

Opera across Borders: the Construction of Italian and Turkish National Identities*

* “Constructing a Community of the Imaginary: the Italian Case” and “The Political Functions of Opera” are by Raffaella Bianchi; “Opera and the Construction of the Turkish as Modern Westerners” is by Bezen Balamir Coskun. Iconographic apparatus by Raffaella Bianchi.

The creation of explicitly ‘national’ musics was a factor in the political nationalism in nineteenth-century Europe, but it was mainly art music that functioned as a kind of weapon in the international culture wars. (Nettl, *The Study of Ethnomusicology*)

Opera has travelled across many borders. According to Craigh Calhoun, it is contradictory in geopolitical terms, being an art form with strong national cultural and aesthetic traditions, and, at the same time, a pioneer in globalisation.¹ Our article explores this paradox, considering the different roles played by opera, on the one hand, in the transformation of Italian identity brought about by Italian patriots in pre-unitarian Italy, and, on the other, in the construction of a westernised identity in Turkey.

In this context, opera will be seen as an activity in motion, a nomadic genre in flux. We contend that it is not the ontology of opera that allows this fluidity; on the contrary, what matters is what opera ‘does’ in any given socio-political context.² Therefore the agency of operatic performance will be explored in relation to politics, with a particular focus on the construction of national identity. This perspective challenges a philosophical and academic tradition of thought which is rooted in Western philosophy: the vision of music as detached from politics. This position is still powerful among musicologists, particularly in the field of Western classical music. More recently, however, music has been seen as loaded with ideological intentions. Among others, Alan Merriam separates musical performance from its function within a given socio-political context: while music may be played in many different circumstances, from bands at military parades to background music in supermarkets, only in some cases may it work as part of a given ideological apparatus.³

Since the publication of Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities*, historians have increasingly engaged with the deconstruction of the meaning of ‘homeland’ and its relation with a number of cultural components, namely gender, social realities, and the media.⁴ We believe that the challenging enquiry into what music does can be accomplished by bringing together cultural and performative studies with research on the political function of music. This study tries to do so across the cultural and geographical boundaries of two different countries, in two significant moments for the construction of their national identity. It is our contention that although opera was used both in Italy and Turkey for fostering the idea of national identity, in Italy music succeeded in fulfilling this role,

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¹ Craig Calhoun,

“Foreword”, in Victoria

Johnson, ed., *Opera and*

Society from Monteverdi to

Bourdieu (Cambridge:

Cambridge University

Press, 2007), xxv.

² For an epistemological distinction between music as a ‘work’ and music as an activity, see Nicholas Cook,

Music: A Very Short

Introduction (Oxford:

Oxford University Press,

2000) and “Music as

Performance”, in Martin

Clayton, Trevor Herbert

and Richard Middleton,

eds., *The Cultural Study of*

Music: A Critical

Introduction (London and

New York: Routledge,

2005), 204-214.

³ Alan Merriam, *The*

Anthropology of Music

(Bloomington:

Northwestern University

Press, 1964), 209-28.

⁴ Benedict Anderson,

Imagined Communities:

Reflections on the Origins

and Spread of Nationalism

(London: Verso, 1991).

while in Turkey opera was not successfully functional to the westernisation of national identity.

Our investigation does not focus on specific performances. Rather, it addresses the cultural context in which we believe the analysis of performances may be historically grounded. It does so by following the methodology elaborated by ethnomusicology, which enables the study of a performance, voice and body to be grounded in the spatiotemporal contingency of a given culture.

Constructing a Community of the Imaginary: the Italian Case

The debate on the construction of an imagined community in Italian opera has traditionally focused on textuality: scores and libretti are read in order to detect patriotic intentionality, possibly with the support of primary sources, usually letters of composers and librettists, or memoirs. Roger Parker has re-examined the reception of Verdi's patriotic choruses, calling for a re-assessment of their relevance in the nation-building process. According to him, there is no evidence of the importance of Verdi's choruses in fostering the feelings of the patriots who participated in the 1848 uprising as Verdi's music was performed neither in theatres nor on the barricades at the time.⁵ Parker sees the construction of Verdi's myth as an operation of propaganda carried out by the new, weak Italian state in its search for powerful identitarian symbols. By contrast, Carlotta Sorba stresses Verdi's intentionality in using patriotic elements as a way of "pleasing the public", who responded positively to patriotic feelings.⁶ The issue at stake is not whether or not Verdi can be associated with an emerging Italian identity, but the phases of his association with patriotism, with Verdi himself as the object of investigation.⁷ However, in order to study the function of opera in building up the nation, the question should be shifted from the composer to the community of patriots. Was there an articulation of patriotic values or feelings in operatic performances which could drive people to rebel? Which tropes may have been influential in the construction of a patriotic imaginary? Are there evidences this construction has been influential?

