord George Heaven, and with another arrow from the Dwarf’s bow piercing Jenny’s heart, their idyllic love blossoms. Only La Gambogi, consumed by jealousy, does not fall for the deception and endeavours to expose the impostor. However, during the unmasking, she unveils with great astonishment a countenance even holier than the mask’s fictitious visage: the power of love has

¹ ¹ ‘E per noi uomini stanchi [...] Per noi rimasti senza speranza [...] non hai una favola per noi? [...] Per i più miseri, i più diseredati | c’è una favola per tutti nella vita. | La vita è piena di favole | e questa è fatta per voi’. Franco Antonicelli, *L’ipocrita felice. Opera in 1 atto* (Milan: Ricordi, 1956), p. 7.

miraculously transformed the man both in appearance and in his soul, turning makeup into reality.

This moralistic fairy tale served as the closing act of Ghedini's operatic career, an opera that, as we will discover, inherently questioned the identity of the genre and that underwent a transformative journey of its own. Originally conceived as a radio opera entitled *Lord Inferno* and winner of the 1952 Prix Italia (a competition promoted by Radio Audizioni Italiane, Italy's national broadcaster), Ghedini's opera enjoyed a subsequent stage adaptation by the name of *L'ipocrita felice*, premiered at La Piccola Scala in Milan in 1956.² The latter was a small appendage to the main theatre, with a more experimental and elitist remit. As the narrator declares in the radio version, introducing the story he is about to recount: 'Life invented it, Mr. Max Beerbohm wrote it down, and I am about to tell it again. [...] It is always a fresh story'.³ The opera was based on *The Happy Hypocrite: a Fairy Tale for Tired Men* by the English author Max Beerbohm (1872-1956), reworked as a libretto by the Italian writer Franco Antonicelli.⁴ The inspiration to use Beerbohm's tale came to Ghedini from the column 'Libretti possibili', compiled by his pupil and friend Carlo Pinelli for the magazine *La Scala*, edited by Franco Abbiati.⁵ The column served the purpose of proposing potential subjects—'anche non italiani'—for the musical stage, synthesising plots and suggesting suitable genres, such as opera, ballet, oratorio and pantomime.⁶ Once again drawing from Anglophone literature, Ghedini's opera exhibited several parallels with

² The opera was last staged at the Teatro Carignano in Turin in 1959.

³ 'La vita stessa l'ha inventata, il signor Max Beerbohm l'ha trascritta, e io torno a raccontarla. [...] Roba sempre fresca'. Franco Antonicelli, *Lord Inferno. Commedia harmonica* [typescript] (Turin: RAI-Radio italiana, 1973), p. 4.

⁴ Beerbohm's fairy tale was first published in 1896 in the pages of *The Yellow Book*, a quarterly literary periodical with which the writer had been associated since its inception.

⁵ See Ghedini's letter to Carlo Pinelli (31.1.1952) in Stefano Parise, *Giorgio Federico Ghedini: l'uomo, le opere attraverso le lettere*, (Milan: Ricordi, 2003), pp. 302–3. Ghedini personally recommended his pupil and friend Carlo as the editor of the column, introducing him to Abbiati, as we can read from their correspondence. See Ghedini's letter to Carlo Pinelli (27.09.1949) in Parise, *Giorgio Federico Ghedini*, p. 284. See also Carlo Pinelli, 'I libretti possibili', *La Scala*, 17 (1951), 73.

⁶ Ghedini's letter to Carlo Pinelli (27.09.1949) in Parise, *Giorgio Federico Ghedini*, p. 284. The deliberate embrace of non-Italian subjects further underscored the proactive internationalism within post-war Italian culture.

his previous work, *Billy Budd*. These include its small scale and brevity, falling under the category of ‘piccola opera’ as described by Emilia Zanetti, and the use of a narrator in both the radio and stage versions. Conversely, the tone of the two works differed drastically: while *Billy Budd* provided a sombre, thoughtful and disenchanted exploration of human nature, *Lord Inferno* presented a seemingly frivolous fairy tale, complete with an optimistic and predictable happy ending.

The new opera appeared to deepen the regression initiated after *Le Baccanti*. The blending of narration with Ghedini’s well-crafted music, fragmented into highly heterogeneous pieces, was regarded by many critics as a blatant debasement of the genre into mere incidental music. The scarcely noticeable differences between the radio opera and the stage version only strengthened this opinion. Ghedini seamlessly incorporated the transformation of the narrator’s role from speech to singing in *L’Ipocrita felice*, without imposing substantial alterations to the music or the overall structure of *Lord Inferno*. It appeared that in the opera, both singing and the scenic dimension were merely superimposed as ancillary elements, rather than integrated, thereby calling into question the fundamental identity of the genre.

Furthermore, as we will explore, the critiques of eclecticism and aestheticism—frequently encountered in Ghedini’s reception—extended in this case beyond mere music or text to encompass the very essence of the subject matter itself. The refined and decadent aestheticism of Beerbohm’s fairy tale inevitably appeared anachronistic in the 1950s, much like Ghedini’s music. Against the backdrop of post-war renewal in Milan, the case of *Lord Inferno* and *L’ipocrita felice* embodied Ghedini’s ambiguous stance at the time. While he benefitted from institutional endorsement and involvement in official initiatives aimed at revitalising the operatic genre, he also navigated an increasingly contentious relationship with the emerging avant-gardes and the

prevailing rhetoric of commitment (*impegno*). This notion of *impegno* entailed a simultaneous commitment to the most radical musical language and the most radical politics of the era.

In what follows, I begin by setting the stage for Ghedini's final operatic chapter. I will outline the immediate context and its intricacies, where post-war rebirth existed alongside new threats of war. Emerging within a fast-changing contest and narrating a tale of conversion, the work itself embodied the contentious theme of transformation in its transition from radio opera to live stage performance. I delve into the unique circumstances surrounding the work's dual versions and demonstrate their similarities to show that it did not emerge merely as an intriguing case of radio opera—a passing phenomenon in the operatic field that both competed with and embraced the new medium. In continuity with Ghedini's earlier works, *Lord Inferno-L'ipocrita felice* further questions the essence of the operatic genre and stands as a definitive statement by the composer on the conception and role of art.

The transformative power of the mask, emblematic of theatrical fiction and artifice, assumed a particular significance within the new metatheatrical framework that Ghedini and Antonicelli drew from Beerbohm's subtitle, 'a fairy tale for tired men'. As we will see, Sir George's uplifting mask could indeed epitomise a cathartic notion of art capable of achieving authenticity and redeeming humanity through its fictional and refined quality. As I aim to demonstrate, *Lord Inferno-L'ipocrita felice* conveyed the composer's belief in the harmony between beauty and good intentions, offering a maverick interpretation of *impegno* in the post-war era. With its blend of bitterness and hope, the contrived happy ending of Ghedini's operatic journey revealed, beneath a façade of aestheticism, the potential for commitment and expressiveness in a music that often seemed impassive and chameleon-like, much like the contrasting concepts of mask and transformation blended in the fairy tale.

Ghedini in the 1950s

Ghedini's career and the historical context underwent rapid evolution during the 1950s, a period marked by light and shadows for both the composer and Italy. The culture of this era intertwined threads of continuity and rupture with the past, compelling artists to navigate a complex interplay of optimism and disillusionment about the future. Ghedini's success within institutional circles moved in tandem with his distancing from the latest musical developments. Meanwhile, Italy's swift reconstruction out of the debris of war unfolded against the backdrop of the looming spectre of another conflict. As discussed in the preceding chapter, following the end of the post-fascist government of national unity and the onset of the Cold War, the newly established Christian-Democratic-led government, victorious in the 1948 elections, took charge of relations with the United States and managed the funds allocated through the four-year European Recovery Program, commonly known as the Marshall Plan. Concluding in 1951, this programme served as a catalyst for the subsequent Italian economic miracle, a period of growth and development extending into the 1960s. This era was marked by economic optimism and transformation, featuring significant migration and urbanisation, notably in the north of the country. During this period, Ghedini experienced the peak of his recognition and success, particularly at an institutional level, with prestigious appointments and major publishing houses (such as Ricordi and Suvini Zerboni) vying for his music. Ghedini assumed the role of Director at the Milan Conservatoire in 1951 and held this influential position for a decade. He also served as an artistic consultant for the Teatro alla Scala and, after several years of commuting from Piedmont, decided to relocate to Milan, the epicentre of the country's cultural and economic renewal in the post-war period. This provided an inextricably influential backdrop to the final phase of Ghedini's output and its reception.

After the downfall of fascism, symbolised by the exhibition of the corpses of Mussolini and other fascist officials in Piazzale Loreto, the city of Milan emerged as the driving force in the reconstruction and modernisation of the nascent Republic. As an industrial capital and a gateway to Europe, Milan also experienced a remarkable cultural renaissance in the years following World War II. In 1946, Arturo Toscanini inaugurated La Scala, already rebuilt after wartime bombing. The following year, Paolo Grassi and Giorgio Strehler founded the Piccolo Teatro, committed to providing ‘theatre for all’ and disseminating the works of Bertolt Brecht in Italy, among others. Milan’s artistic scene benefitted from the efforts of Fernanda Wittgens, credited with the restoration of the Brera art gallery, the recovery of Leonardo’s *Last Supper* from the ruins of Santa Maria delle Grazie, and the exhibition of Picasso’s *Guernica* in 1953.⁷ In the same years, new cultural associations emerged, dedicated to promoting artistic and civic values. Among them was La Casa della Cultura, founded by the philosopher Antonio Banfi and other anti-fascist intellectuals, including Elio Vittorini, Giulio Einaudi and Alberto Mondadori. The activities of prominent Italian publishing houses—such as Feltrinelli, Rizzoli and Mondadori—established Milan as a literary hub. Meanwhile, the rise of new publications, including Elio Vittorini’s *Il Politecnico* and the neo-avant-garde literary magazine *Il Verri*, fuelled the cultural discourse of the time. These publications addressed burning issues such as the artists’ role in society and their relationship with politics, primarily in terms of *impegno*.⁸

Music was integral to this cultural fervour. Milan burgeoned as a vibrant and diverse ‘music laboratory’ in post-war Italy, teeming with events, organizations and venues, while also emerging

⁷ Fernanda Wittgens (1903-1957) was an art critic and historians, notable as the first woman in Italy to direct an important museum like Brera.

⁸ In particular, 1956 stood as a pivotal year in the dynamics between intellectuals and authority, marked by numerous expressions of dissent in response to the invasion of Hungary. Andrea Estero, ‘Il musicista come intellettuale nel secondo Novecento italiano: tra politica e ideologia’, in *La cultura dei musicisti italiani nel Novecento*, ed. by Guido Salvetti and Maria Grazia Sità (Milan: Guerini, 2004), pp. 337–83.

as the premier hub for music publishing and record labels.⁹ From early music to jazz, classical repertoire to the avant-garde, and even pioneering experiments in electronic music, alongside the revival of folk music through the nascent field of Italian ethnomusicology, all genres converged within Milan's music scene.¹⁰ Tradition and innovation marched side by side, exemplified by the successful concerts of the Pomeriggi Musicali orchestra, founded by Remigio Paone and Ferdinando Ballo as early as 1945. The city was committed to restoring what had been lost during the war and aligning itself with the latest international trends. Reflecting the dedication of Italian musicians to catching up with the techniques of the Viennese School, the first 'International Congress on Dodecaphonic Music' took place in Milan in 1949, spearheaded by Riccardo Malipiero and Wladimir Vogel. Here, twelve-tone composition was explored and debated in terms of both technique and aesthetics, paving the way to what would be the distinctive Italian compromise between compositional rigour and calls for humanism, blending Western avant-garde formalism with the aims of Soviet realism.¹¹ Inaugurated in Milan in 1950, *Diapason*—Italy's first magazine dedicated to post-war contemporary music—provided the platform for this ongoing debate.¹² The city also welcomed the first Italian performances of John Cage's music, played by the composer himself, such as the one at the Circolo Culturale Pirelli in 1954, alongside the differently oriented initiatives promoted by Luciano Berio and Bruno Maderna: *Incontri musicali* (both a periodical and concert series dedicated to the post-Webernian repertoire) and the Studio di Fonologia (a middle ground between the *musique-concrète* of Paris and the *Elektronische*

⁹ *Milano, laboratorio musicale del Novecento. Scritti per Luciana Pestalozza*, ed. by Luciana Abbado Pestalozza and Oreste Bossini (Milan: Archinto, 2009). Especially since 1948, under the forward-looking direction of László Sugár as the new owner, the Suvini Zerboni publishing house competed with the long-established Ricordi in championing emerging musicians and innovative music.

¹⁰ Consider the presence in Milan in those years of Roberto Leydi (1928-2003). Alongside Luciano Berio and Bruno Maderna, he co-founded the Studio di Fonologia in Milan and is now recognised as the father of Italian ethnomusicology.

¹¹ At the two opposite extremes, consider the Internationale Ferienkurse für Neue Musik in Darmstadt, renowned as a cradle of the post-war avant-garde, and the so-called Zhdanov Doctrine or the Prague Manifesto, which prescribed the utility and ideological alignment of art.

¹² The magazine was directed by Herbert Fleischer in collaboration with Luigi Pestalozza and Piero Santi.

Musik of Cologne). Both initiatives started their activities between 1955 and 1956, thus coinciding with the inauguration of La Piccola Scala and the premiere of Ghedini's last opera, *L'ipocrita felice*, on the same stage.

