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INTRODUCTION

Introduction: Remembering Italian Operetta

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Received wisdom has it that the Marxist intellectual and political theorist Antonio Gramsci wrote little about music. Nevertheless, scattered across his *Quarderni del carcere* (1929–35) are a small number of trenchant comments on Italian opera, which Gramsci probed for its role in creating the civil society of a unified Italian state – a state whose failures led to the rise of the Fascist regime that kept him imprisoned for the last decade of his life.[1] In Mary Ann Smart's words, 'Gramsci saw the popularity of opera in Italy as both a substitute for and an impediment to the development of his preferred vehicle for Romantic sentiment, a popular literature that demanded a solitary and reflective mode of consumption diametrically opposed to the experience of the opera house.'[2] Opera's melodramatic excess partly accounted for what Gramsci saw as the Risorgimento's failure to be a truly popular movement in Italy; from an infirmity on the aesthetic plane sprang many of the irresolvable cultural and political schisms that beset unified Italy.

This critique of Italian opera as a dissatisfactory vehicle for real political engagement and interior reflection is relatively well known. Rather less familiar is that Gramsci wrote extensively on music prior to his prison years, as co-editor of the Turin edition of the Italian Socialist Party organ *Avanti!* Between 1916 and 1919, Gramsci contributed around eighty (mostly unsigned) reviews of musical events in the Piedmontese capital.[3] Although he lacked musical training – he described himself as a 'reporter' (*cronista*) rather than a critic – his music criticism presents us with a very different face of the austere individual who later founded Italy's first Communist Party. True, Gramsci was clearly a firm opponent of the most popular contemporary Italian operas, those by Puccini and Mascagni above all. But the picture that emerges is of a man interested in theatre in the broadest sense – spoken and lyric, Italian and dialect, serious and popular – who spent a considerable number of evenings in popular venues such as the Politeama Chiarella and the Teatro Alfieri. Indeed, between a third and a half of his reviews (close to forty in total) were not of classical concerts or opera at all, but rather of operettas.

[1] Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* were first published in 1947, a decade after his death. The standard original-language critical edition is Antonio Gramsci, *Quaderni del carcere*, ed. Valentino Gerratana (Turin, 1975).

[2] Mary Ann Smart, 'Verdi, Italian Romanticism, and the Risorgimento', in *The Cambridge Companion to Verdi*, ed. Scott L. Balthazar (Cambridge, 2004), 29–45, at 29.

[3] These reviews have been collected for the first time in Antonio Gramsci, *Concerti e sconcerti: Cronache musicali (1915–1919)*, ed. Fabio Francione and Maria Luisa Righi (Milan, 2022). As Righi explains in her introduction, Gramsci's activity as music critic has gone unnoticed due to a perception of his antipathy to music, as well as difficulties in attribution; see *Concerti e sconcerti*, 11–37.

Gramsci professed the largely disparaging view of operetta typical of both his own educated background and the growing socialist intelligentsia he had joined. Initially tolerant, in a paternalistic way, of operetta's tuneful charms, he increasingly dismissed the genre as a vacuous diversion for a complacent pan-European bourgeoisie. Like many critics, Gramsci seems on occasion simply to have wished for a better public, one less susceptible to 'the waltzes and the dancing, the sentimental arias and the carefree songs, the risqué situations and the abundant double-entendres' that were regularly served up by Italy's many operetta companies.[4] Unlike his German contemporary Siegfried Kracauer – who famously used Offenbach's operettas as a lens through which to examine Parisian society in the years after 1848 – Gramsci left no grand tract on the genre.[5] Yet from his concise critiques of the evanescent works that flitted across Turin's stages, operetta nevertheless emerges as a decadent successor to Romantic opera, no less than *La bohème* or *Cavalleria rusticana*: a symptom of a frivolous, belated culture that failed to address the serious challenges of the day. In the dying days of Liberal Italy, operetta shaped Gramsci's views of popular culture and the mechanics of cultural hegemony alike.

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Readers of this journal are likely to be as unfamiliar with Italian operetta as they are with the idea of Gramsci as its reluctant consumer and critic. Italian operetta has had virtually no place in studies of Italian music in the 1800s and 1900s, even in Italy. But as this special issue hopes to demonstrate, the moment is ripe to expand the purview of Italian music history beyond the country's paradigmatic opera tradition. Over the last decade or so operetta has established a tentative foothold in musicology and theatre studies. A range of scholars including Carolyn Abbate, Micaela Baranello, Tobias Becker, Camille Crittenden, Derek Scott, Laurence Senelick and Clinton D. Young have shown that this quintessentially hybrid, cosmopolitan genre has much to tell us about fundamental transformations in musical culture during the period of its greatest flourishing (*c.*1850–1930).[6] Operetta, these scholars have argued, testifies to a growing divide between art and entertainment, the transnational circulation of works and performers, and spectacular entertainment as a symptom of urban modernity; while the tension between satire and sentiment at the heart of many of the most famous operettas highlights the allure of a genre that offered both the ephemeral pleasures of escapism and nostalgia, and a sardonic look at rapidly changing modern societies.

Italian operetta, we argue, participated fully in all of these trends, while bearing witness to issues specific to Italy's musical history and its shifting political landscape. Even a very brief look at the historical record and the abundant extant sources reveals that operetta (both foreign and native) was a crucial component of the entertainment landscape on the Italian peninsula for decades. It was a career-making genre for thousands of actors and singers, conductors and musicians, impresarios and publishers, not to mention the means

[4] Gramsci, review of *Amami, Alfredo!* (music by Ettore Bellini, libretto by Edmondo Corradi), in *Avanti!* (29 June 1918); reproduced in *Concerti e sconcerti*, 145.

[5] Siegfried Kracauer, *Jacques Offenbach and the Paris of His Time*, trans. Gwenda Davis and Eric Mosbacher (New York, 2002). Kracauer's book was originally published in 1937, the year of Gramsci's death.