Patriotic elements can be detected in Verdi's operas. The theme of the homeland is evident in the libretti of his works, particularly in those authored by Temistocle Solera – just think of the cry of the Scottish exiled in *Macbeth*, or the famous lines from *Attila* "Avrai tu l'universo,/ Resti l'Italia a me" (Take the universe, but leave Italy to me). The most quoted example is the chorus in *Nabucco* known in Italy as "Va' Pensiero", otherwise called the "Chorus of the Hebrew Slaves": "Oh mia Patria, sì bella e perduta" (Oh my homeland, so beautiful and lost). However, what did "Patria" mean in early nineteenth-century Italy?

⁵ Roger Parker, "Verdi, Italian Opera and the Risorgimento: The Story So Far", seminar held at Modern Italian History Seminars, Institute of Historical Research University of London (October 17, 2007); see also, by the same author, *"Arpa d'or dei fatidici vati": the Verdian Patriotic Chorus in the 1840s* (Parma: Istituto Nazionale di Studi Verdiani, 1997), 83-97.

⁶ Carlotta Sorba, "To Please the Public: Composers and Audiences in Nineteenth-Century Italy", *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 36.4 (2006), 595-614.

⁷ George Martin, "Verdi, Politics, and 'Va, Pensiero': the Scholars Squabble", *The Opera Quarterly* 21.1 (2005), 109-132.



Fig. 1: Silver Denarius from the Republican Age, courtesy of the Società Numismatica Italiana.

In the construction of the patriotic imaginary, a central place is given to the gendered definition of Italy. Classically, Italy has always been a woman, the nation in arms. One of its earliest representations is to be found on a silver *denarius* of the Republican age, coined in 90 BC. Italy is depicted as a woman sitting on a pile of shields, with a spear in her right hand; behind her there is another woman, Victory, placing a crown on her head. During the times of Antoninus Pius, Italy was represented on *sesterzium* coins with a sort of crown on her head. The crown, far from being the symbol of monarchy, is a circle of walls, another military attribute: the idea behind *Italia turrita* was that Italy was impregnable.⁸ In medieval times, after the fall of the Roman Empire, Italy is still seen as a woman, but she is not accompanied by Victory any longer: from the Nation

in arms, she has become a woman in chains, featuring as such in a wide literary tradition which goes back to Dante and Petrarch, but also includes intellectuals like Machiavelli and Campanella.⁹ Therefore, the liberation of Italy from her chains during the Risorgimento can be seen as an act of chivalry.

The call to patriots to sacrifice themselves for the creation of the nation-state was deeply embedded and re-presented in opera: since patriots were called to sacrifice their lives to build the nation-state, the operatic imaginary offered heroes ready to sacrifice their lives for their ideals. Gender representation seems to be equally central to the construction of the imaginary community: the operatic stage of this period is populated with virgins sacrificing themselves, women whose purity is either preserved by the hero, or compromised by a foreigner.¹⁰ According to Alberto Banti, the rhetoric of nineteenth-century European nationalism is elaborated around the metaphor of blood and parenthood: fighting for one's country meant fighting to preserve one's own descent from miscegenation.¹¹

In Italian operatic culture, love and patriotic duties are intertwined, and the *Duties of Man* win over love.¹² Not only Solera's libretto for Verdi's *The Lombard at the First Crusade* but also Rossini's *Moses* present the opposing demands of personal love and patriotic duty. Gender and nation reinforce one another in the sense that nationalist ideology naturalizes constructions of masculinity and femininity: women reproduce the nation physically, while men protect and avenge it.¹³ In this context, fighting to preserve the honour of women means to fight for the honour of the whole community. A good example is offered by *Ernani*, where the "horrid embrace" of an elderly guardian, from which the heroine Elvira cries to be rescued, is equated to Austrian domination: fighting the Habsburgs could be conceptualised as a matter of honour for a male subject. More explicitly,

⁸ The authors are indebted to Mario Ferrandi of the Società Numismatica Italiana for this information.

⁹ Marco Sciarrini, *"La Italia nazione": il sentimento nazionale italiano in età moderna* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 2004).

¹⁰ Emanuele Senici, *Landscape and Gender in Italian Opera: The Alpine Virgin from Bellini to Puccini* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 22-25 and 93.