Ghedini was part of this scenario of rapid transformation and ferment. Initially as a teacher and then as the Director of the Conservatoire, Ghedini maintained direct contact with a new generation of Italian musicians, many of whom were his pupils. These included Luciano Berio, Niccolò Castiglioni, Fiorenzo Carpi, Marcello and Claudio Abbado. Under Ghedini's direction, the main auditoria of the Conservatoire reopened in the decade after the war—Sala Puccini in 1952 and Sala Verdi in 1958—reaffirming them as the primary venues for concert activities in Milan.¹³ In 1957, the Conservatoire also hosted the first course in dodecaphony in Italy, undertaken by Bruno Maderna at the invitation of Ghedini. The teacher and director supported the younger generations—as recalled by Castiglioni, who stated 'Ghedini was with us'—but the composer firmly diverged from their tendencies, sharply criticising what he described as their reckless 'stagecoach assault'.¹⁴

Despite this strong institutional presence in the 1950s, Ghedini did not wield a similarly influential position in the intense musical debates of the time, which had turned music into a true ideological battleground. For the new generation of Italian composers, coming from a perspective of historical determinism as applied to art, keen as they were to confront the recent past, the evolution of musical language was considered necessary and inevitable to accompany

¹³ See Chapter XXI in Roberto Zanetti, *La musica italiana nel Novecento*, 3 vols (Busto Arsizio: Bramante, 1985), II, pp. 1265-90.

¹⁴ Castiglioni's interview in Stefano Parise, 'Profilo di Giorgio Federico Ghedini' (dissertation, Università degli Studi di Milano, 1992); see also Ghedini's letter to Carlo Pinelli (26.3.1961) in Parise, *Giorgio Federico Ghedini*, pp. 235-36. The rift with his pupil Berio served as a poignant emblem of Ghedini's strained relationship with the burgeoning generation of Italian musicians.

the social and moral progress of humanity.¹⁵ Ghedini was perceived as being very much at odds with this post-war trend. Following the failure of *Le Baccanti*, many critics had perceived a sort of regression in Ghedini's music—a departure from the modernism of the 1940s, leading to more readily accessible compositions.¹⁶ This was evident in his solo instrumental concertos, composed at the turn of the 1950s, which bore programmatic titles (such as *L'Olmeneta* and *L'Alderina*), and exhibited a melodic propensity, adopting a nearly tonal language. In 1949, during an interview about twelve-note music, Ghedini provocatively mentioned perfect triads as part of his recent linguistic experiments, emphasising the primacy of musical ideas over novel and innovative systems. These positions were seen as unacceptably anachronistic and conservative during a period of such rapid transformation, where a dedication to both artistic and social progress was deemed imperative.

The divergence between the trajectories of contemporary musical discourse and the direction taken by Ghedini in the final part of his career is evident in the critical reception of his last opera. The Crocean judgement of a well-crafted yet uninspired work, continued to infuse the responses to the 1956 premiere of *L'ipocrita felice* (the stage version of the opera), but it was now intertwined with new critical concerns. From the opera's austere opening madrigal to the melodramatic conclusion reminiscent of 'Puccini, Mascagni and Strauss' (C.M.), critics voiced disappointment in what they perceived as a regression to the 'eclecticism of two decades ago' (Gatti)—alluding to works like *Maria d'Alessandria* and *La pulce d'oro*.¹⁷ Ghedini's music was regarded as purely

¹⁵ The seminal works highlighting historical determinism in the post-war era include Theodor W. Adorno's *Philosophy of Modern Music* (1949) and René Leibowitz's exploration of reconciling Sartrean commitment with serialism, as evident in texts such as *Schoenberg et son école* (1947), *Le musicien engagé* (1949) and *L'artiste et sa conscience* (1950).

¹⁶ This is how the critic Giorgio Vigolo sharply criticised the revival of Ghedini's early work, *La Messa del Venerdì Santo* (1929), during the 1949 Sagra musicale umbra: 'the thunderous applause at the end of the performance resonated like a volley of shots fired against the music of the next two decades (...) There is a rumour circulating that Ghedini betrayed and switched sides'. Cit. in Stefano Parise, 'Una svolta stilistica nel secondo dopoguerra. Giorgio Federico Ghedini', in *Italia Millenovecentocinquanta*, ed. by Guido Salvetti, Bianca Maria Antolini and Società italiana di musicologia (Milan: Guerini, 1999), pp. 271–82 (p. 280).

¹⁷ C.M., 'Apollo Musagete di Strawinski. L'ipocrita felice di Ghedini. El retablo de Maese Pedro di De Falla alla Piccola Scala', *Il Sole 24 Ore*, 11 March 1956; Guido M. Gatti, 'Un'opera antimelodrammatica', *Tempo*, 29 March 1956.

illustrative and functional, akin to a form of ‘sonic shorthand’ (Fuga): faithful to the text yet emotionally detached.¹⁸ It sounded austere and frigid, and the oratorio-like form did not help in this regard, drawing criticism for its perceived heaviness, redundancy and lack of theatricality.¹⁹ At the same time, despite its refinement, the music lacked the disdainful and ascetic tone so appreciated in Ghedini’s earlier works (Bardolfo), appearing instead uncommitted and inclined towards easy, cheerful entertainment (Della Corte).²⁰

At the root of this purported disengagement, critics focussed on Ghedini’s choice of the subject matter, making it the primary target of their criticism, as had previously occurred with operas like *Le Baccanti*. In his initial review, Massimo Mila—a prominent figure in the wider contemporary debate on the interplay between art and history—identified the main problem with contemporary operas, which was not so much the form or language employed, but rather to be found in the content, notably the choice of librettos.²¹ Beerbohm’s tale was widely acknowledged as a sophisticated literary source, albeit not entirely original, as some critics traced the plot’s similarity to Stravinsky’s near-contemporary work, *The Rake’s Progress* (1951).²² According to Mila, ‘composing an opera is a bit like giving birth’, but here Ghedini seemed to approach the text unconcernedly, without a genuine inner engagement. Beerbohm’s tale, with its empty moralism

All press clippings from the premiere mentioned here have been generously supplied by the Teatro alla Scala archive in Milan.

¹⁸ Bardolfo, “‘L’ipocrita felice’ e un De Falla felicissimo”, *Candido*, 18 March 1956; Iginio Fuga, “‘L’ipocrita felice’ di Ghedini”, *Gazzetta Del Popolo*, 11 March 1956.

¹⁹ Fuga, “‘L’ipocrita felice’ di Ghedini”; Eugenio Montale, ‘Lord Inferno? No, Lord Paradiso. Il successo della nuova opera di Ghedini “L’ipocrita felice”’, *Corriere d’informazione*, 12 March 1956; Riccardo Allorto, ‘Apollo Musagete. Balletto in due quadri’ [Programme note], in *Teatro alla Scala, stagione lirica 1955-1956* (Milan: Teatro alla Scala, 1956).

²⁰ Bardolfo, “‘L’ipocrita felice’ e un De Falla felicissimo”; Andrea Della Corte, ‘Caloroso successo dell’opera di Ghedini. «L’ipocrita felice» alla Piccola Scala’, *La Nuova Stampa*, 11 March 1956, p. 3.

²¹ Massimo Mila, ‘Il libertino allegorico di Federico Ghedini’, *L’Espresso*, 25 March 1956. In 1949, Mila engaged in a controversial debate with Togliatti in the pages of *Rinascita*, with the former opposing the latter’s encroachment of political ideology into culture.

²² Indeed, as the critics reported, the fairy tale of Lord Hell appeared to echo and subvert the trials of the libertine in Stravinsky’s opera. Bardolfo, “‘L’ipocrita felice’ e un De Falla felicissimo”; Rubens Tedeschi, ‘Tre interessanti lavori di De Falla, Stravinski e Ghedini. I burattini di Podrecca alla Piccola Scala’, *L’Unità*, 11 March 1956; Giulio Confalonieri, ‘Novità di Ghedini alla Piccola Scala con contorno di Stravinski e De Falla’, *La Patria*, 11 March 1956; Montale, ‘Lord Inferno? No, Lord Paradiso’; Luigi Gianoli, ‘Tra i “gioielli” spagnoli e russi una moralistica opera di Ghedini’, *L’Italia*, 11 March 1956; R.M., ‘Tre spettacoli nuovi alla Piccola Scala. Stravinsky, Ghedini e De Falla. Balletto, dramma e marionette’, *Il Popolo di Milano*, 11 March 1956.

(Avanti), neither edifying nor ironic (Abbiati), was considered emblematic of an outdated form of aestheticism—a sort of pure and perfect art that could only thrive in prosperous times or provide an escape from troubled ones (Cajumi).²³ This did not apply to the post-war period, when a pervasive sense of crisis coexisted with a relentless discourse about how to address it.

Aestheticism was thus deemed irreconcilable with the prevailing rhetoric of commitment at the time, both as an imperative for artistic evolution and social engagement.²⁴ Ghedini's new opera seemed to diverge from contemporary expectations of engagement in terms of its form, language and content. On the surface, the opera appeared neither groundbreaking nor relevant. Embracing the mass and purely auditory nature of radio in *Lord Inferno* and emphasising the epic dimension at the expense of theatricality in *L'ipocrita felice*, both versions of Ghedini's work challenged the definition of opera in different ways, but without providing a particularly original solution to its crisis. As we will see, radio opera was in fact something of a trend at the time; meanwhile the presence of a narrator was not unprecedented in the history of the genre.

Concerning the music and text, Ghedini's eclecticism, which had accommodated the pluralistic and ambiguous politics of fascism, could not be readily embraced in a moment of artistic and political militancy, when taking a clear stance was imperative. Furthermore, Beerbohm's late nineteenth-century fairy tale seemed out of place—a specious choice of pure aestheticism, clashing with the need to reintegrate artists and intellectuals into society following the experience of totalitarianism and war. The notion of hypocrisy, surfacing in the ambiguous morality of the

²³ Vice, 'Stravinski Ghedini De Falla', *Avanti*, 11 March 1956; Franco Abbiati, 'Tre opere in un atto alla Piccola Scala', *Corriere Della Sera*, 11 March 1956; Arrigo Cajumi, 'L'ipocrita felice', *La Stampa*, 21 January 1948, p. 1.

²⁴ For a better understanding of the concept of *impegno* and the broader ideological backdrop of post-war Italian music, see Estero, 'Il musicista come intellettuale'; Ben Earle, 'Dallapiccola and the Politics of Commitment: Re-Reading "Il Prigioniero"', *Radical Musicology*, 2 (2007) <<http://www.radical-musicology.org.uk>> [accessed 14 July 2003]; Peter O. Roderick, 'Rebuilding a Culture: Studies in Italian Music after Fascism, 1943-1953' (doctoral thesis, University of York, 2010) <<https://etheses.whiterose.ac.uk/997/>> [accessed 5 May 2023].

fairy tale, contradicted the very essence of post-war *impegno*.²⁵ In an ideological context marked by the waning influence of Croce,²⁶ a belated reception of Adorno, and a renewed interest in Gramsci and his notion of the ‘organic intellectual’,²⁷ the Italian musical community was embroiled in fervent debates, where everything seemed to be at stake.²⁸ These discussions aimed to reconcile various dichotomies—such as the autonomy or functional role of art, individual creative freedom and collective responsibility, modernism and commitment, objectivity and subjectivity, technique and expressive content—, while also addressing tensions between state patronage and the musical free market, artistic elitism and mass audience engagement, highbrow and lowbrow genres.²⁹ Ghedini’s last opera was not detached from all of this but was instead part of it, inevitably and consciously embedded in this context.

From *Commedia harmonica*...

The two versions of the work provided valuable insights into what opera meant at mid-century, touching on relevant themes such as the disparity between new operas and the repertoire, the genre’s thorny relationship with technology and mass media, and its widening gap with audiences. Amid its crisis, opera stood at the centre of an intricate interplay of politics, culture, economics and society in post-war Italy, with state support emerging as a contentious element of continuity with fascism. Ghedini’s work emerged from and epitomised this intricate network of state-supported institutions. Furthermore, *Lord Inferno* and *L’ipocrita felice* presented two distinct

²⁵ In his critique of Western culture, Vittorini railed precisely against the hypocritical division between politics and culture. For an overview of the debate ignited by Vittorini’s *Rinascita*, see Anna Maria Torriglia, *Broken Time, Fragmented Space: A Cultural Map of Postwar Italy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), pp. XI–XII.

²⁶ Croce’s neglect of the technical dimension of art and the functional division between genres, as well as his dismissal of any possible interplay between art and history, could no longer be easily upheld amid the ideological developments of the post-war era. For more on Croce and his enduring influence, refer to the Introduction.

²⁷ Closely related to the concept of ‘hegemony’, Gramsci’s idea of the organic intellectual implied a reversal of the Marxist dualism between structure and superstructure, proposing cultural renewal as the catalyst for revolution.

²⁸ For more on the ideological stakes of cultural debate in Italy during this period, see the Introduction and Giacomo Manzoni, ‘Adorno e la musica degli anni ’50 e ’60 in Italia’, *Musica/Realtà*, 1/2 (1980), 71–79.

²⁹ For insight into the topic of Italian debate, one can refer to the programmes of the International Music Congresses held in Florence. The 1948 fifth congress primarily focussed on the issue of musical language, while the sixth one, held the following year, delved into the question of subjectivity and objectivity in musical expression.

possibilities for reimagining the genre, revealing its increasingly fragile identity as it navigated the moving balance between music and theatre, mimesis and diegesis, entertainment and art. Was opera primarily an auditory spectacle; need it also be visual? Could it effectively represent or narrate something? And who was the genre intended for? As I will discuss in what follows, the comparison between Ghedini's radio opera and its stage adaption can shed light on these debates: one reaching the ears of the mass audience of radio listeners, the other catering to the elite public of the small Milanese theatre. Both the Prix Italia and La Piccola Scala served as fresh arenas and potential lifelines for the genre's survival.

The initiative for an international competition dedicated to new operas and musical-literary works expressly conceived for radio came into being in 1948. In the post-war period, RAI actively engaged in the operatic scene via the recording and broadcast of noteworthy but less popular works, including Ghedini's *Le Baccanti* (1955). The national broadcaster upheld the role of state educator that it had played under fascism.³⁰ Prior to the advent of television in 1954, radio was at the forefront of cultural efforts to inform, educate and entertain the public, offering varied and targeted broadcasts in the mould of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). In 1950, the Terzo Programma was established, focussing on high culture and modelled on the BBC's Third Programme and French radio, creating a state-funded platform for elite art.³¹ If radio had served

³⁰ As Danielle Simon argues, the connection between the then EIAR (Ente Italiano per le Audizioni Radiofoniche) and the fascist regime was close: 'Radio broadcasts during fascism were always political, whether they transmitted a speech by Mussolini or an opera at La Scala'. Danielle Andrea Simon, 'Ecco la radio: Music, Media, and Politics in Fascist Italy' (doctoral thesis, Berkeley University of California, 2020), p. 129 <<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/19f5v00q>> [accessed 16 January 2022]. In particular, according to Simon, broadcasts of Italian opera during fascism epitomised the theatrical nature of fascist politics and its inherent conflict between tradition and modernity.