[6] A necessarily incomplete list of these scholars' works would include Carolyn Abbate, 'Offenbach, Kracauer, and Ethical Frivolity', *The Opera Quarterly* 33/1 (2017), 62–86, part of a special issue on operetta co-edited with Flora Willson; Micaela Baranello, *The Operetta Empire: Music Theater in Early Twentieth-Century Vienna* (Berkeley, 2021); Tobias Becker, 'Globalizing Operetta before the First World War', *The Opera Quarterly* 33/1 (2017), 7–27; Camille Crittenden, *Johann Strauss and Vienna: Operetta and the Politics of Popular Culture* (Cambridge, 2006); Derek B. Scott, *German Operetta on Broadway and in the West End, 1900–1940* (Cambridge, 2019); Laurence Senelick, *Jacques Offenbach and the Making of Modern Culture* (Cambridge, 2017); Clinton D. Young, *Music Theater and Popular Nationalism in Spain, 1880–1930* (Baton Rouge, 2016). For an evaluation of the critical trends in this body of scholarship see Marco Ladd, 'Review Article: The Importance of Being Serious', *Cambridge Opera Journal* 34 (2022), 124–34.

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through which countless Italians travelled the globe; in this respect alone, as Matteo Paoletti has recently shown, it is obvious how operetta complemented the global peregrinations of the Italian opera industry in the nineteenth century.[7] As time went by, however, 'Italian operetta' – meaning Italian-language operetta written by Italian composers and librettists – played an increasingly important role in conversations about the vitality of Italian artistic traditions and, in a broad sense, in discourses of Italian nationhood.

Two contrasting examples can serve to throw operetta's enmeshment in national and international flows of goods and people, ideas and ideologies into sharp relief. Figure 1 reproduces an advertisement that appeared in the operetta industry magazine *L'opera comica* in 1911, publicising the personnel and repertoire of the 'Città di Napoli' operetta company. Around eighty people – not including the orchestra – worked for 'Città di Napoli', which was based in Naples and proudly proclaimed itself an 'Italian company', yet whose repertoire included an international *mélange* of Viennese operettas, Spanish *zarzuelas* and Italian ballets, as well as 'novelties' (*novità*) in each genre which were more often by Italian authors. Yet if this example seems to highlight the porous nature of Italian operetta's Italianness, Figure 2, in contrast, shows how easily the genre could be pressed into service of aggressively nationalistic ends. Again drawn from the pages of *L'opera comica*, Figure 2 reproduces a photograph of a newly built politeama in Tripoli, capital of Italian Tripolitania: the new colony Italy established in North Africa in the wake of the Italo-Turkish War. At its inauguration on 2 March 1913, the caption tells us, an Italian operetta company led by Maurizio Parigi performed Franz Lehár's *Eva* (1911) before an audience including 'the Italian authorities, foreign delegates and Arab notables' – suggesting that as an element of European urban modernity, operetta (even Viennese operetta) was considered indispensable in the projection of Italian colonial ambition to rival powers, and the construction of Italian authority in the eyes of its new colonial subjects. Operetta in Italy, in other words, was always dialectically intertwined with an idealised notion of Italian operetta, and this conceptual conflict drove the evolution of the genre throughout its existence.

Departing from this founding premise, the five articles in this issue put the entire span of Italian operetta under the microscope, from its contested emergence in the 1860s to its heyday in the early 1900s to its long afterlife in the mid-twentieth century. Many of the earliest Italian operettas were unashamed adaptations of foreign works, and the divide between foreign and native would be particularly contested throughout Italian operetta's history. At the same time, operetta almost immediately became entangled with pre-existing local genres and practices. As Elena Oliva argues, operetta's enmeshment with dialect theatre was a powerful discursive force shaping the cultural need for a national – Italian – operetta tradition. Likewise, for Ditlev Rindom, operetta's hybridisation with the Neapolitan song tradition *c.*1900 traces an alternative path through Italian music of this period, one that bypasses the Milanese epicentre of the Giovane Scuola in favour of an operetta school coming out of Naples – not least the crucial, controversial figure of Carlo Lombardo, the composer, librettist, impresario and publisher who would later come to dominate the entire Italian operetta industry. Ironically, the genre's immense popularity with Italian audiences would also lure many established opera composers, such as Mascagni, Leoncavallo and Giordano, to try their hand at *la piccola lirica*, 'little opera'. By the 1910s the major music publishers Ricordi and Sonzogno, key protagonists of the Italian opera industry across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, competed to cash in on the commercial opportunities presented by operetta – even if, as Alessandra Palidda shows, the Sonzogno firm had been a key node in the circulation of comic opera for decades. But the social, economic and political upheaval in the

[7] Matteo Paoletti highlights the global circulation of operetta in his *A Huge Revolution of Theatrical Commerce: Walter Mocchi and the Italian Musical Theatre Business in South America* (Cambridge, 2020), 39–48.

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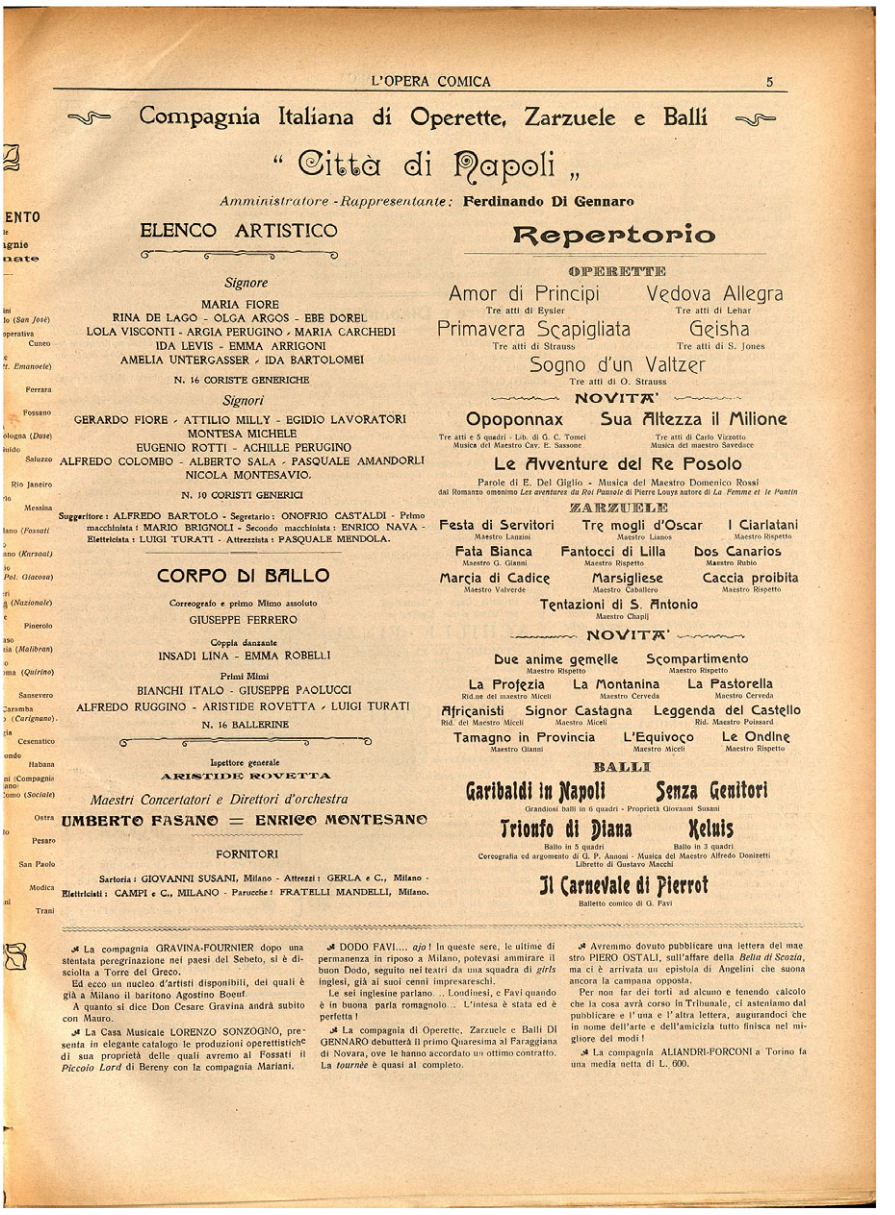

