

## THE REBIRTH OF ITALIAN OPERA

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**I**TALIAN opera of the past century was the logical outcome of that of the eighteenth. Just as duets, ensembles and arias can be extracted from the all-embracing stylistic recitative of the latter, so from nineteenth century opera one may completely isolate, for separate performance, those numbers in which pure music rules absolute and uncontrasted. The Italian composers of both centuries brushed by all that part of the drama which served as framework or explanation, to concentrate their forces on moments whose action attained a lyric or dramatic quality and demanded music of logical completeness.

Yet there is a great difference between the operas of these centuries; while purely musical numbers were relatively few in the eighteenth, in the nineteenth they appear in great abundance. The recitative of eighteenth century opera was rigidly schematic, while that of the nineteenth achieved a dramatic quality, a certain style in keeping with the words and action.

This second difference is the most important. Seeking to interpret the sense of the words and the spirit of the action through a type of music differing from the *canzone*, the *duetto* or the *concertato*, the musicians of the past century rediscovered the structure of Monteverdian melodrama. At the same time they satisfied the demands of romanticism that operatic music should not diverge from a virtually absolute adherence to the poetic text.

This new form of recitative is of particular interest because it conceals a germ of corruption. To augment the importance of recitative and simultaneously diminish the value of the purely musical numbers in effect reduces the music to a condition of inferiority and opera to a formless mass, with no definite character and no great promise of beauty.

The opera of the past century exhausted all the possibilities in its own structure. The first to perceive this was Verdi and in *Falstaff* he forecast the necessity for a profound renovation through reconstruction. There is a continuous lyric impulse in *Falstaff*. The scenes are just so many bases for a like number of musical moments which cannot be isolated because almost every one is born in the episode which precedes it and is concluded in that which follows. Not adhering to a formula imposed from without, the music unfolds itself as naturally and fluently as in the sonatas of Scarlatti, which seem to be the spiritual model for its construction.

Italian composers cannot be said to have followed the example of *Falstaff*. This remarkable opera remains a unique monument with a significance perhaps beyond our times. Musicians who came after Verdi certainly found themselves in a critical position; on the one hand there was the great disturbing world of the past, and on the other the Wagnerian conception which fascinated almost all those desirous of new and courageous things. The idea of continuous recitative, designed for the perfect fusion of words and music, roused a whole generation to enthusiasm—a generation which remembered its Italian origin only in those rare moments when the tenor was singing his aria or when a little duet happened to be set within the grayness of the cold, inexpressive recitative. Thus there was born a hybrid sort of opera, taking from Wagner the continuity of song and from the Italian manner its least expressive and characteristic feature—the recitative of nineteenth century opera. If Puccini had not maintained an amazing equilibrium in his art and had not profited by a wide experience with the theatre, if Mascagni had not expressed in highly significant pages a sensitive, enthusiastic nature, the course of Italian opera might have come to a perilous halt.



It is not surprising that the musicians of the next generation felt impelled to change both type and system. Since the great

models in the manner of Wagner or of the Italian nineteenth century exercised a certain attraction, it was all the more necessary to guard against imitation if their errors were to be avoided.

It was at this point that the Italian polyphonic school, the instrumental composition of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, all that patrimony which had been so long neglected, was examined with fresh interest. The first approach to the works of the classic period enriched the young Italian group with new and varied material. After the dangerous influences of chromaticism and French impressionism had been removed, the Italian school studied the Gregorian chant in all its variety, strengthened its rhythms, returned to the purity of the popular songs, renewed its harmonic sense, revived its counterpoint and created an art which grows daily closer to perfection.

In the sphere of opera the first attempts made by the young Italians did not diverge much from the current product, except that they were embellished by new expressions, melodic, rhythmic and instrumental. The operas were still dominated, in general, by continuous recitative but the recitative had acquired a special robustness and individuality. No longer a formless and colorless mass, it may now be compared to a series of melodic nuclei only separable from the whole as are links from a chain. The orchestra, however, had gained independence for the first time; it was not made up of Wagnerian leitmotifs, nor was it the simple accompaniment characteristic of Italian opera. It formed a distinct unit, a consecutive discourse whose elements were renewed with the unfolding of the scene; it was a free, running comment that sustained, in its turn, the movement of the recitative. But such a structure was merely approximate and generic; it became necessary to break a more defined path for tendencies significant of a revolution in the music itself.



There are three principal currents today in the revitalization of the Italian melodrama. One is represented by Pizzetti,

another by Malipiero, and the third, primarily headed toward the ballet, by Casella. Besides these movements there also exist isolated efforts which we shall examine later.

Pizzetti has a markedly unified conception of music drama; the music in his operas has a continuous line. The voice part does not stop to outline distinct musical forms like the aria, the duet and the ensemble, but closely follows the spirit of the words; the orchestra is a rich background of variety and movement—a background nevertheless quite free from the influence of Wagnerian leitmotif. But the primary interest lies in the quality of his recitative and in the importance of the chorus. The recitative is built up like the Gregorian chant and gives his melodic line a very definite character. The music clothes the words perfectly and they are syllabified with a strict sense of accentuation and value. The old formula of the Florentines, *il recitar cantando*, is faithfully and effectively realized here. The recitative is like a continuous wave and, while at times it is condensed in a hurried syllabification to parallel the words which convey excited activity, at others it expands in a vast contemplative spaciousness, its lyricism expressed in lofty poetic measures.