¹¹ Alberto M. Banti, *L'onore della nazione: identità sessuali e violenza nel nazionalismo europeo dal XVIII secolo alla grande guerra* (Torino: Einaudi, 2005), 112-198.

¹² *Duties of the Man* is the title of Giuseppe Mazzini's most famous political pamphlet, *Dei doveri dell'uomo* (Genova: Costa & Nolan, 1990).

¹³ Julie Mostov, "Sexing the Nation/Desexing the Body: Politics of National Identity in the Former Yugoslavia", in Tamara Mayer, ed., *Gender Ironies of*

Norma, the popular Gaulois heroine in Bellini's eponymous opera, is punished because she has committed the highest betrayal: having intercourse with the enemy (the Roman proconsul Pollione) and procreating with him. Norma sacrifices herself because her love for Pollione has led her to prejudice the purity of her progeny. With *Norma*, operatic culture undergoes a radical change: women are transformed into embodiments of the Nation.

However important tropes might be for the construction of patriotic imagery, the way they were performed and the political context in which they operated were just as important. Significantly, *Norma* was first performed at La Scala in 1831, and the leading role was written for Giuditta Pasta, who was a well-known diva in Milan and clearly part of the community since she was born in nearby Saronno. She was also very active in the Risorgimento movement, so much so that she offered her house to the Provisional Government after the Five Days Uprising, supplied financial support to the patriots in exile, and sang for them in Switzerland on Mazzini's request.¹⁴ One wonders what kind of intentional or unintentional agency her body was communicating through stage performance. According to Susan Rutherford, what distinguished Pasta from other singers was the manner in which she embodied voice with a dignity and grace which distinguished her from the more naturalistic style of her younger rival Maria Malibran.¹⁵

Pasta's pictures in the role of Norma, wearing a costume with a laurel wreath – or with a crown – are strikingly similar to the representation of Italy on Roman coins. Norma is also a sort of Italian Marianne, an icon Italian patriots recognized because they were familiar with the ideas and images of the French revolution. As an allegory, Marianne is ambivalent: on the one hand her image underlies the maternal qualities of the Nation, on the other, with one uncovered breast, she has a strong erotic appeal. But Giuditta Pasta's Norma did not share such ambivalence. Her dignified performing style, as well as her irreprehensible moral conduct in her social and personal life bear testimony to a radical change in the morality and costumes of women singers. One may speculate whether this had to do with their new

Nationalism (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 89.

¹⁴ For a biographical account of the life of Giuditta Pasta see Giorgio Appolonia, *Giuditta Pasta, gloria del belcanto* (Turin: EDA, 2000). For a portrait of Giuditta Pasta in the context of the Milanese operatic scene see Giuseppe Barigazzi, *La Scala racconta* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1991).

¹⁵ Susan Rutherford, "La Cantante Delle Passioni: Giuditta Pasta and the Idea of Operatic Performance", *Cambridge Opera Journal* 2.19 (2007), 107-138.



Fig. 2: Giuditta Pasta as Norma, courtesy of Civica Raccolta delle Stampe Bertarelli, Milan.

¹⁶ See John Rosselli, *Singers of Italian Opera: The History of a Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 68-70.

¹⁷ Rutherford, "La Cantante delle Passioni", 123-136.

¹⁸ Simone Izzo, "Comedy between Two Revolutions: Opera Buffa and the Risorgimento, 1831-1848", *The Journal of Musicology* 21.1 (2004), 121-174.

¹⁹ Giuseppe Mazzini, *Philosophy of Music: Envisioning a Social Opera* (Lewiston and Lampeter: Edwin Mellen, 2004), 39.

²⁰ Carlotta Sorba, " 'Comunicare con il popolo': Novel, Drama, and Music in Mazzini's Work", in C.A. Bayly and E.F. Biagini, *Giuseppe Mazzini and the Globalization of Democratic Nationalism, 1830-1920* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 75-92.