L'OPERA COMICA 5

Compagnia Italiana di Operette, Zarzuele e Balli

" Città di Napoli "

Amministratore - Rappresentante: **Ferdinando Di Gennaro**

ELENCO ARTISTICO

Signore

MARIA FIORE
RINA DE LAGO - OLGA ARGOS - EBE DOREL
LOLA VISCONTI - ARGIA PERUGINO - MARIA CARCHEDI
IDA LEVIS - EMMA ARRIGONI
AMELIA UNTERGASSER - IDA BARTOLOMEI

N. 16 CORISTE GENERICHE

Signori

GERARDO FIORE - ATTILIO MILLY - EGIDIO LAVORATORI
MONTESA MICHELE
EUGENIO ROTTI - ACHILLE PERUGINO
ALFREDO COLOMBO - ALBERTO SALA - PASQUALE AMANDORLI
NICOLA MONTESAVIO.

N. 10 CORISTI GENERICI

Suggeritore: ALFREDO BARTOLO - **Segretario:** ONOFRIO CASTALDI - Primo macchinista: MARIO BRIGNOLI - Secondo macchinista: ENRICO NAVA - **Elettricista:** LUIGI TURATI - Attrezzista: PASQUALE MENDOLA.

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Coppia danzante
INSADI LINA - EMMA ROBELLI

Primi Mimi
BIANCHI ITALO - GIUSEPPE PAOLUCCI
ALFREDO RUGGINO - ARISTIDE ROVETTA - LUIGI TURATI

N. 16 BALLERINE

Ispettore generale
ARISTIDE ROVETTA

Maestri Concertatori e Direttori d'orchestra
UMBERTO FASANO = ENRICO MONTESANO

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Repertorio

OPERETTE

Amor di Principi — Tre atti di Eysler
Vedova Allegra — Tre atti di Lehar
Primavera Scapigliata — Tre atti di Strauss
Geisha — Tre atti di S. Jones
Sogno d'un Valtzer — Tre atti di O. Strauss

NOVITA'

Opoponnax — Tre atti e 5 quadri - Lib. di G. C. Tomei - Musica del Maestro Cav. E. Sassone
Sua Altezza il Milione — Tre atti di Carlo Vizzotto - Musica del maestro Savelucc

Le Avventure del Re Posolo
Parole di E. Del Giglio - Musica del Maestro Domenico Rossi
dal Romanzo omonimo *Les aventures du Roi Pausole* di Pierre Louys autore di *La Femme et le Pantin*

ZARZUELE

Festa di Servitori — Maestro Lanzini
Tre mogli d'Oscar — Maestro Lianos
I Ciarlatani — Maestro Rispetto
Fata Bianca — Maestro G. Gianni
Fantocci di Lilla — Maestro Rispetto
Dos Canarios — Maestro Rubio
Marcia di Cadice — Maestro Valverde
Marsigliese — Maestro Caballero
Caccia proibita — Maestro Rispetto
Tentazioni di S. Antonio — Maestro Chapli

NOVITA'

Due anime gemelle — Maestro Rispetto
Scompartimento — Maestro Rispetto
La Profezia — Rid.me del maestro Micoli
La Montanina — Maestro Cerveda
La Pastorella — Maestro Cerveda
Africanisti — Rid. del Maestro Micoli
Signor Castagna — Maestro Micoli
Leggenda del Castello — Rid. Maestro Poissard
Tamagno in Provincia — Maestro Gianni
L'Equivoco — Maestro Micoli
Le Ondine — Maestro Rispetto

BALLI

Garibaldi in Napoli — Grandioso ballo in 6 quadri - Proprietà Giovanni Susani
Senza Genitori
Trionfo di Diana — Ballo in 5 quadri
Keluis — Ballo in 3 quadri
Coreografia ed argomento di G. P. Annoni - Musica del Maestro Alfredo Donizetti - Libretto di Gustavo Macchi

Il Carnevale di Pierrot — Balletto comico di G. Pavi

La compagnia GRAVINA-FOURNIER dopo una stentata peregrinazione nei paesi del Sebeto, si è disciolta a Torre del Greco.
Ed ecco un nucleo d'artisti disponibili, dei quali è già a Milano il baritono Agostino Boeuf.
A quanto si dice Don Cesare Gravina andrà subito con Mauro.

La Casa Musicale LORENZO SONZOGNO, presenta in elegante catalogo le produzioni operettistiche di sua proprietà delle quali avremo al Fossati il *Piccolo Lord* di Bereny con la compagnia Mariani.

DODO FAVI.... *ajo!* In queste sere, le ultime di permanenza in riposo a Milano, potevasi ammirare il buon Dodo, seguito nei teatri da una squadra di *girls* inglesi, già ai suoi cenni impresareschi.
Le sei inglesine parlano ... Londinesi, e Favi quando è in buona parla romagnolo ... L'intesa è stata ed è perfetta!

La compagnia di Operette, Zarzuele e Balli DI GENNARO debutterà il primo Quaresima al Paraggiana di Novara, ove le hanno accordato un ottimo contratto. La *tournée* è quasi al completo.