Still more important in Pizzetti's music drama is the chorus. One might say that all the elements of his operas tend toward the moment when the chorus speaks. Pizzetti has a special predilection for polyphonic construction; one feels in him a nostalgia for the vocal compositions of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries which held such treasures in their austere frames. And that is why the chorus has acquired so great a significance for him. Though he treats it dramatically, he conserves a line of great nobility. It is here that the dramatic conflicts find meaning and expression; it is here that the moments of lyric contemplativeness reach their culmination. The whole tone of his operas is uplifted at the points where the chorus enters, richly enhancing them with its firm construction.

Even this brief examination of Pizzetti's music drama should reveal to us why it does not lead to further developments. Founded on characteristics so eminently personal it is not likely to become the basis of a school. Pizzetti's music is the product of a very marked sensibility, but it does not contain those decisive

elements of reform necessary to draw a numerous and aggressive following in his train.



The achievements of Malipiero in opera are highly significant not only for the intrinsic value of the music but for the general structure of his works and the rapport between music and words. The music of Malipiero limits itself to the special form which he is treating at the time; that is to say, the ideas instead of following foreordained and exterior schemes, create of themselves the form best suited to their nature. That is why one finds a succession of closely knit, logical compositions wherein no concessions are made, a series of brief but complete pictures in which the ideas are expressed with the greatest naturalness and coherence. All of Malipiero's musical literature has this character and it is enough to examine his two quartets, *Rispetti e Strambotti* and *Stornelli e Ballate*, and the symphonic expressions, *Le Pause del Silenzio*, to understand the quality and temper of his whole art. It was to be expected that Malipiero should apply the same doctrine of coherence to the theatre, creating a style that is without useless pages and pernicious concessions to existing modes.

Between the school of continuous recitative and the Italian school of the *canzone*, *duetti* and *concertati* inserted in the course of the opera, Malipiero had no hesitation in enthusiastically embracing the latter. However (and this is the chief merit of his reforms) while in previous Italian opera the numbers were set forth after long periods of preparation in which the drama had plenty of time to arrive at a climax calling for the interpolation of highly significant music, Malipiero cuts all the preparatory periods in half and reduces the drama to a synthesis of important moments only, those, that is to say, which can be enclosed within the very definite form of a musical composition. The opera of Malipiero might be called a synthetic music drama which confines itself ruthlessly to the development only of the necessary plot. His idea is best exemplified in one of the three operas that compose *L'Orfeide*—the *Sette Canzoni*. These

seven dramatic expressions are bound to each other by a symphonic intermezzo and each is made up of a song which motivates the dramatic situation and has violent contrasts.

For the theatre, Malipiero has written the trilogy, *L'Orfeide*, in all of whose parts the comic and the tragic alternate with rich variety, *Tre Commedie Goldoniane*, in which *La Bottega del Caffè*, *Sier Todaro Brontolon* and *Le Baruffe Chiozzotte* are each condensed into one act that reduces the plot to its fundamental situation, to the great advantage of the musical substance, and *Filomela e l'Infatuato*, an opera in three pictures whose plot portrays violent despair in grim and shadowy colors.

A music drama developed with such profound understanding of musical needs and the felicitous fusion of words and music has a great future. It is easy to understand why Malipiero has followers among the young and among those who feel the necessity of new life in the theatre.



The third modern direction is toward a ballet that is rather special for, besides containing whole sections for voice, it preserves something of the aspect of Italian opera. It has two characteristic expressions, as, on the one hand, in *La Giara* by Casella, and, on the other, in *Barabau*, by the young composer, Vittorio Rieti. Both have their inspiration in Italian popular music and in the musical spirit of the people—something new in the music drama of Italy, which has always aspired to a grandiose solemnity and to expressions of great dignity. *La Giara*, dealing with a story of the Sicilian countryside, is rich in the themes and rhythms of that great island. The dances have the same style as the musical pieces that were the fulcrum of the old-time opera—they present a rapid, close-knit development which depends on the action, tending now toward hearty vivacity, now toward serene contemplation.

Rieti's *Barabau* not only draws its inspiration from popular songs, but glorifies the flavor of Italian rural humor through a succession of gay and witty episodes.



In these three diverse types of works there is a clear index to the orientation in the music drama taken by young writers in Italy. There are also other works which, though they do not represent special tendencies of reform, deserve special consideration, for example, *Belfagor* of Respighi and *La Leggenda di Sakuntala* of Alfano. The first, which is comic, reveals Respighi's great art as a colorist. He has succeeded in transplanting the piquant flavor of his symphonic poems into the three acts of his opera, and it is consequently luminous and dazzling. It might be said that the luminosity is at times excessive and that one would relish an occasional restorative shadow. *La Leggenda di Sakuntala* by Franco Alfano is an opera of abundant lyric and dramatic qualities, a very noble work, though perhaps at times overladen with its various elements and somewhat overreaching in its sonority. But, as has been said, these are all manifestations which represent a very significant aspect of the recent Italian output. Despite many dire predictions the music drama is evidently still alive today, apparently capable of renewing itself, and in the worldwide movement Italian composers are lending to its new life both ideas and enthusiasm.