²¹ Timothy D. Taylor, "Peopling the Stage: Opera, Otherness and New Musical Representations in the Eighteenth Century", *Cultural Critique* 1 (1997), 55-88.

centrality in operatic performance accompanied by new patriotic fervour: embodying the Nation entailed personal responsibilities.¹⁶

After Pasta, the rising star Maria Malibran took the role of Norma in 1834 and this aroused much debate, reported by local magazines and newspapers, which divided themselves on opposite fronts.¹⁷ This must be seen in the context of a cultural struggle for hegemony between supporters of the Austrian government and the progressive bloc of patriots. Evidence can be found in the *Memoirs* of patriot Massimo D'Azeglio (1867), who wrote that Austrians ruled Milan through La Scala and that he could not help but being fascinated by Malibran, despite her pro-Habsburg political leanings. A soprano embodying the nation was a central theme of opera seria, yet it is evident also in *Il Colonnello* (1835), a comic opera by Ricci and Ferretti, and in the most famous comic opera by Donizetti, *La Fille du Régiment* (1840), which revealed a Francophile political inclination.¹⁸ These operatic performances engaged with the patriotic construction of Italy, and with contemporary political issues such as the alliance with France, re-working old myths to suit the new political climate. The redemptive role attributed to women since Dante's times is extended to music in the following words by Mazzini: "Music (like woman) has in it so much of the sacredness of natural purity, and such promise of the future.... It might be that a higher ministry of human regeneration is reserved for Music (as for woman) than is generally believed".¹⁹ Propaganda through the arts was a self-conscious process, theorised by Mazzini himself: his *Filosofia della Musica* gives music the function of inspiring young generations of patriots. He sees music as the most powerful of the arts thanks to its very strong emotional potential: the utterance of patriotism.²⁰

Opera and the Construction of the Turkish as Modern Westerners

The rise of opera at the end of the sixteenth century coincided with an increase of exchanges among peoples and the travel of musical sounds across borders. Opera grew out of the interaction between many different musical practices which reflected the representation of new peoples and new relationships within early modern Europe. The first non-Western sounds in opera coincided with the appearance of Turkish musical elements in Western European music by the end of the 1600s: for Europeans, Turkish music was exotic and Turks were represented as the unquestionably foreign Other. The longevity of the Ottoman Empire and its proximity to Europe resulted in a European fascination with everything Turkish.²¹

Particularly after the Ottomans' second siege of Vienna in 1683, the character of 'the Turk' became popular in European operas where it was fashionable to include the exotic stereotypes of harems, strong coffee, hookahs and onion-shaped hats.

European composers often wrote operas featuring harems and Turkish armies with strong percussion sections with which they imitated the powerful sound of Ottoman mehter music. One of the earliest known examples of a ‘Turkish’ opera is *The Happy Captive*, a three-act English comic opera composed by Lewis Theobald and John Ernest Galliard in 1741. This is also one of the earliest examples of exoticism in operas prior to 1750. Nearly thirty operas were written about the life of Suleyman I the Magnificent between 1753 and 1799 alone.²²

Mozart’s *The Abduction from the Seraglio* (1782) is perhaps the most famous among Turkish-style operas, in which virtuous women are rescued from a harem and from sinister Turks. The plot of *The Abduction from the Seraglio* revolves around the efforts of two Spanish men to rescue two European women from the clutches of Selim Pasha, a Turkish nobleman, who is the personification of the noble savage. Besides the character of Selim, Mozart introduces another Turkish character, Osmin, who is an object of ridicule for his reluctance to drink wine due to his Muslim faith. According to Taylor, in *The Abduction* Mozart highlighted the triumph of the Enlightenment values of humanity and rationality, which are shown as capable of influencing non-Europeans as evidenced by Selim Pasha, who is rehabilitated in the end.²³ Besides *The Abduction*, there are over a dozen operas centred on the rescue of the European damsel from the clutches of Turks. Turkish characters are often portrayed as noble savages in Western operas, and given the names of Ottoman Sultans like Selim, Osmin and Suleyman. The interest of these operas in things Turkish was more than a fad, but the use of Turkish music was still a way to present the Turks to the public eye as savages and villains.

If we move to Turkey, we come across a different stereotype of the Turk, who is generally represented as a man who reads the Koran and does not go to the opera.²⁴ In order to change the image of the Turk as the ‘pre-modern’ other of ‘modern’ Western civilization, a modernization (westernization) project was initiated after the second half of the nineteenth century. Especially after the establishment of the Republic of Turkey, cultural policies were aimed at constructing a modern cultural identity for the Turkish people, as well as a lifestyle based on Western culture and values. Within this context, the introduction of opera was seen as part and parcel of the westernization program.

The introduction of Western music coincided with the recognition by Ottoman rulers of European superiority in world affairs. Although the Ottoman Empire had been familiar with European culture and music for a long time, the turning point which brought about the adoption of Western



Fig. 3: Nineteenth-century Turkish costume, courtesy of Civica Raccolta delle Stampe Achille Bertarelli, Milan.