Avremmo dovuto pubblicare una lettera del maestro PIERO OSTALI, sull'affare della *Bella di Scozia*, ma ci è arrivata un epistola di Angelini che suona ancora la campana opposta.
Per non far dei torti ad alcuno e tenendo calcolo che la cosa avrà corso in Tribunale, ci astenlamo dal pubblicare e l'una e l'altra lettera, augurandoci che in nome dell'arte e dell'amicizia tutto finisca nel migliore dei modi!

La compagnia ALIANDRI-FORCONI a Torino fa una media netta di L. 600.

Figure 1 Advertisement for the 'Città di Napoli' operetta company, *L'opera comica* (21 February 1911), 5. Courtesy of the Biblioteca Braidense, Milan | Su concessione del Ministero della Cultura – Pinacoteca di Brera – Biblioteca Braidense, Milano. Further reproduction prohibited.

aftermath of the First World War burst the operetta bubble just as it was beginning to look like the most lucrative genre available to Italy's composers. Throughout the 1920s, as Marco Ladd discusses, the genre was perceived to be in crisis, under threat from new media (such as cinema) and new styles of popular music. After 1930, new compositional contributions to the genre declined rapidly, thereby helping to fix the leading composers of the 1920s – Mario Costa, Giuseppe Pietri and Virgilio Ranzato – into a small 'canon' that has dominated perceptions of Italian operetta ever since. Yet operetta continued to be performed

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Anno VII - N. 6. Milano 1 Aprile 1913 Conto corrente postale

L'OPERA-COMICA

ABBONAMENTO ANNUO: in Italia L. 5 - Estero L. 8
Un numero separato Cent. 10 — Arretrato Cent. 20
Inserzioni: Nelle *Forbiciate* ogni linea o spazio L. 0.20
Negli *Stelloncini* » » » 0.30
PAGAMENTO ANTICIPATO

Giornale d'Operette
Uffici Via Silvio Pellico N. 8 - Telef. interc. 17-49
Esce il 1 e il 15 d'ogni mese — Per telegrammi: OPERCOM - Milano

L'OPERETTA NELLE NUOVE TERRE D'ITALIA

Per gentile concessione del giornale IL SECOLO

Il Politeama di Tripoli, costruito dall'Ing. Battiti ed inaugurato la sera del 2 marzo 1913 dalla Compagnia di Maurizio Parigi, con *Eva* di Lehar alla presenza delle autorità Italiane, delle legazioni estere e delle notabilità arabe.

I NOSTRI TEATRI

La Mar-Gar-Car trionfante al Fossati - Il « Cavalier della Luna » ed altre cose al Kursaal. Dante il tosco al Verdi.

Sarebbe ovvio accennare che il Fossati è tornato ai leggendari *tutto esaurito* con la venuta della Maresca-Garisenda-Caracciolo che ha ritrovato a sua volta la fitta coorte degli ammiratori più sfegatati. Gli elementi nuovi sono pochi, su quelli brevemente c'intratterremo. Abbiamo avuto fino ad oggi *Principessa dei dollari*, *Sogno di un valzer*, *Casta Susanna* e *Ulani di Hardestein*. Inutile accennare a bellezza di messa in iscena ad esuberanza di masse e nemmeno all'eleganza e al valore dell'impeccabile Pompeo Rlechieri, maestro e donno della fiorente Ditta.

Gea della Garisenda, sempre più doviziosa di mezzi vocali e di grazie - oltre alla perfezione interpretativa di « Franzi » di « Alice » e della « Principessa » negli *Ulani*, ha incarnato *Susan-*

Figure 2 Colonial operetta: Photograph of the Politeama di Tripoli. Reproduced in 'L'operetta nelle nuove terra d'Italia', *L'opera comica* (1 April 1913), 1. Courtesy of the Biblioteca Braidense, Milan | Su concessione del Ministero della Cultura – Pinacoteca di Brera – Biblioteca Braidense, Milano. Further reproduction prohibited.

(especially in minor theatres) and consumed in recorded form for many decades after 1930, and would linger on as an intermedial presence in Italian comedy throughout the mid-twentieth century. Indeed, its medial afterlife in Italy extended to the early days of television

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and the LP, even if, in Emanuele Senici's analysis, by this point its consumption was entangled in the complicated politics of memory surrounding the recently fallen Fascist regime.

As this outline suggests, the broad history of operetta in Italy passes through many of the same stations familiar from histories of operetta in Paris and Vienna. Accordingly, Italian operetta poses various challenges to historians, some shared with the genre as a whole but others unique to its Italian variant. Many early Italian operettas only survive as librettos, reflecting their strictly local circulation before the emergence of a national market in the 1890s. Such libretti also present a deceptively fixed textuality that belies operetta's flexibility in adaptation – for works were readily cut, rewritten and translated to suit local and often fleeting circumstances – and its frequent foregrounding of improvisatory performance that leaves no written trace. Within Italy this methodological challenge is particularly pronounced since a significant proportion of Italian operettas were already loose adaptations of French and Viennese works, with new libretti also re-used and re-adapted by multiple composers. While a small number of eminent names and famous works was established already by the 1910s and 1920s – evidence of growing efforts to establish an Italian operettistic canon to match its operatic counterpart – a scholarly approach that focuses simply on works, composers and the linear development of a tradition has particular limitations in an Italian context, since Italian operetta was always perceived as being in dialogue with (or under the sway of) foreign operetta. Operetta's foreign provenance was an intellectual challenge for Italian critics from the start, even though it was an obvious symptom of the country's participation in a broader Western European modernity that these same critics often sought to advance.

The manifold critiques of Italian operetta from contemporary observers (such as Gramsci) accordingly need to be treated with care. Both the denunciations of Italian operetta as artistically and morally bankrupt and the nationalistic calls for a genuinely Italian form of operetta reflected Italian critics' self-defined role as cultural gatekeepers, in spite of obvious public enthusiasm for many forms of the genre. The grooves cut by these rhetorical wheels have moreover had a lasting influence on subsequent historiography. Much of what Micaela Baranello has observed with respect to Viennese operetta is paralleled in the Italian case: in post-war Italy the genre was either dismissed as the epitome of the Adornian culture industry by severe guardians of the Western art music tradition, or celebrated uncritically by enthusiasts in terms strikingly reminiscent of a century earlier.[8] The difference, of course, is that no Italian work has had the influence of a *Fledermaus* or a *lustige Witwe* (or a *Belle Hélène*, for that matter), a situation that emerges as a running thread across all five articles. In this respect it is telling that perhaps the most sustained critical examination of the genre's Italian history to date has been penned not by a musicologist, but by the cultural historian Carlotta Sorba, in an article that explores the operetta industry's central role in forging Italy's emerging entertainment sector in the late 1800s.[9] Sorba's work, together with valuable recent contributions by Valeria De Lucca and Matteo Paoletti, serves as a key reference point for several of the articles in this issue, which collectively argue that examining the history of Italian operetta sheds light on major themes that have long interested both opera historians and scholars of modern Italy.[10]

[8] See Baranello, *The Operetta Empire*, 182–89. Waldimaro Fiorentino's *L'operetta italiana: Storia, analisi critica, anedotti* (Bolzano, 2006), for instance, is framed explicitly as a work of appreciation and advocacy, in ways that limit its scholarly applications.