³¹ Roberto Giuliani, 'La musica alla Rai dagli anni della riorganizzazione al Terzo Programma (1945-54)', in *Italia Millenovecentocinquanta*, pp. 31–64.

as a tool for propaganda during fascism and a powerful weapon during wartime, the medium was now envisioned as a conduit for fostering art and promoting peace after the war.³²

The Prix Italia was established in this same spirit, with the aim to unify Europe culturally beyond its political and ideological divides. Its mission was to develop the artistic potential of the medium, both in creating and reproducing artistic works, as well as to bridge the gap between intellectuals and radio's large audience, dispelling their mutual preconceptions.³³ Given its multiple goals, which encompassed art and diplomacy, the initiative received a positive reception not only from the participating radio organisations, but also from national and international institutions like UNESCO, as well as from the artists themselves.³⁴ The hefty monetary prize and the opportunity for international broadcast attracted both emerging and established musicians, challenging their prevailing bias against radio as an economically unrewarding and artistically ephemeral medium. Meanwhile, the pacifist philosophy underlying the prize infused the themes of the competing works and influenced the results. This was the case with *Ifigenia* by Ildebrando Pizzetti, the winning opera of 1950, which ends with a collective, multilingual plea questioning the perpetuation of war and invoking divine mercy.³⁵ However, despite the innovative and reconciliatory essence of the Prix Italia, it also served as an occasion to revisit lingering issues stemming from the fascist era, such as state patronage of the arts and the potential of radio for music.

³² Simon, 'Ecco la radio'; Giovanni Antonucci, *Prix Italia 1948-1998. La radio e la televisione del mondo* (Rome: RAI, 1998).

³³ 'Premesse e finalità del «Premio Italia»', *Radiocorriere*, 25.40 (1948), 5, 9.

³⁴ Participating in the founding of the Prix Italia in Carpi in September 1948 were 14 European countries (with the exception of Egypt), which included nations of the Soviet bloc such as Czechoslovakia. In the following years, the prize was also extended to non-European countries (such as Canada, the USA and Japan), as well as incorporating new media such as television.

³⁵ 'Perché? Pourquoi? Por qué? Warum? Why? Quare?', the chorus asks before the concluding prayer in Latin. Similarly, thanks to its pacifist tones, the 1949 prize recipient, *Federico generale* by Jacques Constant and Claude Arrieu, surpassed works by more renowned composers like Gian Francesco Malipiero, Arthur Honneger and Bohuslav Martinu.

Radiocorriere, the network's weekly print magazine, stood as the primary platform for this extensive debate, voicing a wide range of artists' opinions. Some commentators, like Alberto Savinio, expressed concerns about government intervention in artistic affairs, viewing the RAI award as a continuation of the Keynesianism inherited from fascism.³⁶ Within this system of control and subjugation, the state assumed the role of the primary manager and client of culture—the 'master and benefactor', as articulated by Luigi Pestalozza—, thus serving as the guarantor and intermediary between the artist and the public.³⁷ In the view of many, the use of prizes as incentives for art seemed to be a symptom of a deepening dysfunction in culture and society. As Corrado Alvaro put it, 'where the arts flourish spontaneously, society flourishes (...). The humiliating charity of prizes (...) is not a sign of refined civilisation'.³⁸ Conversely, as previously mentioned, the opinion of many composers was favourable, resulting in a significant turnout of participants. Luigi Dallapiccola argued that awards like the Prix Italia could offer a modern alternative to traditional patronage systems, providing contemporary artists with the financial stability needed to pursue their ambitious projects and works—particularly in the demanding realm of opera, which posed challenges both compositionally and economically.³⁹ As early as 1945, Ghedini had contemplated the future of the genre after the war, almost hoping for a return to independent theatre and the traditional impresario system: 'Will there be subsidies? Will the government assume these burdens?'.⁴⁰ Indeed, the republican state continued its control and financial support, much like the regime had in the 1930s, regarding opera a national heritage to be preserved and a costly industry to be financed. As the national broadcaster, RAI was both

³⁶ Luigi Greci, 'Una lettera di Ildebrando Pizzetti. Un'intervista con Alberto Savinio.', *Radiocorriere*, 25.50 (1948), 5, 9. However, in another aspects, Savinio was a proponent of the initiative, firmly believing in the potential of radio as a form of art.

³⁷ Luigi Pestalozza, 'Lo Stato dell'organizzazione musicale: la svolta del fascismo e la sua lunga durata', *Musica/Realtà*, II.5 (1981), 146-60.

³⁸ Luigi Greci, 'Buone opere usciranno da questa iniziativa dice Corrado Alvaro', *Radiocorriere*, 25.47 (1948), 14-15.

³⁹ 'Il pensiero degli artisti italiani sul "Premio Italia"', *Radiocorriere*, 25.42 (1948), 3-4. It is worth noting that Dallapiccola had premiered *Il Prigioniero* initially in its radio version in 1949.

⁴⁰ Ghedini's letter to Carlo Pinelli (9.1.1945), in Parise, *Giorgio Federico Ghedini*, pp. 245-46.

recipient and source of state funds, utilising proceeds from tax rights and revenues to support festivals and the always overdrawn Enti Lirici.⁴¹

From a musical point of view, opera on the radio, as well as the very concept of radio opera, had been subjects of interest and ongoing discussion well before the inception of the Prix Italia. This discussion intersected with the broader discourse surrounding the impact of technology and media on music and art. Radio was debated as either a means for disseminating music or as an independent genre in its own right. In G.M. Gatti's 1937 survey 'La radio e la musica', many Italian musicians expressed their reluctance to compose new music specifically for the radio. Gian Francesco Malipiero, in particular, went so far as to proclaim that radio was bringing about the death of music.⁴² According to the opinions collected by Gatti, composers warned against using radio as a means of music appreciation, especially in terms of over-exposure and passive or distracted listening. According to Fedele D'Amico, music ran the risk of becoming trapped between two extremes: ritualised concert hall experience and relegation to background noise during daily life. Many interviewees also argued that the radio's perceived influence on certain trends of twentieth-century music, such as the preference for chamber ensembles and oratorio-like forms, was in fact a mere historical coincidence. The contentious nature of radio music was further amplified in the case of opera due to the genre's inherent complexity, its combination of both auditory and visual elements. In 1937, opinions were divergent: some, like Ferdinando Ballo, believed radio could represent a sort of Indian summer for the struggling genre, while others, like G.F. Malipiero, saw it as an additional factor of competition. From one perspective, radio had the potential to both widen opera's reach and foster a more intimate engagement with the art form and its 'metaphysical mystery', in Massimo Bontempelli's words. From another

⁴¹ Marcello Ruggieri, 'L'assetto istituzionale e il sistema produttivo', in *Italia Millenovecentocinquanta*, pp. 31–64.

⁴² Guido M. Gatti, 'La radio e la musica', *La Rassegna Musicale*, 10.9–10 (1937), 301–28.

viewpoint, radio carried the risk of eroding the ritualistic and social essence of opera, its ‘aura’, by interspersing listening with family conversations and card games, as D’Amico pointed out.⁴³

Transnational debate on opera and new media intensified in the 1950s, culminating with an International Conference on Opera in Radio, TV and Film, held in Salzburg in 1957. The notion of ‘mechanised opera’ emerged as a means for both mass dissemination of the repertoire and enhancement of sonic possibilities for new works. Within the Italian context, upon the establishment of the Prix Italia, numerous Italian musicians, including those who were initially sceptical, became enthusiastic supporters of a burgeoning radio-opera genre. Among them was Ghedini, who declared during the award ceremony for his *Lord Inferno*: ‘radio opera exists and must exist’.⁴⁴ The innovative sound effects provided by technology had dispelled the composer’s initial reservations, consistent with his confidence in the operatic genre ‘as long as it was music first’.⁴⁵ Music as ‘the true object of opera’ was Adorno’s subsequent argument in support of opera without staging and via LPs in 1969.⁴⁶ The core challenge posed by radio opera revolved around the absence of scenic and visual elements, which accentuated the auditory dimension and cast doubt on the genre’s identity as a multifaceted art form. Was radio opera closer to the true essence of opera or an incomplete rendition of it? According to Mario Labroca, radio was not a ‘blind’ substitute for theatre; instead, it breathed new life into the genre. Radio opera offered a purification from the constraints of staging, liberating the listener’s imagination to connect directly with the composer.⁴⁷ In a similar vein, even G.F. Malipiero, who had previously demonised the medium of radio, now found in radio opera an opportunity to overcome the

⁴³ Gatti, ‘La radio e la musica’.

⁴⁴ ‘A Marius Constant e G.F. Ghedini ex aequo il «Premio Italia 1952»’, *Radiocorriere*, 29.43 (1952), 2–6. *Lord Inferno* won the 1952 Prix Italia, tied with *Le joueur de flûte* by the young French composer Marius Constant.

⁴⁵ ‘[Ghedini] non credeva affatto nell’opera radiofonica, mentre ha sempre creduto nel melodramma purché sia musica’, in *ibid.*

⁴⁶ Theodor W. Adorno, ‘Opera and the Long-Playing Record’ [1969], trans. by Thomas Y. Levin, *October*, 55 (1990), 62–66 <<https://doi.org/10.2307/778937>> [accessed 21 June 2023].

⁴⁷ Mario Labroca, ‘Le due opere che hanno vinto il “Premio Italia 1952”’, *Radiocorriere*, 29.43 (1952), 6–7.

difficulties of the post-war moment and to realise his long-term project of an anti-melodramatic opera—a non-realistic, purely musical one. According to Malipiero, quality music could elevate the listener beyond the ridiculous limitations of traditional operatic staging: ‘do not look but listen’ was his recommendation for opera.⁴⁸

These sentiments strongly echoed the well-known choral prologue found in Orazio Vecchi’s *Amfiparnaso* (Venice, 1597), a renowned ‘madrigale drammatico’ often considered a precursor to the operatic genre: ‘But in the meantime, know that the spectacle of which I speak one beholds in the mind, which it enters through the ears, and not the eyes. Therefore, keep silent, and rather than seeing, listen!’.⁴⁹ Ghedini drew inspiration from these words, quoting them as the epigraph to his *Lord Inferno*, a work he consequently defined as a ‘commedia harmonica’.⁵⁰ This emphasis on the auditory over the visual dimension was well-suited for a radio opera but conflicted with the traditional view of opera as a form of spectacle. This stance somewhat aligned with the ‘antitheatrical prejudice’ of modernism (as described by Jonas A. Barish) and expressly targeted the notion and conventions of nineteenth-century opera. Dismissing lavish theatricality rooted in expressive, imitative and spectacular values, modernist opera intentionally challenged audience expectations and reduced emotional engagement with forms of immersive drama. The deliberate embrace of an anti-mimetic and detached approach dismantled any theatrical illusion or possibility for identification.⁵¹ In this context, radio opera perfectly met the modernist demand

⁴⁸ ‘Il pensiero degli artisti italiani sul “Premio Italia”’. La radio è un nuovo mondo che si apre. Intervista di Alberto Mantelli con Gian Francesco Malipiero’, *Radiocorriere*, 25.43 (1948), 3–4.

⁴⁹ ‘Ma voi sappiat’ intanto, | Che questo di cui parlo | Spettacolo, si mira con la mente, | Dov’entra per le orecchie, e non per gl’occhi. | Però silenzio fate | E invece di vedere, hora ascoltate’. *L’Amfiparnaso o Li disperati contenti* is a work by the composer from Modena Horazio Tiberio Vecchi (1550-1605), which combined the five-part madrigal polyphony with characters and events from the *commedia dell’arte*. With its emblematic title meaning a double Parnassus, *L’Amfiparnaso* was a mixed spectacle, composed of 13 unrelated scenes, including the participation of mimes, actors and dancers. Its heterogeneous succession of songs, dialogues, madrigals and ballets was entirely made in five-voice polyphony.

⁵⁰ *L’Amfiparnaso* was quite well-known in Italy at the time, especially following its revival by Casella, who presented it in 1927 alongside Stravinsky’s *Les Noces*.

⁵¹ See on the subject of modernist opera and anti-theatricality: Alan Ackerman, ‘Introduction: Modernism and Anti-Theatricality’, *Modern Drama*, 44.3 (2001), 275–83; Herbert Lindenberger, ‘Anti-Theatricality in Twentieth-Century Opera’, *Modern Drama*, 44.3 (2001), 300–317; Martin Puchner, ‘Modernism and Anti-Theatricality: An Afterword’,

for anti-realism and anti-theatricality. As Niccolò Castiglioni put it when introducing his radio opera, *Attraverso lo specchio* (winner of the 1961 Prix Italia), ‘the curtain does not open, and do you know why? Because it does not exist. [...] There is no need for a stage that pretends to be true, because there is nothing true here [...]’.⁵²

Indeed, we must consider that, when it comes to opera, the concepts of theatricality and realism are inherently challenged by the essence of the genre itself. The act of people singing alone defies any attempt at real-life representation.⁵³ In opera, music and theatricality seemingly exhibit an inverse relationship. On the one hand, the foregrounding of music both defines and unsettles the operatic genre compared to other theatrical forms: music in opera enhances the emotional impact on the audience while challenging the possibility of achieving perfect verisimilitude on stage. On the other hand, conversely, opera’s theatricality poses a threat to music’s primacy, potentially reducing it to a role of mere role of gesture, commentary or accompaniment to the on-stage action.⁵⁴ Given these general observations on opera, when the visual component is entirely removed, radio opera becomes an even more elusive genre to define, resulting in various hybrid forms that straddle the line between opera and incidental music. Inevitably, the absence of direct stage representation necessitates a strong reliance on the narrative dimension, to guide the listeners and ignite their imagination.