²² Taylor, “Peopling the Stage”, 58; see also Donald Jay Grout, *A Short History of Opera* (New York: Colombia University Press, 2003).

²³ Taylor, “Peopling the Stage”, 75.

²⁴ Zafer Senocak, *Atlas des Tropischen Deutschlands* (Berlin: Babel Verlag, 1993).

²⁵ Metin And, "Opera in Turkey", <<http://www.turkishculture.org/pages.php?ParentID=8&ID=93>>, 20 February 2009.

music by Ottomans was the establishment of military bands to replace janissary bands of musicians. In 1831 Giuseppe Donizetti was invited to Istanbul by Sultan Mahmud II to set up a military band, and to teach in the Imperial School of Music established by the Sultan himself. Donizetti's efforts paved the way for an appreciation of Western classical music among the Ottoman elite. Parallel to this development, opera became a favourite form of theatre in nineteenth-century Istanbul. During this period, Istanbul had become one of a handful of opera capitals in Europe. It is important to note that Verdi's *Il Trovatore* was performed in Istanbul in 1846, i.e. before it was staged in Paris. All these productions were performed by artists from abroad, and most opera-goers in the city were from its Levantine and minority communities.²⁵ Italian troupes gave public performances not only in Istanbul, but also in Izmir and Thessaloniki, and opera productions and concerts were also held at the palace theatres. Sultan Abdulhamid II was particularly fond of opera and took great pleasure in attending operas at the theatre in Yildiz Palace, where he appointed Italian musician Arturo Stravolo as director of the opera house.

National opera in Turkey developed only after the establishment of the Republic of Turkey in 1923, when Mustafa Kemal Atatürk launched far-reaching cultural reforms. Atatürk attached great importance to music – as he did to all the arts – and made considerable investments in classical forms of Western music and opera. He announced the music reform in 1934 during the opening ceremony of the Turkish Parliament: with the slogan "new society, new music", Atatürk underlined his position in favour of Western musical forms, including opera. Following his speech, solo performances of *alla turca* music were banned on the radio, and *alla turca* music was removed from national curricula.²⁶ A municipal Conservatory of Music was founded in Istanbul, and the Republic founded and financed a state conservatory in Ankara, as well as a National Opera, two symphony orchestras, and a number of smaller schools and groups. Under Atatürk's guidance, talented young people were sent to Europe for professional musical training: opera, in particular, was considered the highest form of music, and the development of opera was prioritised by the state, so much so that Turkish composers were encouraged to work on Turkish operas.

The first Turkish opera, *Özsoy*, composed by Ahmet Adnan Saygun, premiered in 1934, coinciding with the Iranian Shah's visit to Turkey. This visit was particularly important for Atatürk since Shah Reza saw Turkish modernization as an example of his own modernization project for Iran. Not surprisingly, the plot of *Özsoy* was about the common roots of the Iranian and Turkish peoples and consisted of elements of Turkish and Iranian mythologies. Moreover, Atatürk commissioned Munir Hayri Egeli to write libretti on three storylines titled *A Ulku Yolu* (Path of Idealism),

²⁶ For the following account of the history of Turkish opera see Gönül Paçacı, "Cumhuriyetin Sesli Serüveni (The Republic's Musical Adventure)", in Gönül Paçacı, ed., *Cumhuriyet'in Sesleri (Republic's Voices)*, (Istanbul: Tarih Vakfı Yayınları, 1999), 10-29.

Bayonder (The Leader) and *Taşbebek* (The Doll). These libretti were then given to Turkey's leading composers, Ulvi Cemal Erkin, Necil Kazim Akses and Ahmet Adnan Saygun, to be set to music.

Taşbebek, the second Turkish opera commissioned by Atatürk, was about the creation of a new nation and the merits of the Republican regime. Both Özsoy and *Taşbebek* contain references to Turkish identity and nationalism, which was the specific aim of the use of Turkish plots within the general project of using opera as a factor of modernization. Furthermore, both *alla turca* and Western music were performed contextually with the introduction of the Latin alphabet, which was to be one of the most significant indicators of Turkish disconnection from the Arab- and Farsi-speaking world and a move toward westernization. The differences between Eastern and Western music allowed Atatürk to emphasize the differences between Arabian lethargy and Western dynamism: according to him only Western forms of music could reflect the revolutionary dynamics of the new Turkish society.