[9] Carlotta Sorba, 'The Origins of the Entertainment Industry: The Operetta in Late Nineteenth-Century Italy', *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 11/3 (2006), 282–302.

[10] Valeria De Lucca, 'Operetta in Italy', in *The Cambridge Companion to Operetta*, ed. Anastasia Belina and Derek B. Scott (Cambridge, 2019), 220–31; and Paoletti, *A Huge Revolution of Theatrical Commerce.* See also Paoletti's chapter '"The Operetta Seasons Considerably Decreased Our Losses": Art and Business from Italian Ledgers of the Early

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Building on these foundations, the remainder of this introduction presents a brief survey of Italian operetta's history, both to complement the more detailed, smaller-scale historical arcs traced by each of the five articles, and to outline the manifold ways that Italian writers – critics and proponents of operetta alike – have discussed the Italian form of the genre since its emergence. For one crucial feature of the history of Italian operetta is the way observers of the tradition have found it impossible to define the genre cleanly, its identity hotly contested throughout its heyday and long afterlife in the twentieth century.

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In the beginning, Italian operetta was simply transplanted French operetta.[11] Offering a simple summary of what primordial Italian operetta sounded and looked like in the 1860s is remarkably difficult; likewise discerning which elements would have been perceived as 'Italian' or not. What is certain is that operetta's status as an imported genre was especially challenging in a newly formed country whose political leadership often leant on its operatic heritage as a symbol of national identity. If any genre was to provide light-hearted music-theatrical entertainment for the new Kingdom of Italy, critics argued, surely it ought to be *opera buffa* – a venerable artform that had a strong claim to be the true forefather to operetta as a whole. Unsurprisingly, the French operettas by Offenbach and Hervé (first substantially introduced by the Grégoire brothers in 1866 following tentative efforts by the Meynadier company) were frequently framed as having been inspired directly by *opera buffa*.[12] But this *opera buffa* tradition was also understood to be under direct attack from these highly successful French imports, particularly given that Italian operatic composers at this time were increasingly focused on producing serious works. Early Italian efforts to engage with the new Frenchified genre commonly prompted conservative critics to demand that composers attach themselves overtly to the older Italian tradition, even as composers themselves increasingly defended their engagement with the genre.[13]

As Elena Oliva discusses in her article, Italian operetta was from the beginning trapped between competing critical narratives: fetishistic reverence for Italian comic traditions, paranoid narratives of foreign 'invasion' and scepticism towards the widespread cultivation of hyper-local dialect traditions. Throughout the 1870s a growing profusion of generic labels (*operetta*, *opera comica*, *opera buffa*) tried both to make sense of the mixing of styles and to place new Italian works within a lineage of short one-act operas and farces cultivated on the peninsula since *c.*1800. This critical discourse, however, ignored the vitality of the hybrid traditions that sprang up in the grey area between operetta and dialect theatre – whose very success helped nurture the desire for an Italian-language variety of operetta that would later efface the crucial contribution of dialect works in seeding the genre across the peninsula. The success of this broader cultural operation by the new operetta industry can be discerned

1900s', in *Genre Beyond Borders: Reassessing Operetta*, ed. Bruno Bower, Elisabeth Honn Hoegberg and Sonja Starkmeth (Abingdon, 2024), 13–27.

[11] Elena Oliva, *L'operetta parigina a Milano, Firenze e Napoli (1860–1890): Esordi, sistema produttivo e ricezione* (Lucca, 2020).

[12] The claim that operetta first emerged in Italy in the mid-nineteenth century, and via France, has been challenged by Gianni Borgna in his *Storia della canzone italiana* (Milan, 1992), citing Donizettian examples from the 1830s. Nonetheless it is clear that 1866 marked an epochal arrival of operetta both practically and discursively.

[13] Prominent defenders included the Florentine composer Agostino Sauvage, in his article 'Operetta nell'arte', in *Atti dell'Accademia del R. Instituto Musicale di Firenze* (1888), 53–64. The apparent decline of *opera buffa* in post-unification Italy, already queried by Francesco Izzo in his *Laughter Between Two Revolutions:* Opera Buffa *in Italy, 1831–1848* (Rochester, NY, 2013), has been further challenged by the research network 'Between Grandeur and Derision: The Evolution of Musical Dramaturgy in Unified Italy' at the University of Bern, funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation.

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in a comic epigram of 1892 penned by *Il teatro illustrato*'s regular contributor E. Evaschi, which evidently encapsulated a widespread view at the time:

L'opera buffa fioria un dì in Italia	*Opera buffa* flourished in Italy
E n'eran celebrati i suoi cantanti	And its singers were admired across the land
Ma venne orribil peste dal di fuori	But a horrible plague came from abroad
Col nome d'*operetta*; è un *animalia*	Known as *operetta*; a musical *animalia*,
Musical, antiartistica, sgualdrina	Both anti-artistic and promiscuous,
Che l'opera nostral mandò in rovina.	That drove our native opera into the ground.[14]

Tellingly, the epigram's gendered and xenophobic morality tale – the native blooms of *opera buffa* trampled by a dissolute and exotic feminine invader, sexually and taxonomically Other – passes over the active role played by Italian performers and audiences in nurturing operetta on the peninsula. Yet its ironic tone – not to mention its publication by Sonzogno, one of the pre-eminent figures in the operetta scene – suggests that this invasion was enthusiastically welcomed by Italian audiences.