Modern Drama, 44.3 (2001), 355–61; Richard Begam and Matthew Wilson Smith, *Modernism and Opera* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016).

⁵² ‘Ma invece il sipario non si apre, E sapete perché? Perché non esiste! [...] Non c’è bisogno di una scena che faccia finta di essere vera, perché qui di vero non c’è niente [...]’. From the libretto by Giacomo Ca ‘Zorzi (Noventa) for the radio opera *Attraverso lo specchio* (1961) by Niccolò Castiglioni, based on Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There*, cit. in Carlo Piccardi, ‘Didascalicità del moderno: “Attraverso lo specchio” di Niccolò Castiglioni’, *Musica/Realtà*, 35.103 (2014), 73–130. Niccolò Castiglioni was a pupil of Ghedini’s at the Milan Conservatoire.

⁵³ Danielle Ward-Griffin, ‘Realism Redux: Staging “Billy Budd” in the Age of Television’, *Music & Letters*, 100.3 (2019), 447–79.

⁵⁴ Puchner, ‘Modernism and Anti-Theatricality’.

This is what the narrator in *Lord Inferno* sought to achieve, by prompting the audience to envision what they could not see: ‘Follow me carefully. You must see a large garden down there... do you see it?’.⁵⁵ Considered by some an ineffective interference with music in opera,⁵⁶ the use of a spoken narrator was a common device in radio operas. Proponents of the genre at the time, such as Labroca, connected this practice to the original essence of sacred mysteries, namely medieval liturgical dramas like *misteri* and *sacre rappresentazioni*.⁵⁷ Especially in the post-war period, as Angela I. De Benedictis asserts, composers’ engagement with the new medium primarily centred around this modernist epic-oratorio dimension, featuring surreal plots and metatheatrical elements, rather than exploring innovative techniques or new forms.⁵⁸ As evidenced by the two versions of Ghedini’s last opera, this tendency often saw radio operas serving as extensions and adaptations of traditional ones, in a continual interchange with the operatic stage.⁵⁹ However, with its fluctuating identity, the genre began to decline in the later 1950s, struggling to compete with the rising dominance of television. Radio operas were essentially niche products distributed through a mass medium, remaining entirely acoustic in a culture increasingly dominated by visual imagery.

...to One-Act Opera

When *L’ipocrita felice* made its debut on the stage in 1956, it was on the same bill as Stravinsky’s *Apollon Musagète* and De Falla’s *El retablo de maese Pedro*—three distinct pieces, yet together displaying an aesthetic kinship, marked by a certain neoclassical approach and restrained musical style.⁶⁰ In contrast to this musical restraint, the stage of La Piccola Scala appeared exaggeratedly

⁵⁵ ‘Ma seguitemi con attenzione. Voi dovete veder laggiù un gran giardino... lo vedete?’ Antonicelli, *Lord Inferno*, p. 4.

⁵⁶ Antonio Capri, ‘Natura e interiorità in Ghedini’, *La Scala*, 86 (1957), 37–41.

⁵⁷ Labroca, ‘Le due opere che hanno vinto il “Premio Italia 1952”’.

⁵⁸ Angela Ida De Benedictis, *Radiodramma e arte radiofonica. Storia e funzioni della musica per radio in Italia* (Turin: EDT, 2004).

⁵⁹ There were many other similar examples of radio operas later adapted for the stage, such as Ildebrando Pizzetti’s *Ifigenia* or *Cagliostro*, and Nino Rota’s *I due timidi*.

⁶⁰ Gianoli, ‘Tra i “gioielli” spagnoli e russi una moralistica opera di Ghedini’. In the press reviews, critics unanimously expressed enthusiasm for De Falla, positioning his opera as the undisputed masterpiece of the evening.

cluttered and ostentatious, akin to ‘a scenographic Olympiad crammed within a parlour’.⁶¹ Such contrasts between the visual and musical realms in the staged version of Ghedini’s opera raise the question of whether *L’ipocrita felice* was conceived as an afterthought to the earlier radio opera, an enhancement addressing the limitations of this earlier version, or instead a regression towards more conventional forms of the operatic genre.

As mentioned in his letter to Antonio Ghiringhelli, the then superintendent of La Scala, Ghedini had not eagerly embraced the proposal to stage a theatrical adaptation of *Lord Inferno* for the small stage of La Piccola Scala. This venue had been officially inaugurated only a few months prior to *L’ipocrita felice*’s premiere, on 26 December 1955, with a performance of Domenico Cimarosa’s *Il Matrimonio segreto* (1792), conducted by Nino Sanzogno and directed by Giorgio Strehler. Adorned in deliberately anachronistic Empire-style decor, La Piccola Scala aimed to evoke the intimate and refined atmosphere of Renaissance court theatres. Housing only 600 seats, the theatre catered to a discerning audience, offering an eclectic repertoire that spanned chamber classics and contemporary premieres. The theatre served as an experimental arena and a training ground for performers and professionals destined for the main stage at La Scala.⁶² Perhaps due to this mission—reminiscent of that of the Teatro delle Novità—, Ghedini was hesitant to present his most recent work at La Piccola Scala. He may have deemed it as too peripheral and experimental for a composer of his established reputation.

The question of whether the new, staged version was a superimposition on, or supplantation of the earlier radio opera is to some extent answered by the works’ material traces. While the new theatrical work bore obvious traces of the earlier radio opera, *L’ipocrita felice* was not so much

⁶¹ O.V., ‘Tre registi e tre scenografi e un palcoscenico nel palcoscenico’, *Corriere Della Sera*, 11 March 1956.

⁶² La Piccola Scala also hosted courses in music history and aesthetics for university students, as well as stage design courses for students at the Brera Academy. *Milano com’è. La cultura nelle sue strutture dal 1945 a oggi. Inchiesta* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1962).

composed anew as literally written over the previous piece. In some ways, this reinforced concerns about the opera's lack of novelty.⁶³ Both in the full score (preserved in the Ricordi archive) and the handwritten vocal score (kept in the archive of La Scala), the previous title remains discernible, despite being crossed out and replaced with the new one (see Figures 6.1 and 6.2).⁶⁴ Numerous corrections, annotations, cuts, additional pages, omitted sections and cross-references are still visible in the new version, alongside practical instructions for the conductor and technical notes for the previous radio production.⁶⁵ Musically, the disparities between the two versions range from minor register adjustments—possibly tailored to the abilities of specific performers—to substantial changes in vocal lines and orchestration, such as in the love duet.⁶⁶ The orchestration in *Lord Inferno* is notably richer and more varied, especially in the wind and percussion sections. Additionally, alongside some simplification, the instrumental parts of *L'ipocrita felice* are divided between the stage and the orchestra pit. This technique, common in opera, served to distinguish distinct dramatic levels through internal and non-diegetic music. However, in this case, it also reproduced the varying sound levels found in the radio opera.

⁶³ This was also a point of criticism directed at La Piccola Scala's initiative, which was accused of presenting works as new that were not, thus undermining its experimental mission. R.M., 'Tre spettacoli nuovi alla Piccola Scala'.

⁶⁴ The available sources include the vocal score published by Ricordi and the full score preserved in the publisher's archive. As for the radio version, there are recordings from RAI and a handwritten vocal score by Barbara Giuranna, kept in the Scala archive, which includes additional stage directions intended for 'the assistant'.

⁶⁵ These technical notes encompass aspects like synchronisation, volume balancing, timing, tape splicing and the incorporation of noise effects.

⁶⁶ As we will see, the modifications, especially those concerning the vocal parts, are typically not documented in either La Scala's or Ricordi's score. In these instances, readers are advised to refer to the official published vocal score.

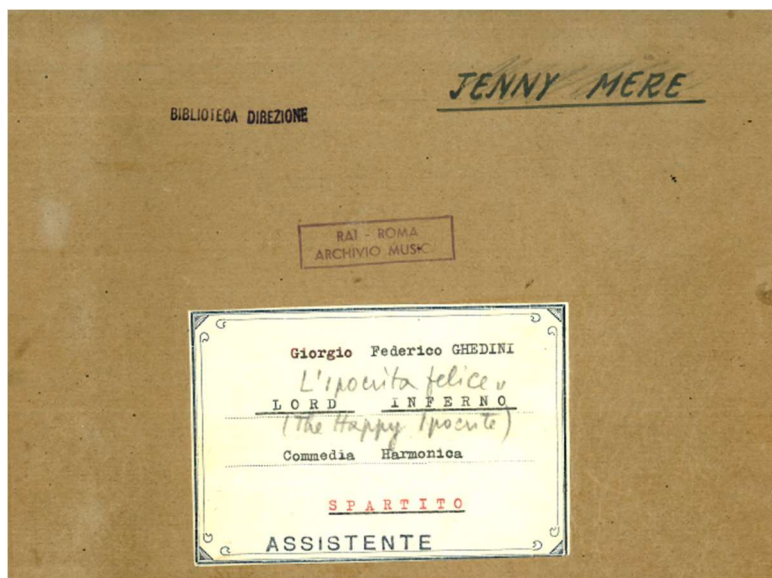


Figure 6.1. Cover page of the vocal score preserved in the archive of La Scala



Figure 6.2. Cover page of the full score preserved in the Ricordi archive

The juxtaposition of the two versions not only reveals Ghedini's rushed approach to *L'ipocrita felice* and the potentially fluid boundaries of the opera's identity, but also confirms the composer's anti-theatrical intentions, aligning with prevalent trends in twentieth-century music theatre.

Dramaturgically, aside from the removal of certain secondary characters (such as the Coryphaeus or the voices of children and governesses)—likely due to practical staging considerations—the core structure of the work remains unchanged. When reimagining *Lord Inferno* as a traditional opera with full staging, Ghedini did not abandon the narrative dimension, much like he had previously done in *Billy Budd*. Despite significant cuts,⁶⁷ he retained the role of the speaker but reconfigured the spoken-word recitation into a form of sung recitative accompanied by the orchestra. What was incidental music in the radio opera, flexible to the actor's delivery, had to systematically fit in with the part of the tenor-narrator in *L'ipocrita felice*. This metatheatrical framework was seen by many critics as an unnecessary and cumbersome complication, which hindered the opera's theatrical effectiveness.⁶⁸ The inclusion of a storyteller and a chorus of listeners, reminiscent of ancient theatre, acted as both a link and a barrier between the audience and the fairy tale. This 'double distancing effect'⁶⁹ led to a notable sense of detachment and theatrical cooling, in line with the epic quality found in certain kinds of twentieth-century theatre besides Brecht.⁷⁰ Critics viewed *L'ipocrita felice* as 'a more intellectual and allusive piece rather than theatrical', in which the composer's deliberate disregard for theatrical impact was balanced by an expert dedication to the music.⁷¹

⁶⁷ The cuts to the narrator's part mainly involve descriptions, which have now been replaced with direct on-stage representation. See, for instance, the scene where Il Nano shoots his arrow at Jenny Mere (vocal score n. 61).

⁶⁸ Alceo Toni characterised the narrator as 'a hindrance that continually interrupts the necessary focus of attention and dramatic emotion' [*un ingombro, un inciampo che viene di continuo ad interrompere il necessario accentramento dell'attenzione e dell'emozione drammatica*]. However, this opinion was shared by a wide range of critics, irrespective of their backgrounds and temperaments. Alceo Toni, 'Alti e bassi alla Piccola Scala. Un mediocre balletto di Stravinski - Un'opera onesta di Ghedini - Un capolavoro di De Falla', *La Notte*, 12 March 1956; Montale, 'Lord Inferno? No, Lord Paradiso'; Tedeschi, 'Tre interessanti lavori di De Falla'; Gianoli, 'Tra i "gioielli" spagnoli e russi una moralistica opera di Ghedini'.

⁶⁹ 'Doppiamente lontanamente' as Lionello Levi defined it in its review of the opera. Lionello Levi, "'L'ipocrita felice" di Ghedini', *Il Resto del Carlino*, 11 March 1956.

⁷⁰ See 'Il teatro epico di Igor Stravinskij' in Carl Dahlhaus, *Dal dramma musicale alla Literaturoper* (Rome: Astrolabio Ubaldini, 2014), pp. 173-208. Dahlhaus contended that a degree of epic quality was inherent in the operatic genre, stemming from the composer's pervasive aesthetic presence.

⁷¹ Fuga, "'L'ipocrita felice" di Ghedini'; Levi, "'L'ipocrita felice" di Ghedini'; R.M., 'Tre spettacoli nuovi alla Piccola Scala'.

Even with the introduction of a visual dimension, music retained its central role, bearing ‘all its rights and responsibilities’ (Tedeschi) as the cornerstone of Ghedini’s music theatre.⁷² Critics mostly characterised the music of both *Lord Inferno* and *L’ipocrita felice* as elaborate, learned, demanding, bare, cold and eclectic, with little discernible difference between the descriptions of the two works. This aligned with the broader reception of Ghedini’s output, with his music commonly seen as formally flawless but wanting in expressiveness, frequently appearing too detached and unresponsive to the dramatic content. Massimo Mila aptly defined *L’ipocrita felice* as a ‘madrigal opera’, encapsulating both its musical refinement and its anti-theatrical nature.⁷³

The inception of the opera perfectly embodies this definition, featuring a sacred and sombre chorus of weary men (reminiscent of a Dantean circle) in Ghedini’s distinctive archaic and austere style. The initial monodic phrases played by the orchestra gradually evolve into a more intricate polyphonic texture, intertwining with the choral chants as each vocal section joins sequentially (T-B-A-S). The abrupt entrance of the narrator disrupts the mood of affliction, injecting the promise of a universal fairy tale through a contrasting, somewhat mundane recitative—sung rather than spoken, as it already was in the previous radio version. Just as in the rest of *L’ipocrita felice*, this stylistic heterogeneity in the music marks the opera’s formal structure while guiding listeners through the different layers of the story. Focussing on the initial segments, this is how the music articulates the narrative levels, aiding the listener in navigating them much like the narrator does (see Table 6.1).

Music	Narrative levels		
	Level 0	Level 1	Level 2
<i>Andante</i>	Chorus of Tired Men		
<i>Poco più</i> (4)	Narrator		

⁷² Tedeschi, ‘Tre interessanti lavori di De Falla’.

⁷³ Mila, ‘Il libertino allegorico’.

(fade out)	Narrator...		
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Table 6.1. Narrative layers and musical structure in the opening scene (vocal score, pp. 1-50)

The primary diegetic marker distinguishing each level is the alternation between singing and declamation (particularly noticeable in the radio opera) and the distinct stylistic shifts from one moment to another, defining their formal boundaries akin to closed pieces. These include the opening ‘madrigal’ chorus, the narrator’s recitative style, the ‘English pseudo-military march’,⁷⁵ the eighteenth-century character piece (*Andante grazioso*), the nimble and ambiguous leitmotif representing Il Nano as a grotesque Cupid’s guide, Jenny Mere’s melodrama, and so forth. This eclecticism pervades the entire opera, a point critics emphasised, albeit with some objections. They were taken aback by the stark contrast between the archaic style of the beginning, the nods to eighteenth-century music-hall, the final Italian-style love duet, the somehow misplaced intrusion of verismo in La Gambogi’s jealousy scene, and the highly emphatic conclusion with peals of bells and a choral ‘Ah!’ on a perfect C major chord.

Ghedini’s music seemingly evokes a journey through music history, echoing the ironic eclecticism seen in operas like *La pulce d’oro*. For critics, this heterogeneity was synonymous with craftsmanship, but also conveyed a sense of detachment from the stage, as if the music merely adorned the text without striving for effects (even facile ones) or emotional engagement. The trademark bareness of Ghedini’s music sharply contrasted with the flamboyant spectacle reported in accounts of the premiere. Some even suggested that the exaggeration of the scenic elements was intended to compensate for shortcomings elsewhere, reflecting broader concerns about the decline of the operatic genre.⁷⁶ Bringing Garble’s theatre into the tight confines of La Piccola Scala, the stage teemed with dances, acrobats, extras, Chinese shadows and more. Meanwhile, the

⁷⁵ Termed as such by Ghedini, inspired by the ‘deafening bagpipes in Edinburgh’, in his letter to Carlo Pinelli (31.01.1952). Parise, *Giorgio Federico Ghedini*, pp. 302–3.

⁷⁶ Della Corte, ‘Caloroso successo dell’opera di Ghedini’.

music remained limited to a repetitive background accompaniment, serving as internal music.⁷⁷ A straightforward march tune (*Andante alla marcia*) first echoed from a distance, emanating from the ensemble on stage to accompany the narrator (see Example 6.1). It was repeated without much elaboration but steadily intensified, eventually enveloping the entire orchestra as the narration transitioned into representation.



Example 6.1. Giorgio Federico Ghedini, *L'ipocrita felice*. *Opera in un atto di Franco Antonicelli* [vocal score] (Milan: Ricordi, 1956), pp. 7-8

While the instrumental music often features simple and catchy melodies, commentators perceived the singing as lacking in *cantabilità* and somewhat disconnected from the rest of the score. This is underscored by the transition of the narrator's role from spoken to sung in the revision, without alterations to the music itself. In fact, these new parts for the narrator and other modified vocal sections are treated as entirely supplementary and distinct components, not included in the opera's full score but only in the published vocal score. Placing singing at the core

⁷⁷ Garble's vibrant theatre, with its array of oddities and performances, strongly evokes the settings and moods found in contemporary films by Fellini, such as *Luci del varietà* (1950) or *La strada* (1954).

of opera's theatrical impact, some critics condemned the vocal parts of *L'ipocrita felice* as devoid of musical appeal. Mila, for instance, found Ghedini's declamatory style to be unnatural and cold, while others lamented the monotony of the opera's vocal lines, especially regarding the main character, Lord Inferno-Lord Paradiso, whose vocal role appeared ambiguously defined.⁷⁸ In contrast, the more favourable reviews praised Ghedini's use of vocal diversity in delineating the characters within the fairy tale. Here we encounter the grotesque Garble, whose voice is broken by wide leaps, trills, staccato notes and falsetto (see Example 6.2); the enigmatic Nano, interpreted by a soprano blending seamlessly with a theme in the violins yet at the expense of textual clarity (see Example 6.3); the melodious tones of Jenny Mere, predominantly diatonic and occasionally pedantic (see Example 6.4); and the creeping, chromatic lines of Mr. Aeneas, the mask seller and master of disguise (see Example 6.5).



Example 6.2. Garble. Giorgio Federico Ghedini, *L'ipocrita felice*. *Opera in un atto di Franco Antonicelli* [vocal score] (Milan: Ricordi, 1956), p. 48



Example 6.3. Il Nano. Giorgio Federico Ghedini, *L'ipocrita felice*. *Opera in un atto di Franco Antonicelli* [vocal score] (Milan: Ricordi, 1956), p. 24

⁷⁸ Mila, 'Il libertino allegorico'.



Example 6.4. Jenny Mere. Giorgio Federico Ghedini, *L'ipocrita felice. Opera in un atto di Franco Antonicelli* [vocal score] (Milan: Ricordi, 1956), p. 45



Example 6.5. Mr Aeneas Giorgio Federico Ghedini, *L'ipocrita felice. Opera in un atto di Franco Antonicelli* [vocal score] (Milan: Ricordi, 1956), p. 64

To summarise, in the opinions of its critics, the 1956 debut of *L'ipocrita felice* showcased terse music, monotonous singing, an unnecessary narrator and an overly elaborate scenic production. In the transition from *Lord Inferno* to this stage version, the opera's various components seemed to develop independently, interweaving with each other, yet lacking a cohesive formula to harmonise them. The representational dimension of the stage was merely superimposed without supplanting the narrative, singing extended and superseded spoken word, yet without significantly affecting the music. The long-celebrated artistic unity of opera appeared to unravel through an anti-pleonastic dissociation of its components.⁷⁹ *L'ipocrita felice* further corroborated Ghedini's alignment with a certain modernist aesthetic, one that Dahlhaus associated with Stravinsky's music theatre in terms of its epic quality, display of artifice and anti-theatrical deconstruction.⁸⁰

⁷⁹ Massimiliano Locanto, 'Challenges to Realism and Tradition: Stravinsky's Modernist Theatre', in *Stravinsky in Context*, ed. by Graham Griffiths (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), pp. 153–61 <doi:10.1017/9781108381086> [accessed 10 September 2023].

⁸⁰ Dahlhaus, 'Il teatro epico di Igor Stravinskij'.

In Ghedini's final operatic ventures, opera endeavoured to exist solely on a musical plane, even without staging, yet it ultimately could not forsake the narrative dimension. The interplay between music and narrative took centre stage in *L'ipocrita felice*, as it had done in *Billy Budd*. Blurring the lines between singing and acting, and prioritising the oratorical dimension over the visual, Ghedini's post-war operas embraced a fundamentally anti-theatrical approach. The music was divorced from the stage and functioned as a complementary element to the narrator, compensating for the absence of visual elements. With a static and detached, almost documentary-like attitude, the score vividly depicted the story's settings as an internal soundtrack—capturing the sounds of Garble's theatre, the chirping of birds in Kensington wood, and more. Ghedini's music guided the listener through the various levels of the narrative as a camera lens, embracing a mimetic tone within the fairy tale and an abstract quality in the opera's surrounding metatheatrical framework.

Based on both the contemporary criticism and the analysis conducted so far, Ghedini's final work, in both of its versions, struggled to fit within the conventional boundaries of the operatic genre, typically defined as a form of theatrical representation primarily conveyed through singing. Like the earlier *Billy Budd*, *Lord Inferno-L'ipocrita felice* seemingly remained, at its core, a combination of musically illustrated stories. Furthermore, Ghedini's objectivism and display of mastery appeared to many as a mere expression of aestheticism and escapism, disengaged from both the text and the pressing issues of the contemporary context. In the final section of this chapter, I intend to propose an alternative reading of the opera and the composer's aesthetic stance through the emblem of the mask. I will delve deeper into the contours of the fairy tale and the opera's metatheatrical structure, where fiction and reality intertwine on multiple levels—in a manner reminiscent of *La pulce d'oro* but taken to more extreme consequences. According to Antonicelli and Ghedini's reading of Beerbohm's story, fatigued men yearn for a fairy tale, and

the narrator obliges by recounting a story centred on theatre, masks, hypocrisy and disguise.

From the gravity of the initial madrigal to the parodic melodrama of the final chorus, the work encompassed what Mila described as Ghedini's multiple masks, beneath which lay his unwavering 'devotion to craftsmanship'.⁸¹

Happy Ending

Despite some critics perceiving a distance between the composer and the author of the original source text, Ghedini and Beerbohm were connected by notable similarities in style and aesthetics. These commonalities are evident in their reception in mid-century Italy, where critics praised both for their refinement, restraint, cultural richness and a touch of aloofness.⁸² Aldo Camerino, one of the editors of the 1947 Italian translation of *The Happy Hypocrite*, cited Beerbohm's own words in *Ichabod* to encapsulate the essence of his aesthetical attitude:

Do not, reader, suspect that because I am choosing my words nicely, and playing with metaphor, and putting my commas in their proper places, that my sorrow is not really and truly poignant. I write elaborately, for that is my habit, and habits are less easily broken than hearts. I could no more "dash off" this my *cri de coeur* than I could an elegy on a broomstick I had never seen. Therefore, reader, bear with me, despite my sable plumes and purple; and weep with me, though my prose be, like those verses which Mr. Beamish wrote over Chloe's grave, of a character to cool emotion.⁸³

Aestheticism, a recurring theme in Ghedini's criticism, was indeed a 'habit' for Beerbohm, reflecting his decadent background as a dandy and humourist in Oscar Wilde's clique in Oxford.

⁸¹ Mila in [Ricordo e testimonianze su G. F. Ghedini], in Conservatorio di musica 'Giuseppe Verdi' di Milano, *Annuario dell'anno accademico 1964-65*, ed. by Guglielmo Barblan (Milan: Conservatorio di musica 'Giuseppe Verdi', 1965), pp. 205-40 (p. 234-8).

⁸² Domenico Bartoli, 'Non alzò mai la voce. "Max l'incomparabile"', *Corriere Della Sera*, 22 May 1956, p. 3; Aldo Camerino, *Scrittori di lingua inglese* (Milan: R. Ricciardi, 1968).

⁸³ Original quote taken from Sir Max Beerbohm, *Yet Again* (London: John Lane Company, 1910), p. 125. The 1947 edition published by Bompiani was the version Carlo Pinelli referred to, although the fairy tale had previously been published in Italy as a standalone piece in the 1930s within the pages of *Occidente*, a magazine dedicated to promoting foreign literature during fascism. Max Beerbohm, 'L'ipocrita felice', trans. by Aldo Philipson, *Occidente. Sintesi dell'attività letteraria nel mondo*, 3.8 (1934), 87-108; Max Beerbohm, *L'ipocrita felice e altri racconti*, ed. by Emilio Cecchi and Aldo Camerino (Milan: Bompiani, 1947).

A versatile writer and essayist, caricaturist and theatre critic, Beerbohm was a keen observer of the fin-de-siècle era. He used his wit and insight to satirise the pretentious, affected and absurd aspects of his fashionable contemporaries, including figures like Edmond Rostand and Gabriele D'Annunzio.⁸⁴ Beerbohm's humour seamlessly blended with his classical formalism, creating a sophisticated and allegorical array of references beneath a seemingly naïve exterior, just as in *The Happy Hypocrite*. Much like Ghedini's eclectic music, Beerbohm's fairy tale contains a bit of everything. It draws from Victorian do-goodery, rooted in the notion that doing good equates to being good. Furthermore, the idea of the mask is prominent in the fairy tale as a symbol of estrangement and a device for doubling, akin to Peter Pan's shadow. Dorian Gray's painting and the symbolism of the mirror in mythology also recur, as does the power of love in the guise of a mischievous dwarf.⁸⁵

Additionally, the fairy tale explores a series of further themes: the moralistic contrast between pristine nature and the degenerate city; the literary theme of hypocrisy and the twentieth-century exploration of the boundary between appearance and reality; the plot-clinching unmasking of both fairy tales and comic situations; the juxtaposition between the temptress and the angelic woman; the figure of the aristocratic libertine who embraces artifice as a way of life; the redeemed sinner and the Franciscan joy of poverty; and the folk wisdom encapsulated in the notion that 'clothes make the man'.⁸⁶ The narrative thus appears as a showcase of culture and refined craftsmanship, prioritising these over originality and moralistic purposes. Typical of late nineteenth-century decadence, this form of aestheticism inevitably appeared outdated to post-war

⁸⁴ In his later years, Beerbohm's ironic voice became a hallmark of British humour through BBC broadcasts. He moved to Rapallo in 1910, residing in Italy—except for the wartime periods—until his death in 1956, the same year Ghedini's *L'ipocrita felice* was staged.

⁸⁵ See a similar motif of the dwarf in Oscar Wilde's *The Birthday of the Infanta* (1891).

⁸⁶ The ending of Act I of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* could fit perfectly into Beerbohm's fairy tale: *Away, and mock the time with fairest show | False face must hide what the false heart doth know*. See also Franco Pezzini, *Victoriana. Maschere e miti, demoni e dei del mondo vittoriano* (Bologna: Odoya, 2016).

Italian critics, viewed as art suitable for happier, idle times or as a means of escape during difficult ones.⁸⁷

In the post-war context, the aestheticism, eclecticism, disregard for originality and disengagement found in Beerbohm's work could only be perceived as compounded flaws in Ghedini's opera. The choice of such a cultured fairy tale was considered unjustified and out of step with the prevailing emphasis on artistic commitment, contrasting notably with the flourishing of cinematic neorealism. According to some critics at the premiere, the opera's vague and disjointed blend of satirical, moral, legendary, mystical and symbolic elements dampened both its instructive quality and its ironic intent.⁸⁸ The optimistic moral message, encapsulated as 'Omnia vincit Amor', appeared confused, superficial and pedantic to many.⁸⁹ However, upon closer examination, it becomes clear that the opera not only embraced Beerbohm's original text but also resonated deeply with its contemporary context.