The growing popularity of operetta in these years throws into new light the image, still common, of these years in Italian music history as a barren interregnum between mid-century *bel canto* and the invigorating influence of turn-of-the-century *verismo*, punctuated only by the increasingly sporadic output of an ageing Verdi and various attempts at Meyerbeerian *grand opéra*.[15] Certainly, a central factor in operetta's success (both foreign and Italian) in these early years was its ongoing and ever-renewing appeal during a period when successful operatic premieres across Italy were few and far between. Both Milan and Rome boasted a wide range of operetta theatres, as the two cities competed for economic and political power in the decades following Unification and a vast range of new venues such as politeamas sprang up across Italy. But at least as important, theatrically speaking, was Naples. The former Bourbon capital had suffered badly from its loss of political status and claims that Naples's storied *opera buffa* tradition was in terminal decline echoed dismay at the city's shocking urban decay, voiced in particular by writers and politicians from the North. And yet, renowned for its rich dialect theatrical tradition and celebrated nationally and internationally for its song tradition, Naples played a central role in developing a native operetta tradition via the interaction between different genres and performance spaces throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

As Ditlev Rindom's article explores, the reported Italianness of early Italian works in this genre regularly reflected their engagement with regional practices. Quintessentially Neapolitan phenomena such as *canzone napoletana* or Pulcinella shows could (and did) function as national signifiers that could also serve as standard-bearers of *italianità* internationally; hence Neapolitan operetta could travel on established channels of national, continental and transatlantic commerce and become increasingly Italian in the process. Yet the free interplay between operetta and the Neapolitan song industry – a hybrid tradition that was in many ways an Italian counterpart to Tin Pan Alley, albeit shaped by its historical and literary prestige – was emblematic of a tension in Italian operetta that would eventually develop into a full-blown identity crisis, as the genre was torn between its idealised potential

[14] E. Evaschi, *Il teatro illustrato e musica popolare* (November 1892), 176.

[15] See, for instance, Jay Reed Nicolaisen, *Italian Opera in Transition, 1871–1893* (Ann Arbor, 1980), and Julian Budden, *The Operas of Verdi*, vol. 3, *From* Don Carlos *to* Falstaff (London, 1981), 261–91. For a revisionist account focused on innovation, see Francesca Vella, *Networking Operatic Italy* (Chicago, 2022).

to serve as a lighter form of opera and its role in (and economic dependence on) disseminating popular music. Naples illustrates clearly how Italian operetta's essential generic instability was a strength in the early decades of the genre, allowing it to draw on local traditions of opera, theatre, song, pantomime and dance, and to move between a dizzying range of performance spaces. As the genre became ever more popular and its national and international conventions began to stabilise, however, this inherent generic fluidity became more of a stumbling block, as divisions between subsidised 'art' and commercial 'entertainment' hardened.

If concerns about Italian operetta's 'Italianness' were already a critical commonplace by the late 1800s, during the early 1900s such concerns reached fever pitch. So-called 'Silver Age' Viennese operetta, inaugurated by Lehár's *Die lustige Witwe* in 1905, was profoundly influential in Italy: its sweet sentimentality conquered Italian stages across the peninsula, prompting native composers to embrace both the plot structures and contemporary musical styles associated with Lehár, Kálmán and others.[16] From a historiographical perspective the early years of the twentieth century function as a crucial fulcrum for Italian operetta, both the genre's zenith as an active composing and performing tradition and the point at which writers started to historicise this tradition. Several specialist journals were founded to promote operetta among audiences and industry professionals, such as *L'opera comica*, *L'operetta* and *Lo spettacolo*, while the nascent theatrical unions represented by publications such as *L'argante* sought to bring the growing operetta workforce into the national labour movement. Articles exploring the history of operetta also began to emerge in less overtly partisan venues – even elite publications affiliated with major broadsheets – indicating both a market for titillating anecdotes and a critical rapprochement with a once raucously populist genre.[17] Typically discussing the major historical turning points and emphasising key Italian contributors to the genre, such articles speak of the Italian establishment's growing desire to engage with (and domesticate) operetta for nationalistic ends, as well as the professional mobility of librettists, composers, journalists and playwrights such as Renato Simoni and Arturo de Cecco.

Music publishers, unsurprisingly, played their own part in shaping this operetta boom. None other than Giulio Ricordi himself was an active operetta composer under the pseudonym Jules Burgmein, a Franco-Austrian pen name that underlined the genre's cosmopolitan profile. The Sonzogno firm, however, was arguably the most significant publishing force shaping the fortunes of operetta in Italy. It was Sonzogno that began importing vast quantities of foreign works from the 1870s onwards, and Sonzogno that first encouraged its roster of opera composers (notably Leoncavallo) to engage with operetta; indeed, the firm even launched a dedicated operetta competition in 1913 that (it was hoped) would act as a successor to the renowned one-act opera competition that had launched Mascagni's *Cavalleria rusticana* in 1890. As Alessandra Palidda's article examines, Sonzogno's activities embedded the Italian operetta world firmly within a broader European media landscape. The multi-pronged and commercially agile activities of Sonzogno facilitated the international export of Italian works, while revealing how operetta's predisposition towards hybridity allowed the genre to thrive within a rapidly shifting medial and technological environment. But the publisher's machinations also highlight the increasing pressure to identify an unimpeachably Italian set of composers who could satisfy a strictly national market for operetta, something that was also becoming obvious (if contested) in the way that critics were gradually beginning to describe the genre's history.

One particularly revealing example of this nascent Italian operetta historiography is a recurring column published between 1914 and 1916 in *L'opera comica* (founded 1907) under

[16] Lehár's work received its Italian premiere as *La vedova allegra* in April 1907 at Milan's Teatro dal Verme.

[17] See, for instance, Carlo Cordara, 'La mania operettistica', in *La stampa* (23 March 1910), 3; and Ulderico Tegani, 'Nel mondo dell'operetta', in *La lettura: Rivista mensile del Corriere della sera* (September 1911), 830–8.