Ghedini and Antonicelli adapted Beerbohm's story, drawing inspiration from its subtitle ('a fairy-tale for tired men') to craft a metatheatrical framework for the opera—a backdrop of bitterness that envelops a story of optimism. Here lies the essence of their commitment, drawing out the relevance of *The Happy Hypocrite* in the context of the 1950s. Who were these weary men, prominently featured in *L'ipocrita felice*, longing for a fairy tale of hope and transformation? They could echo the sentiments of the composer himself, a seasoned musician nearing the end of his career, grappling with unease amid changing times. Or they could represent Italians in general, survivors of fascism and war, seeking redemption and a metamorphosis like that of Lord Inferno,

⁸⁷ Cajumi, 'L'ipocrita felice'.

⁸⁸ Abbiati, 'Tre opere in un atto alla piccola Scala'; Confalonieri, 'Novità di Ghedini alla Piccola Scala'; Fuga, "L'ipocrita felice" di Ghedini?.

⁸⁹ Teodoro Celli, 'Lord Inferno diventa Lord Paradiso', *Oggi*, 22 March 1956; C.M.; Gianoli, 'Tra i "gioielli" spagnoli e russi una moralistica opera di Ghedini?.'

whether hypocritical or genuine.⁹⁰ More broadly, the chorus of tired men, resonating like an internal audience in ancient theatre, effectively captured the ambivalent mood of the post-war era—a blend of pervasive disenchantment and fleeting optimism driven by the desire for renewal. Their choral lament voiced the collective experience of humanity—survivors of catastrophe and facing the looming spectre of new conflicts between East and West. The fairy tale of Lord Inferno served as both an escape and a guiding paradigm, offering a beacon of hope and redemption to all. ‘Sul mondo più distrutto solo Amore è speranza’: this was the final moral that Ghedini and Antonicelli presented to their contemporary audience.⁹¹

As evidenced by the output showcased at the Prix Italia, themes of hope, redemption and pacifism permeated numerous works of the time.⁹² However, the moral and seemingly simplistic optimism of *L’ipocrita felice* took on an intriguingly nuanced and ambiguous quality, inviting further reflection. Can you judge a book by its cover? At first glance, the fairy tale seemed to endorse hypocrisy through its portrayal of deception and emphasis on the superficiality of good intentions. In the radio version, the Coryphaeus explicitly asks: ‘Should we wear a mask to become what we like? Is deception allowed?’. The storyteller clarifies: ‘Every sincere intention resorts to fiction to assert itself. Of course, the wax of the mask must be of high quality (...)’

⁹⁰ Whether it was an opportunistic transformation (*trasformismo*) or a genuine conversion for the Italians, who abruptly shifted from being fascist soldiers to peace-loving democratic citizens, remains an open question. Nevertheless, as Fogu suggests, the Catholic trope of resurgence gained particular relevance in the post-war period. Paola Gambarota, ‘Uomo Qualunque: The Transnational Making of Italian Post-war Populism’, *The Italianist*, 39.1 (2019), 44–63 <doi:10.1080/02614340.2019.1586318> [accessed 7 September 2023]; Claudio Fogu, ‘Italiani brava gente: The Legacy of Fascist Historical Culture on Italian Politics of Memory’, in *The Politics of Memory in Postwar Europe*, ed. by Richard Ned Lebow, Wulf Kansteiner and Claudio Fogu (New York: Duke University Press, 2006), pp. 147–76.

⁹¹ ‘In the most shattered word, only Love is hope’. Franco Antonicelli, *L’ipocrita felice*, p. 27.

⁹² In this regard, *Ferrovia sopraelevata* (1955) by Luciano Chailly shares striking parallels with Ghedini’s *L’ipocrita felice*. When seeking a subject for an opera to be staged at the Piccola Scala, the composer chose a text by Dino Buzzati, originally conceived for the Prix Italia. The opera, premiered at the Teatro delle Novità a year before *L’ipocrita felice*, explored similar themes of transformation and love, portraying the redemption of a seasoned sinner, literally a devil. The surreal undertones of the text were complemented by music that floated between melodrama and internal music, embodying the typically modernist dissociation between operatic components. For more on Chailly’s opera, see Emanuele Franceschetti, ‘«Un senso d’eccitato tramonto». Il teatro musicale in Italia nel secondo dopoguerra (1945-1961)’ (doctoral thesis, Sapienza Università di Roma, 2021).

Love encompasses all that is authentically true'.⁹³ This new commentary, introduced by the authors and absent from Beerbohm's original text, emphasised the themes of fiction and craftsmanship as quintessential elements of art, symbolised by the presence of the mask. Looking more closely at the fairy tale's happy ending, Lord Inferno finds redemption not solely through his love but also through the transformative potency of his mask, as the epitome of both theatrical identification and estrangement. Embracing the artifice of his mask, the libertine metamorphoses into the essence of Lord Paradiso. This perspective, as suggested by Ghedini's opera, underscored how art's creative fiction had the power to reshape reality, even at its deepest levels. The fairy tale of the happy hypocrite strikingly echoed Nietzsche's words: 'everything profound loves masks', interpreting the mask as a means to both protect and reveal hidden truths.⁹⁴

This moral conclusion, combined with the matryoshka-like structure of the opera, invites a nuanced interpretation of *L'ipocrita felice* as a metaphorical exploration of the boundaries and role of art. As Garble—the pimp, supposedly 'expert on human beings'—comments on Jenny Mere's stage performance, 'fiction is fiction, but the heart always entertains doubt'.⁹⁵ The intricate interplay between reality and fiction resurfaced in Ghedini's last opera, echoing his earlier *La pulce d'oro* as well as other twentieth-century works.⁹⁶ Moreover, a broader reflection on aesthetics unfolded within the multiple metatheatrical layers of *L'ipocrita felice*. Responding to the yearning

⁹³ 'Dobbiamo metterci una maschera per diventare quello che ci piace? Possiamo servirci di un raggiri? [...] Ogni volontà sincera si giova di una finzione quasi per provare se stessa. Certo, bisogna che la cera della maschera sia di buona qualità. [...] Amore è ogni cosa vera'. Giorgio Federico Ghedini, *Lord Inferno: commedia harmonica. Riduzione per canto e pianoforte di Barbara Giuranna* (Rome: RAI, 1952), p. 29.

⁹⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil. Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, ed. by Judith Norman and Rolf-Peter Horstmann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 38.

⁹⁵ Antonicelli, *L'ipocrita felice*, p. 12.

⁹⁶ However, in *La pulce d'oro*, the reflection took an ethical direction opposite to this. More generally, both the metatheatrical structure and the complex relationship between fiction and reality resonated throughout twentieth-century theatre, touching on both aesthetic and existential themes. This was the case with works that, in different ways, echoed Ghedini's opera: De Falla's *El retablo de Maese Pedro* (in which the metatheatrical element was not added but intrinsic to the episode of Don Quixote) or the radio opera *Attraverso lo specchio* by Niccolò Castiglioni.

chorus of drained men, the fairy tale of the happy hypocrite seemingly embodied the role of art during times of crisis: its fiction restores hope, offers solace and edifies suffering humanity; the artfully crafted mask, infused with love, holds the transformative power to redeem even the vilest soul. Despite its inherent fictitious and artificial nature, art retains the potential for authenticity and commitment. Indeed, echoing André Gide's assertion that 'hypocrisy is one of the conditions of art', *L'ipocrita felice* showed how artifice becomes aesthetically necessary not to conceal or evade reality, but to actively engage in exploring, transforming and unveiling its hidden truths.⁹⁷

According to John Waterhouse, the opera provided 'a serious meditation on human nature, under the apparent *jeu d'esprit*'.⁹⁸ Yet, when considered within the framework of Ghedini's body of work and his artistic standing in the 1950s, it might hold deeper implications. A specific detail within the opera hinted at this nuanced biographical reading.

The inexpressiveness of the mask was particularly accentuated in the operatic adaptation of Beerbohm's text: while it bestows on Lord Inferno a perpetually blissful countenance, it paradoxically prevents him from smiling. Similarly, as Dario De Rosa recalled, Ghedini 'seemed like an impassive mask, making people laugh without ever laughing'.⁹⁹ Drawing insight from recurring comments in Ghedini's reception, one can discern a parallel between the fixed expression of Lord Inferno and the composer's artistic attitude, as recounted by critics. As already mentioned, Ghedini's music was consistently praised for its outward refinement and impeccable composition. However, like the hypocrite's mask, it was criticised for lacking internal inspiration—deemed inauthentic in Crocean terms—and thus perceived as inexpressive and cold. In this final phase of his career, resembling the parable of Lord Inferno, Ghedini appeared

⁹⁷ Gide quoted in *L'età vittoriana. L'immagine dell'uomo fra letteratura e scienza. Atti del IV Congresso dell'Associazione italiana di anglistica, Perugia, 9-11 ottobre 1981*, ed. by Piero Boitani and Vanna Gentili (Rome: Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 1982), p. 259.

⁹⁸ John C.G. Waterhouse, 'Lord Inferno', in *Grove Music Online* (2002) <<https://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-5000004531>> [accessed 24 November 2021]

⁹⁹ De Rosa's interview in Parise, 'Profilo di Giorgio Federico Ghedini'.

determined to redeem his music from this prevailing criticism, as if asserting the authentic intentions and true inspiration hidden behind the assumed inexpressiveness attributed to him.

Some perceived his departure from the sophisticated complexities of *Le Baccanti* as a move towards greater simplicity and humanity, as evidenced in operas like *Billy Budd* and *L'ipocrita felice*.¹⁰⁰ Conversely, for others, Ghedini's last opera reached the pinnacle of artificiality with its intricate structure and cultured music, drawing even on the genre's madrigalian origins.¹⁰¹

Prioritising artistic creation and its form—symbolised metaphorically by the craftsmanship of the mask—over explicit and direct engagement in political and social issues was not well-received in the post-war milieu and indeed was prone to being misunderstood as detachment and isolation. With bitter irony, Ghedini portrayed himself as one of the 'right-wing conformist composers', who felt compelled to continue composing in a traditional mode, contrary to contemporary trends in mechanised and automatic music-making such as the aleatory music and post-serialism, which constrained the composer's creative freedom. He remarked, 'we should regard ourselves as remnants and survivors, and our compositions as museum pieces'.¹⁰² In addressing the unease among the contemporary middle generation of Italian composers, Gavazzeni explained that they were facing the consequences of their exclusive focus on music.¹⁰³ Nevertheless, despite the varying opinions of critics and the evolving phases of his career, the principle of prioritising music remained the central thread of continuity and the bedrock for the artistic coherence that defined Ghedini's oeuvre.

¹⁰⁰ A.F., 'Apollo Musagete di Stravinski- L'ipocrita felice di Ghedini - El retablo de Maese Pedro di De Falla, alla Piccola Scala', *Il Sole 24 Ore*, 11 March 1956.

¹⁰¹ Riccardo Allorto, 'Teatri e concerti. Due novità alla Scala', *Ricordiana*, 2.4 (1956), 195–97; Mila, 'Il libertino allegorico'.

¹⁰² Ghedini quoted in Andrea Della Corte, 'Lettere di Giorgio Federico Ghedini ad amici', in *Accademia di Santa Cecilia. Manifestazioni Culturali, Anno Accademico 1965-66* (Rome: Eurosia, 1965), pp. 17–44 (p. 29).

¹⁰³ Gavazzeni cited in Estero, 'Il musicista come intellettuale', p. 354.

In a sense, as if coming full circle, Beerbohm's *The Happy Hypocrite* echoed the parable form and late-D'Annunzian aestheticism of *Maria d'Alessandria*, Ghedini's inaugural opera. *L'ipocrita felice* reaffirmed love as a path to redemption but avoided martyrdom and culminated in a happy ending. In his final opera, Ghedini illustrated that not only love but also beauty—and by extension, art—can serve as saviours for humanity. *L'ipocrita felice* seemingly revisited the moral optimism encapsulated in the classical ideal of *kalokagathia*, where inner and outer beauty harmoniously coincide. This conclusion could be read as a happy ending in Ghedini's operatic narrative: after navigating the moral disillusionment depicted in *Re Hassan*, *Le Baccanti* and *Billy Budd*, this final chapter of *L'ipocrita felice* reintroduced a glimmer of hope for the possibility of human redemption and happiness. This aligned with an ethically committed vision of art, viewing it not merely as a tool for escapism and deceit but as a genuine human necessity and as an edifying beauty. Ultimately, Ghedini's last opera can be interpreted as a profound aesthetic statement by the composer, firmly articulating his stance in the heated post-war discourse. His stance represented one of the many nuanced positions in Italy, navigating between the demands of technique and expression, realism and formalism, while steering clear of extremisms.¹⁰⁴

Bonisconti coined the term 'umanesimo ghediniano' to encapsulate Ghedini's attitude. The ethos and concern for the human stood as a distinctive watchword in post-war Italian culture, embracing both moral commitment and the defence of music's expressiveness against excessive technicality.¹⁰⁵ Enacting the modernist conflict between authenticity and theatricality, truth and performance, *L'ipocrita felice* embodied Ghedini's steadfast belief in art as a redemptive form of fiction, especially when it was sincere and well crafted. As the opera illustrated, humanity relies on fairy tales and beauty not just to endure, but also to attain redemption. This was the ideal of

¹⁰⁴ Roderick, 'Rebuilding a Culture'; Nicolò Palazzetti, *Béla Bartók in Italy: The Politics of Myth-Making* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2021); 'Spectral Opera: Britten's *The Turn of the Screw*, 1954', in Harriet Boyd-Bennett, *Opera in Postwar Venice: Cultural Politics and the Avant-Garde* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp. 91–118.