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the title 'L'archivio operettistico'. Consisting of some eighteen entries in all, this 'archive' of operetta was the initiative of the journal's co-editor, journalist Marco Ramperti, and was evidently an exercise in legitimisation. The first column begins with a self-aware, meta-theatrical flourish, a brief note from the 'bouncers' of the establishment addressing the reader–spectator with the promise that the new endeavour will offer 'an episodic and anecdotal history of operettas of every time and every place'.[18] The series covers disarmingly familiar bases to modern scholars of operetta, locating the origins of the genre in Paris and Vienna, Offenbach and Strauss. Yet operetta's foreign origins seem to have posed no threat, in spite of concerns Ramperti voiced elsewhere at the genre's growing sophistication and diminishing spontaneity. He evidently saw himself – and the Italian performers and composers on whose behalf his magazine advocated – as belonging to a shared European tradition of which Italy was clearly part. Perhaps Ramperti, later a prominent figure in the Fascist literary establishment, would have continued by writing a more chauvinistic defence of native operetta composer had the series not abruptly stopped publishing in 1916, a year after Italy's entry into the First World War; tellingly, there is no entry on Italian operetta per se, despite columns on Spanish *zarzuela* and operetta in Turkey.[19] Still, the articles expose an easy cosmopolitanism surrounding the genre at the height of its success at odds with critical anxiety articulated elsewhere, when operetta was expected for both practical and artistic reasons to operate in a wider theatrical ecosystem alongside a range of foreign works, and indeed other genres.

The First World War, however, was highly disruptive to this pragmatic consensus.[20] Arguments for an 'Italianisation' of the operetta industry were frequently founded on a bald economic case for supporting Italian workers against foreign competition; such views were turbo-charged in the heightened patriotism (and xenophobia) of wartime. At the same time, the ongoing critical project of identifying an Italian operettistic canon acquired new urgency. Critics were ever more apt to champion the latest popular Italian composer as 'truly Italian', to claim that Italian works displayed a more 'sincere' comic vein than the Viennese, and to inveigh against greedy impresarios and publishers who pushed audiences towards 'foreign' entertainment. Both tendencies would become even more pronounced in the 1920s, as the economic, social and political uncertainty of the postwar years severely undermined the foundations of Italy's already fragile operetta industry. Debates about Italian operetta's aesthetic worth, its national character, and its position within the broader industry were never abstract concerns, but always bound up with perceptions of operetta's place within a broader entertainment landscape and with the struggle industry professionals experienced to secure stable income and recognition.

Operetta's imminent demise was a constant leitmotif in critical and professional discussions throughout this decade, even if the careers of operetta composers Mario Costa, Giuseppe Pietri and Virgilio Ranzato constituted a final, brilliant burst of compositional activity. Yet, as Marco Ladd's article argues, these composers' most popular works – many produced under the stewardship of the controversial Carlo Lombardo, then at the height of his power and influence – clearly point to the cultural forces tearing operetta apart, especially in their foregrounding of international styles of popular music. The presence of

[18] Marco Ramperti, 'L'archivio operettistico: Prima serie', in *L'opera comica* (11 July 1914), 3. Ramperti had also written about operetta in this vein for other publications; see discussion in De Lucca, 'Operetta in Italy', 224–7.

[19] Only the first half of the final two-part column, eulogising the recently deceased Italian operetta actor Giulio Marchetti, was actually published; see 'L'archivio operettistico: Diciottesima serie', in *L'opera comica* (15 July 1916), 3.

[20] For a parallel account focusing on opera in the 1910s and 1920s, see Virgilio Bernardoni, 'Puccini and the dissolution of the Italian tradition', in *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century Opera*, ed. Mervyn Cooke (Cambridge, 2005), 26–44; and Alexandra Wilson, *The Puccini Problem: Opera, Nationalism, and Modernity* (Cambridge, 2007), esp. 155–84.

culturally and racially foreign elements in contemporary operetta (as jazz-derived dances were often perceived) sparked furious polemics. None of the controversy, however, could disguise the economic fact of the public's waning interest. As happened in many other countries, Italian audiences were increasingly spending their money on other, newer forms of entertainment, which gradually loosened the operetta industry's previously lucrative ties with the popular music industry. By the early 1930s eminent figures within the industry were already discussing the genre in the past tense. Though new works were premiered, and some older ones continued to be performed for decades, subsequent historiography has invariably reinforced the sense that operetta's Italian history here came to an end.[21]

The fact that this apparent ending took place under the shadow of the Fascist regime doubtless contributed to the subsequent reluctance to look too deeply into Italian operetta, including its history after 1930. But in the immediate post-war period, as Emanuele Senici's article on operetta on early Italian television explores, operetta was still vivid in the minds of older Italian audiences, imbuing the genre with a strong element of nostalgia (or exaggerating the nostalgic impulse already present in several successful works). Emblematic of this nostalgic crossroads is the tellingly titled *Guida alla rivista (e all'operetta)* of 1953, co-authored by writers, playwrights and journalists Dino Falconi and Angelo Frattini – parentheses marking out a historiographical investment in the genre as a predecessor to the still-thriving tradition of revue.[22] It is clear that the figures described by Falconi and Frattini were highly familiar to their anticipated readership, even if the shadow of the recent past is felt in the authors' total lack of interest in the genre's political entanglements, their determination to forget operetta's once fervent pursuit of *italianità.* Paradoxically, this forgetting was made easier by the fact that the project of creating an Italian canon of operetta composers had in a key sense been fulfilled. Few of the countless figures that wrote for the operetta stage before c.1920 – Luigi Dall'Argine, Angelo Bettinelli, Ivan Darclée, Ettore Bellini, Gaetano Scognamiglio, to name only a few – feature in Falconi and Frattini's small pantheon of *autori italiani.* As a site of memory, Italian operetta was frozen in its final configuration: the world of Costa, Pietri, Ranzato and Lombardo, plus the singers and actors popular in that decade.

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And so it has largely remained. Since the 1950s Italian operetta has almost entirely disappeared from the stage, with a few notable exceptions – chiefly the Trieste Operetta Festival, founded in 1950 and still running today, and occasional outings for the '1920s canon' elsewhere.[23] As a result, the genre's once central role in the Italian cultural imaginary has slipped out of public, institutional and even historical memory. The last significant spate of publications on operetta (Italian or otherwise) came in the 1980s, half a century on from the genre's last hurrah in a wider European context.[24] Perhaps inevitably, Italian operetta tends to be marginalised by authors seeking to narrate the history of the genre as a whole; Richard Traubner's popular history (1983) accords the Italian experience less than a page.[25]

[21] Exemplary here is Mario Quargnolo's gloomily titled *Dal tramonto dell'operetta al tramonto della rivista: Mezzo secolo di fasti e miserie del varietà e dell'avanspettacolo* (Milan, 1980), which treats 1930 as the definitive end of the tradition.

[22] Dino Falconi and Angelo Frattini, *Guida alla rivista (e all'operetta)* (Milan, 1953). The layout of the title page of the volume is even more telling: while 'rivista' is printed in large type, 'operetta' appears in much smaller type as a subtitle, and on the illustrated front cover it appears not at all. Perhaps unsurprising, in this context, is the fact that Falconi and Frattini had written several *riviste* together in the 1930s and 1940s.