¹⁰⁵ Angiola Maria Bonisconti, 'Il teatro musicale di Giorgio Federico Ghedini', *Musica d'oggi*, 4.5 (1961), 194–200; Roderick, 'Rebuilding a Culture'.

art that Ghedini pursued and sought to preserve at a time when art's primacy and pleasure appeared to be overshadowed by the demands of innovation, commitment and authenticity.

CONCLUSION

‘Why did I give up opera?’, Goffredo Petrassi revealed in an interview, ‘Because, in opera, in a certain sense, one has to strip oneself naked’.¹ Along the same lines, with *Lord Inferno*, Ghedini figuratively shed his ‘impassive mask’, bringing his operatic journey to a close.² In the early 1960s, the composer continued to explore new projects, yet never settled on a definitive direction. Even Pirandello, he felt, fell short as a potential source, his writing unsuitable for opera’s demand of ‘less erudition and more humanity’, with opera requiring straightforward situations over ‘dialectical ambiguity’.³ Simplicity was the aesthetic ideal of the older Ghedini, in stark contrast to prevailing trends. As we have seen, the composer’s final years were imbued with a deep sense of bitterness and isolation, as he found himself increasingly estranged from the evolving landscape of contemporary music.

Harkening back to the Beethovenian model, Ghedini sought to elevate his music to a realm of contemplation and purification, culminating in his last unfinished composition, *Symphonia*, which was comprised solely of perfect chords. In his decades of productivity after World War II, Ghedini’s music seemed to increasingly fall out of step with the times. His later output responded to the changing times in a seemingly fragmented and contradictory manner, complicating the identification of common threads. Drawing some conclusions from the multifaceted narrative of his operas is thus no simple feat. This narrative intricately weaves diverse contemporary cultural trends and musical styles: the crisis of opera and its potential resolution, the interplay between

¹ Quoted in Raymond Fearn, *Italian Opera since 1945* (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic, 1998), p. 24.

² As seen in the previous chapter, ‘impassive mask’ is how Dario De Rosa defined Ghedini’s persona, able to evoke laughter without ever cracking a smile. Quoted in Stefano Parise, ‘Profilo di Giorgio Federico Ghedini’ (dissertation, Università degli Studi di Milano, 1992), p. 553.

³ Ghedini’s letter to Carlo Pinelli (14.12.1961) in Stefano Parise, *Giorgio Federico Ghedini. L’uomo, le opere attraverso le lettere* (Milan: Ricordi, 2003), p. 334.

power and culture, as well as the intermingling of tradition and innovation, all set against the backdrop of Italian history during the middle decades of the twentieth century. Amid the perceived fragmentation, I will now endeavour to uncover the underlying threads of continuity that have surfaced throughout the chapters, weaving through both Ghedini's operas and the broader historical and cultural context. Building upon recurring motifs in Ghedini's reception, I will spotlight eclecticism and aestheticism as the dual focal points of this narrative, consistently framed by the dichotomy of anachronism and timeliness.

The first aspect of continuity that stands out is how the case of Ghedini spotlights the unwavering attention to and economic backing for the genre from the Italian state, regardless of dramatic changes in the political landscape. After his debut at the Teatro delle Novità with *Maria d'Alessandria* in 1937, Ghedini's operas graced esteemed venues such as La Scala and La Fenice (theatres now supported by the fascist government). He also enjoyed the support of state-funded initiatives aimed at promoting and preserving new contemporary operas: the aforementioned Teatro delle Novità; the striking initiative of the *Cicli di opere contemporanee*, which hosted *Re Hassan* in 1942, amidst the turmoil of war; the Venice Festival commission of *Billy Budd* in 1949; the Prix Italia, promoted by RAI and awarded to Ghedini's *Lord Inferno* in 1952; and the activities of the Piccola Scala, which included staging *L'ipocrita felice* in 1956.

Amidst pervasive debates on its crisis, the genre seemingly survived on state-funding, deeply intertwined as it was with a sense of national identity. The major challenge for operatic institutions, promoters and composers was to revitalise the established repertoire with new operas, promoting a lively and contemporary production. It was in the context of this production ethos that Ghedini's works emerged, and against which they were judged. However, the relevance, 'newness' and 'contemporary' nature of Ghedini's works, premiered within new music festivals and under the aegis of contemporary opera prizes, was not always immediately evident

and ignited considerable controversy. Outdated subjects were frequently paired with music deemed innovative, or vice versa, and contemporary themes were developed within more conventional forms. As we have seen, the mystical late-D'Annunzian parable of *Maria d'Alessandria*, sourced from a medieval hagiographic collection and not new in the operatic realm, was uniquely infused with Ghedini's idiosyncratic style. Likewise, *Re Hassans*'s historical drama of a tyrant and his people resonated with well-worn operatic tropes, but was set with distinctly modern and harsh sonorities. With its whimsical contrasting character, *La pulce d'oro* instead merged the tradition of comic opera with the contemporary currents of magic realism and neoclassicism. Later, the ancient and enigmatic tragedy of Euripides—a common trope in twentieth-century opera—became a playground for Ghedini's heightened modernism in *Le Baccanti*. Conversely, the poignant narrative of Melville's sailor *Billy Budd* and the didactic fairy tale of Beerbohm's *L'ipocrita felice* were complemented by clearer sounds and more conventional forms, almost akin to closed pieces.

The diversity of subjects, forms, musical styles and techniques, evident across Ghedini's operas and even within each individual one, confirmed eclecticism as a fundamental trait of his output and a paradoxical component of continuity. Beyond the composer's evolving trajectory, eclecticism indeed surfaced as a pervasive and steadfast hallmark of Ghedini's approach to composing opera. Different influences subtly interwove within and across his works. The reference to the D'Annunzian-Pizzettian current was evident in *Maria d'Alessandria*, while Busoni's neoclassical irony informed the composition of *La pulce d'oro* and its intertwining of diverse stylistic elements. In *Le Baccanti*, Bartók's nocturnal atmospheres and Stravinsky's primitive tones resonated throughout the opera, enriching its complex sonic landscape. Meanwhile, in the final two operas, popular motifs were juxtaposed with elaborate polyphonic textures.

If all of this has already been brought to light through the analyses in the preceding chapters, here it is interesting to underscore the broader implications and interpretations that such eclecticism could encapsulate. The primary facet to consider concerns the pivotal and complex—sometimes contentious—relationship between music and text, at the core of Italian operatic criticism. Unlike many twentieth-century opera composers who penned their own librettos, Ghedini consistently relied on literary collaborators to draft the texts for his works, in accordance with a conventional division of roles. The composer envisioned the libretto as a preliminary sketch, akin to a ‘skeletal scaffold’ upon which to build the music in a manner that aligned with the text’s ‘tone’.⁴

According to some observers, Ghedini’s eclecticism enhanced the music’s adherence to the varied situations and characters portrayed in the libretto, evoking a nuanced revival of the Renaissance and Baroque representativeness of music. The composer tailored his technical and stylistic means to convey the diverse *affetti* depicted in the text. Rather than merely describing and superimposing the content of the libretto, his music translated it using its own language, employing eclecticism as a means for expression.⁵

Conversely, according to his detractors, Ghedini’s eclecticism was a vain display of technical mastery and skill, which fell short of capturing the dramatic essence of the text in its entirety. The music seemingly ran in parallel to the narrative, rather than enhancing its meaning.

The stylistic fragmentation compromised the audience’s ability to engage fully with the stage, while the pursuit of musical innovation did not always align with the quest for dramatic depth.

⁴ See Ghedini’s letter to Carlo Pinelli (19.09.1944) in Parise, *Giorgio Federico Ghedini*, pp. 218–19; Giorgio Federico Ghedini, ‘Note su «Le Baccanti» e su altri lavori’, *Agorà*, II.1 (1946), 23–25.

⁵ In this line of thought, see Guido Salvetti, ‘La presenza di Giorgio Federico Ghedini nella storia del primo Novecento italiano’, in *Ghedini e l’attività musicale a Torino fra le due guerre. Atti del convegno in occasione dell’Anno Europeo della Musica (Torino, 14-15 gennaio 1986)*, ed. by Teatro Regio (Turin: Teatro Regio, 1986), pp. 7–14; Giovanni Ugolini, ‘Il teatro di Ghedini’, *La Scala*, 1962.149 (1962), 27–33; Angiola Maria Bonisconti, ‘Il teatro musicale di Giorgio Federico Ghedini’, *Musica d’oggi*, 4.5 (1961), 194–200. Furthermore, it is relevant to recall the reviews penned by Andrea Della Corte and Franco Abbiati, consistently praising Ghedini’s music for its adept portrayal of atmospheres and character psychology.

Ghedini's music seemed to act as an adornment to the scene, almost like its double.⁶ The result was an apparent misalignment between music and text, manifesting in a sense of detachment. In this perspective, as already evidenced in *Maria d'Alessandria*, Ghedini's eclecticism led to a uniquely idiosyncratic form of modernism. This was defined by a paradoxical search for expressiveness through twentieth-century methods of objectivity, such as the ironic appropriation of the past, the blend of disparate styles and the intentional display of the composer's craftsmanship. All this excelled in the parodic neoclassical setting of *La pulce d'oro* but appeared incongruous elsewhere. As Castiglioni suggested, Ghedini leaned towards neoclassicism and employed its historical and technical filters more out of his musical instinct than any intentionality.⁷ Petrassi vividly recalled Ghedini as a 'passionate individual with a stern image', conveying his intensity through a notably cool and detached demeanour.⁸ From this standpoint, the composer's modernism appeared to arise merely as a by-product, an unintended consequence between his intentions and the actual outcomes. However, as revealed in the preceding chapters, Ghedini's operas featured several more modernist traits—traits that were noted by contemporary critics—including their elitist and anti-theatrical nature.

Widely characterised by its complexity and aristocratic tone, Ghedini's music seemingly catered to a refined audience of connoisseurs rather than appealing to the broader public. With an air of austerity and outward aloofness, the emotion within Ghedini's music was to be pursued actively by the listener rather than freely given. According to his pupil Pinelli, there was a disproportion between the richness and intensity of Ghedini's ideas and the restrained means employed to actualise them.⁹ The composer was keenly aware of the challenging dynamics of engaging with the opera audience: 'this is precisely why music akin to Mascagni's garners such success [...] in

⁶ Ferdinando Ballo, 'La stagione di opere contemporanee a Milano', *Musica*, 2 (1943), 220–35.

⁷ Castiglioni's interview in Parise, 'Profilo di Giorgio Federico Ghedini', pp. 547–49.

⁸ Petrassi's interview in *ibid.*, p. 572.

⁹ Carlo Pinelli, *Re Hassan, di Giorgio Ghedini* (Milan: La lampada, 1942).

opera, certain commonplaces are indispensable'.¹⁰ Yet, Ghedini's operas bore unmistakably anti-operatic traits: a sense of dramatic stasis, austere soundscapes, eclectic and cultured references, all contributed to a lack of sensationalism and hindered the audience's immediate identification.

Ultimately, in Ghedini's last operas, the very essence of opera itself, as a genre traditionally defined by the integration of singing and stage performance, was profoundly challenged.

Ghedini's theatre undeniably emerged as deeply entwined with modernist sensibilities, regardless of whether it was a deliberate artistic intent or an incidental result on the part of the composer.

The pervasive sense of detachment, the contentious disconnection between music and stage, as well as between opera and its audience, and the general inclination towards anti-theatricality in Ghedini's works, all aligned closely with certain modernist trends of the time. More specifically, Ghedini's case seems to perfectly embody the discord inherent in modernist opera, riven 'between the desire to estrange and the equally compelling desire to absorb and enchant'.¹¹

Ghedini's eclecticism carried further implications, beyond its impact on the relationship between music and text and its modernist repercussions: it touched upon both aesthetic nuances and ideological undercurrents. When juxtaposed with the unfolding cultural politics within the historical context, Ghedini's style and its reception unveil insights into the intricate interplay between culture and power, offering valuable perspectives on the processes of transformation and continuity. At his debut at the Teatro delle Novità, the multifaceted stylistic range of *Maria d'Alessandria* not only reflected but also seemingly diplomatically negotiated the heightened tensions within the Italian musical landscape of the time. In the words of the critic Piero Santi, Ghedini appeared akin to a figure 'standing amidst the turmoil, indifferent to it'.¹² In this context,

¹⁰ From Ghedini's letter to his pupil Attila Poggi (07.01.1943) in Parise, *Giorgio Federico Ghedini*, p. 177.

¹¹ Richard Begam and Matthew Wilson Smith, *Modernism and Opera* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016), p. 12

¹² Piero Santi, 'Ghedini', *L'approdo musicale*, 21 (1966), 163–66.

his eclecticism could adeptly navigate the complex dynamics of pluralistic fascist policies and the inherent factionalism they entailed. Even after the demise of fascism, especially during the years of national unity government, the embrace of eclecticism retained its political efficacy, deftly balancing diverse tendencies and tempering their extremes. As seen, those years represented a pinnacle of achievement for Ghedini, characterised by widespread acclaim and resounding success across various fronts. The composer's eclectic style, once detached from factionalism during the regime, now emerged as an even stronger symbol of national unity. This highlights another thread of continuity from the regime to post-fascist Italy, firmly grounded in the ethos of cultural pluralism and the lack of any dominant cohesive movements.

While eclecticism might have been seen as politically neutral to some extent, the matter grew more complex when assessed from an aesthetic standpoint, particularly when considering the role of art within society and throughout history. As emerges from his reception, Ghedini's eclecticism inevitably prompted a certain accusation of aestheticism in the eyes of critics, a charge that held considerable weight in both Crocean and post-war aesthetics. According to many, Ghedini's works were perceived not as arising from genuine inspiration or commitment, but rather as being indifferently influenced by circumstances or conformity to the cultural trends of the time, extrinsic to the composer's own nature.¹³ If—as Mila strikingly put it—'writing an opera is akin to giving birth', Ghedini seemed to regard the process as a less laborious activity, regarding subjects and librettos as mere pretexts for crafting good music.¹⁴ The emphasis on aesthetic pleasure and the refinement inherent in aestheticism—broadly defined as advocating art

¹³ See Robert Aloys Mooser's opinion in [Ricordo e testimonianze su G. F. Ghedini], in Conservatorio di musica 'Giuseppe Verdi' di Milano, *Annuario dell'anno accademico 1964-65*, ed. by Guglielmo Barblan (Milan: Conservatorio di musica 'Giuseppe Verdi', 1965), pp. 205-40 (pp. 238-9).