[23] For instance, Lombardo and Ranzato's *Il paese dei campanelli* (1923) was recently revived at the 2023 Festival della Valle d'Itria in Martina Franca, Italy, marking the work's centenary.

[24] Among the Italian examples, see, in addition to Quargnolo's *Dal tramonto dell'operetta al tramonto della rivista*: Giuliana Poggiali, *Breve storia dell'operetta* (Rome, 1981); Sandro Massimini and Pino Nugnes, *Storia dell'operetta* (Milan, 1984); Ernesto Oppicelli, *L'operetta: Da Hervé al musical* (Milan, 1985); and Bruno Traversetti, *L'operetta* (Milan, 1985).

[25] Richard Traubner, *Operetta: A Theatrical History* (New York, 1983; revised edition 2003), 399–408.

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Italian authors have been more generous with their coverage. On the partisan end of the spectrum, the *Storia dell'operetta* (1984) co-authored by Sandro Massimini (a vaudeville artist who revived several Italian operettas during his career) strives to situate Italian authors and works within 'the big operetta family', defending operetta overall from elite snobbery while remaining clear-eyed about the merits of Italian contributions to the genre.[26] At the more critical end lie pessimistic accounts penned by Mario Quargnolo and Bruno Traversetti, shaped by the debates of the 1960s that saw the Italian intellectual left – much influenced by the Frankfurt school – take a particularly hard line on the products of the culture industry, which operetta clearly seemed to be.[27] Forty years later, however, even these interpretive predispositions are fast fading, as De Lucca's significantly more generous survey of Italian operetta for the *Cambridge Companion to Operetta* attests. Having forgotten what operetta once meant in Italy, in other words, we are in a better position to encounter it afresh: neither as critics nor as defenders, but instead alert to its fundamental role in shaping modern Italy.

What, then, can readers of this special issue expect? First and foremost, the five contributors are collectively invested in an expanded conception of Italian opera studies. The field has been transformed since the 1970s and 1980s, when a wave of critical studies, scholarly editions and the birth of modern opera studies all brought Italian opera – itself once dismissed as tuneful, commercial and unserious – to the centre ground of musicology and spotlighted its role in shaping the idea of the Italian state. Polemically, we might say that operetta was at least as representative an art form for bourgeois Italians as opera at the turn of the twentieth century. It is, moreover, no coincidence that the 'Great Tradition' of Italian opera conventionally said to have ended with Puccini's demise shared its death throes with Italian operetta. Studying operetta can shed new light on opera, and vice versa, while connecting Italy's musical history further with wider European and global developments.

Second, this special issue demonstrates the need for historical accounts of Italian music that place ideas of 'Italianness' further in dialogue with both local and regional identities, while considering transnational and global phenomena. The regional perspectives foregrounded in the earliest Italian operettas were gradually subsumed by the desire to define a tradition of Italian-language, self-consciously national operetta and to build a canon that could rival that of Italian opera. Yet the international infrastructure from which Italian operetta arose ultimately also contributed to its dissolution, as a global entertainment industry made operetta redundant. Such a story patently cannot be told via the nation alone, though operetta has much to tell us about the way discursive objects like 'Italy' and 'Italianness' shaped processes of Italian regionalism, nationalism and cosmopolitanism alike.

Third, operetta's hybrid identity puts a merciless spotlight on the relationship between art and entertainment during this period. Italian operetta exhibits considerable traffic between the two, while demanding more detailed, localised understandings of cultural hierarchies that avoid conflating cities as different as Milan, Rome and Naples. While the category of the 'middlebrow' has proved a powerful tool in understanding operetta traditions elsewhere, Italy's notably complicated demographic profile and contested regionalisms inevitably require a tailored approach that accounts for how aristocratic, industrial and intellectual elites confronted the much larger working class and peasantry across a vast class chasm. Within this context, gender and sexuality are also a recurrent theme across several articles here, reflecting how Italian operetta characteristically focused on the female performing body, and was itself repeatedly gendered as a feminised, trivial offshoot of 'serious' opera. Celebrity artists such as soprano Emma Vecla – famous for interpreting Anna Glavari in the Italian debut of Lehár's *Die lustige Witwe* – were no less central to operetta than

[26] See Massimini and Nugnes, *Storia dell'operetta*, viii–ix. As the authors note defensively, 'can we continue even now to deem Operetta an "uneducated" music [*musica non colta*], or even a musical subspecies of sorts, bearer of anachronistic and reactionary values?' (xiii).

[27] See, for instance, the discussion of Italian operetta in Traversetti's *L'operetta*, 121–41.

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figures such as *verismo* diva Hariclea Darclée were to opera.[28] But prurient scrutiny of female performers was key to conservative arguments about operetta's perceived licentiousness and spurious artistic worth (for all that sensuality was obviously essential to its success).

Fourth, Italian operetta – and operetta in Italy, to highlight this slippage a final time – makes a compelling case study of the complexities of genre. Operetta invites us to ask how Italians experienced the interplay of different genres during the last decades of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth, and the ideological underpinnings of these views. The generic instability of operetta in Italy also poses important questions for us scholars examining it today, forcing us out of our generic pigeonholes and encouraging us to extract our historical actors from the same. As Arman Schwartz argues in his postlude to this issue, operetta as a genre has always, in a sense, belonged to 'nowhere' – a situation that Italian operetta reveals with particular starkness. Such metaphorical homelessness compels us to ask not only what operetta meant as it travelled across modern Italy's theatrical and social terrain, but what it means to us today – and why.

And what of Gramsci? 'There's nothing more cosmopolitan than mediocrity and meaningless buffoonery', he declared in a typically acerbic judgement on a new Italian operetta in 1917.[29] These very categories – cosmopolitanism, artistic quality, escapism – are, we argue, crucial windows onto the broader history of modern Italy and the operetta culture that helped shape it. The 'carefree songs' and 'risqué situations' evoked by Gramsci might in fact be an apt way to evoke the history of Italy that here follows.

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[28] It is worth noting that the aforementioned Ivan Darclée, a noted operetta composer and impresario, was none other than Hariclea's son.

[29] Gramsci, review of *La montagna di luce* (music by Costantino Lombardo; libretto by Luigi Motta), in *Avanti!* (10 August 1917); reproduced in *Concerti e sconcerti*, 122.

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