¹⁴ Massimo Mila, 'Il libertino allegorico di Federico Ghedini', *L'Espresso*, 25 March 1956.

for art's sake, in other words, actually reveals its pivotal role in the complex interplay between culture and politics during this period.

Closely interwoven with the dimension of eclecticism, aestheticism forms a second focal point in Ghedini's operatic narrative, symbolically encapsulating it within a circle: far from being just a pose, as critics suggested, it served as the explicit source of inspiration for both Ghedini's inaugural and concluding operas. As illustrated in the first chapter, in fact, the late-D'Annunzian subject of *Maria d'Alessandria*, resonating with the themes and optimism of fascist rhetoric, inherently embodied an implicit aestheticism. This, combined with a notably heterogeneous musical style, inevitably conflicted with the Crocean ideals of authentic art.

Later, after nearly two decades and a series of very diverse operas, Beerbohm's fairy tale marked a deliberate return to early twentieth-century aestheticism in *Lord Inferno*. The seeming disengagement of the story and its happy ending, driven by the moral redemptive force of the mask, resurfaced with a somewhat polemical optimism, subtly challenging the prevailing contemporary rhetoric of *impegno*. Ghedini's penchant for eclecticism stood as a vivid counterpoint to the increasingly radicalised tendencies of the 1950s. Within this framework, as suggested in the concluding chapter, the aestheticism of *L'ipocrita felice* assumed a deeper significance, promoting a delicate balance between levity and commitment and emphasising the fusion of artistic quality and expression as a means of moral catharsis.

Clearly, Ghedini's aesthetic vision embraced multiple facets and influences: a dedication to craftsmanship intertwined with the quest for expressiveness, technical mastery was paired with inspiration stemming from Crocean philosophy, and compositional rationality melded with elements of spiritualism. Yet, amidst scepticism regarding his musical identity and intellectual awareness, one can identify recurring themes and a distinctively modern approach to music-making as a continuous thread throughout his operatic oeuvre. Criticism at the time and

subsequent reception provide useful insights in this regard. According to Ugolini, Ghedini's operas emanated a 'profound moral dedication, a conscious engagement with the history of contemporary man'.¹⁵ In the same vein, Andrea Lanza introduced the concept of 'moral theatre' to encapsulate the ongoing exploration within Ghedini's operas into the essence of human nature, its boundaries and the potential for redemption.¹⁶ From Maria's religious conversion to the ominous presence of evil in *Billy Budd*, from Moraima to Penteo, Ghedini's main characters frequently emerge as martyrs.

The tragic confines between guilt and innocence, choice and fate, were probed deeply by Ghedini, resulting in a sense of disillusionment and cynicism that pervades his operas. A recurring penchant for mysticism and an enduring undercurrent of moral and existential pessimism resurfaces in many of them. The happy ending is granted solely to the first and the last of his operatic works. In this pessimistic vein, a discernible Nietzschean thread seems to reverberate across different themes, from the portrayal of the D'Annunzian superwoman in *Maria d'Alessandria* to the Dionysian spirit depicted in *Le Baccanti*, as well as the pivotal motif of masks in *Lord Inferno*. On a broader scale, we can observe how the twentieth-century reflection on the boundary between fiction and reality not only surfaces as a recurring theme within Ghedini's operas (most prominently in *La pulce d'oro* and *L'ipocrita felice*), but also prompted an exploration of the very limits of the theatrical stage. The technique of off-stage or disembodied voices, along with metatheatrical moments, appeared frequently in Ghedini's works. The moments of mimetic onstage singing, like those of Moraima in *Re Hassan* and the protagonist in *Billy Budd*, thus attain heightened significance.

¹⁵ Giovanni Ugolini, 'Dramma e spiritualità di Ghedini', *La Scala*, 159 (1963), 7–15.

¹⁶ Andrea Lanza, "'... una stesura che ho voluto secca e avara di parole...". Ghedini e il teatro d'opera: uno sguardo d'insieme', in *Giorgio Federico Ghedini: dallo spirito torinese alle suggestioni europee. Atti del convegno, Torino, 22 gennaio 2016*, ed. by Giulia Giachin (Turin: Edizioni del Conservatorio, 2017), pp. 79–98.

Nevertheless, according to numerous critics of the time and subsequent scholars, the allure, innovation and cohesion of Ghedini's theatre were not rooted in his choice of themes or dramatic techniques, but rather resided in the music, particularly in its unique sonic quality. As previously hinted, the term 'teatro timbrico', coined by Piero Santi, effectively encapsulated similar sentiments expressed by many critics.¹⁷ According to Gavazzeni, timbre was not merely a quality or distinguishing trait of Ghedini's music. It constituted the latter's primary compositional principle in opera, from which characters, settings and actions originated and were imbued within the sonic realm. Gavazzeni, as an expert conductor, asserted that Ghedini's operas were a reference model for employing the orchestra, prioritising timbral expression over a symphonic approach.¹⁸ As highlighted also by D'Amico, sound thus emerged as the unifying and formal cornerstone of Ghedini's works.¹⁹

Within this framework, his operas progressed through a succession of vivid sonorous images, each episode finely delineated by its unique timbral qualities.²⁰ The music absorbed the drama in Ghedini's operas, embodying its expressive essence and dialectical contrasts. As Riccardo Allorto put it, and as fully exemplified by the radio opera *Lord Inferno*, Ghedini's theatre seemed to 'lack any need for scenic enhancements beyond those conveyed through sound'.²¹ This modern emphasis on timbre was undoubtedly one of the hallmark traits of Ghedini's style. His musical legacy endured throughout the 1950s, resonating through the composers of the new generation, a fact readily acknowledged by his own pupils: 'Ghedini stood steadfastly beside us, his gaze fixed on the future'.²² The composer's meticulously crafted soundscapes and his controversial eclecticism reverberated in the works of authors like his pupil Berio and in the postmodern

¹⁷ Piero Santi, 'Ghedini e il suo teatro timbrico', in *Ghedini e l'attività musicale a Torino fra le due guerre*, pp. 15–26.

¹⁸ Gianandrea Gavazzeni, 'La musica di Ghedini', *Letteratura*, 33 (1947), 152–7.

¹⁹ *Ghedini e l'attività musicale a Torino fra le due guerre*.

²⁰ Santi, 'Ghedini e il suo teatro timbrico'.

²¹ Riccardo Allorto quoted in Ugolini, 'Dramma e spiritualità di Ghedini', p. 9.

²² Niccolò Castiglioni cited in Parise, 'Profilo di Giorgio Federico Ghedini', p. 549.

techniques of collage: recall, for example, the comparison drawn in the third chapter between *La pulce d'oro* and *Allez-hop*. Ghedini's idiosyncratic position within twentieth-century Italian music effectively acted as a bridge connecting the modernists of the *generazione dell'80* with subsequent generations, beginning with Petrassi and Dallapiccola first and extending to the emerging avant-garde movements of the post-war period.

Regardless of whether the institutions that hosted Ghedini's operas championed them as 'contemporary' and 'new', and of critical scepticism as to their timeliness, there is no doubting that—as the preceding chapters have shown—his operas were intimately entwined with the evolving context.²³ Ghedini's work 'can be variously interpreted as escapism or existential, but it is certainly of its moment'.²⁴ Whether in spite of this embeddedness or because of it, however, Ghedini's operas seemingly faltered in standing the test of time and did not endure much beyond the specific historical moment of their inception. Therefore, a final question arises: why did these operas, much vaunted at the time, subsequently vanish from both music history and the repertoire?

As Gatti articulated it in 1948, 'the works of Ghedini, however praiseworthy from the standpoints of form and effective sound-texture, do not make a decisive impression, because of their scant lyric breath and consequent weakness of melodic invention. An unpleasant coldness surrounds them and makes them staccato and inhuman, like a landscape seen through a crystal'.²⁵ As early as 1944, Ghedini himself remarked about *Le Baccanti*, 'if the opera lacks, it will be due to a deficiency in inspiration, poetry and melodic imagination. These are qualities I don't possess

²³ Massimo Mila, 'Modernità e antimodernismo in Malipiero', in *Omaggio a Malipiero. Atti del Convegno di studi malipieriani promosso dalla Fondazione Giorgio Cini (Venezia, 29-30 maggio 1972)*, ed. by Mario Messinis (Florence, Olschki, 1977), pp. 15–20.

²⁴ Peter O. Roderick, 'Rebuilding a Culture: Studies in Italian Music after Fascism, 1943-1953' (doctoral thesis, University of York, 2010), p. 343 <<https://etheses.whiterose.ac.uk/997/>> [accessed 5 May 2023].

²⁵ Guido Maggiorino Gatti, 'Current Chronicle: Italy', *The Musical Quarterly*, XXXIV.2 (1948), 268–71 <[doi:10.1093/mq/XXXIV.2.268](https://doi.org/10.1093/mq/XXXIV.2.268)> [accessed 26 July 2022].

abundantly, and even if I did, I would hesitate to showcase them for fear of appearing overly emphatic and redundant'.²⁶ Was Ghedini's obsolescence primarily due to his inability to embody the warmth, expressiveness and *cantabilità* that had long permeated the tradition of Italian opera? Both timely and out of step, contemporary and traditional, his operas seemingly fell in between critical divides, unable to engage both new audiences and aficionados of the repertoire. Ghedini's case epitomises a much broader discourse on the genre, on the search for opera's saviour. As Graziosi poignantly asserted in 1945, 'the prospect of awaiting a new Verdi or Puccini seems increasingly futile'.²⁷

In an era when the past and future of art were consciously interrogated, debates over what constituted a successful formula for an Italian opera in the twentieth century endured. What has emerged here is that regardless of what that formula should be, there was clearly much at stake in asking, and clearly much still at stake in theatrical forms of music. As Dallapiccola put it, 'after the death of *melodramma*, theatre endures'.²⁸ In reality, upon examination of current opera season programmes in the twenty-first century, it becomes strikingly evident that operas succeeding Puccini's works have made only a sparse appearance in the repertoire of opera houses. Striking a balance between theatrical impact, modernity and audience acclaim appears an elusive feat. As the reception of Ghedini's works proves, the opera of the new century was perceived as a sort of idealised phoenix, against which the actual composed works were unfavourably compared. Regardless of the solutions put forth by each individual opera—closed pieces or open forms, singing or recitation, narration or representation—the genre continued to languish in a state of stagnation. The once cohesive unity of opera was steadily disintegrating. Theatre and music no

²⁶ From Ghedini's letter to Carlo Pinelli (19.04.1944) in Parise, *Giorgio Federico Ghedini*, pp. 218-9.

²⁷ Giorgio Graziosi, 'Un diverso teatro musicale', *Il Mondo*, 4 August 1945, p. 12.

²⁸ Quoted in Carmelo Alberti, 'Tradizione, innovazione e trascrizione e nella messinscena delle opere liriche italiane del Novecento eclettico', in *Il Novecento musicale italiano tra neoclassicismo e neogoticismo. Atti del Convegno di studi (Venezia, 10-12 ottobre 1986)*, ed. by David Bryant (Florence: Olschki, 1988), pp. 305-40 (p. 339).

longer merged seamlessly; instead, they interacted with each other in dynamically shifting proportions and relationships. Ghedini's last two operas served as compelling examples of this divergence, each exploring different paths: in *Billy Budd*, the composer exalted the scenic design through collaboration with esteemed artists like Guttuso; in *Lord Inferno*, he pursued a complete detachment from the visual dimension. All solutions were potentially valid and 'contemporary', as D'Amico might have observed, yet they ultimately proved ineffective in reforming the genre and in reinstating its social and timely significance.

Following the endless discourses on crisis, perhaps we come to the realisation that opera, as a living form of art, is a genre historically circumscribed, determined not only in its inception but also in its decline. Drawing from my firsthand experiences as a musician and a schoolteacher, along with my recent research and placement at La Scala, the state of opera in Italy today does not appear to stray far from Ghedini's era. Low-cost productions of iconic operas from the repertoire are set against picturesque backdrops for tourists and aficionados during the summer seasons. Meanwhile, lavish spectacles continue to serve as social gatherings and status symbols within prestigious venues like La Scala, an ongoing juggernaut of cultural production and entertainment. Within the programming of such institutions, what is striking is how few new operas feature, and how few seem to find any kind of foothold in the repertoire. While in the age of Ghedini this was a matter for urgent redress, discourse today on the matter is now laced with resignation. To mention a few names from the past decade of seasons at La Scala, contemporary composers like Giorgio Battistelli, Thomas Adès and Francesco Filidei remain relatively unfamiliar to the broader public, their works in danger of being swiftly eclipsed by the passage of time. Revivals of forgotten twentieth-century operas are sporadic and typically limited to niche and specialised audiences, as seen in the case of the 2018 staging of Ghedini's *Billy Budd* at the Milan Conservatoire.

Perhaps more than any other musical genre, opera encapsulates the profound dilemma of modern art, as articulated by Taruskin: the struggle between existing ‘in history or in society’.²⁹ Investigating the decline of opera and its perceived obsolescence after Puccini, as seen through the lens of Ghedini’s works, has thus led to compelling findings. As opera’s popular allure steadily waned, the ongoing discussion about its crisis and the concerted efforts to secure its survival underscore the enduring significance of the operatic tradition in Italy and the intimate intertwining of their respective histories. As demonstrated by this thesis, navigating between anachronism and relevance, opera continues to be a prominent topic and a valuable vantage point for understanding the evolution of Italian history during the turbulent years between the first and second halves of the twentieth century. Despite historical categorisations and resets, the case of Ghedini has emerged above all as an appropriate and engaging perspective for exploring the intricacies of this history and its unbroken continuities.

²⁹ Quoted in Roderick, ‘Rebuilding a Culture’, p. 195.

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