İsmet İnönü, Turkey's second president, and Hasan Ali Yücel, minister of culture and education, followed Atatürk's path as pioneers of Turkish national opera. German composer Paul Hindemith came to Turkey to found the State Conservatory in 1935, while a German opera and theatre director, Karl Ebert, set up departments of opera and theatre in the Conservatory of Music as well as founding an apprentice theatre where opera and drama students could appear in public performances. The first opera to be performed was Mozart's one-act *Bastien and Bastienne*. This was followed by Puccini's *Madame Butterfly* and *Tosca*, and Beethoven's *Fidelio* in 1940, 1941 and 1942 respectively. With the performance of *Madame Butterfly*, Ankara theatre-goers began to develop an ardent interest in opera. The Exhibition Hall in Ankara was converted into a theatre and opera building in 1947-48. Known as the "Büyük Tiyatro", or Great Theatre, it opened on April 2, 1948 with a performance of *Kerem*, an opera by Ahmet Adnan Saygun. A special law, in 1949, sanctioned the opening of the Ankara State Opera and Ballet.²⁷ Two of Atatürk's great dreams were thus realized.

²⁷ Elvin İlyasoğlu, "Yirminci Yüzyılda Evrensel Türk Müziği (Twentieth Century Turkish Music)", in Gönül Paçacı, ed., *Cumhuriyet'in Sesleri (Republic's Voices)* (Istanbul: Tarih Vakfı Yayınları, 1999), 70-87.

Holding the Community Together

According to Christopher Small, the study of music as an activity must take into account a wide range of elements related to the place where music is performed, including its physical, relational, and social elements.²⁸ Opera first developed in the mundane context of the Italian Court theatres, and fairly soon became a civic entertainment with the construction of proper buildings devoted to its performance. In 1637 the first public opera house, San Cassiano, opened in Venice. This date marks a watershed in

²⁸ Christopher Small, *Musicking: The Meaning of Performing and Listening* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1998); see also Massimo Mila, *Breve Storia della Musica* (Turin: Einaudi, 1993), 107-130.

²⁹ See Fabrizio Dorsi and Giuseppe Rausa, *Storia dell'opera italiana* (Milan: Bruno Mondadori Editore, 2000), 1-31; John Rosselli, *The Opera Industry in Italy from Cimarosa to Verdi: the Role of the Impresario*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); Luciano Bianconi, *Il Teatro d'Opera in Italia* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1993), 14-16; and Carlotta Sorba, *Teatri: l'Italia del Melodramma nell'età del Risorgimento* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2001), 21-33.

³⁰ Philip Gosset, "Becoming a Citizen: the Chorus in 'Risorgimento' Opera", *Cambridge Opera Journal* 2.1 (1990), 41-64.

³¹ Cit. in Rosselli, *The Opera Industry in Italy*, 2; see also Bruno Spaepen, "'Governare per mezzo della Scala': l'Austria e il teatro d'opera a Milano", *Contemporanea* 4.4 (2003), 593-620.

the reception of opera: from the restricted environment of courts to the entrepreneurial establishment run by the management of famous impresarios. During the nineteenth century, opera became a popular entertainment open to a wide public across the Peninsula, and was the centre of city life in Italian urban contexts.²⁹

As a social activity, music can foster the sense of belonging to a community, albeit an imagined one, like the Italian nation during the Risorgimento. The sense of belonging was highlighted by an aesthetic element: the chorus. Philip Gossett recalls how Mazzini wished for wider use of the chorus in opera, since it suggested the possibility of enhancing the idea of a 'choral' community: a collective individuality. Among the many developments in Italian opera in the first half of the nineteenth century, "when Rossini was hailed the 'Napoleon of music' and the Kingdom of Italy was proclaimed in 1861 ... none is so culturally important as the change in the conception of the chorus".³⁰

It is significant that the sense of belonging to a community was stressed in the only locus available for the community to elaborate a shared identity. Opera houses were often the only place in a city where people could meet freely. For instance, in Milan under the Austrian domination no public meetings were allowed, and La Scala opera house became the main place for socialising. Indeed, opera houses had an important function as they provided a space where community could be experienced; they were the locus of the public sphere where boundaries among individuals could be overcome. The peculiar cultural institution of the Italian opera house provided a stage for collective meetings and collective demonstrations of the existence of an Italian imagined community. In John Rosselli's opinion, cultural unity in Italy was achieved through cultural practices such as opera going, at a time when Italy was such a diverse conglomeration of peoples and states that Metternich could famously define it as nothing more than a "geographical expression".³¹

Transposed to another time and place, the role of opera in the constitution of national identity works in quite a different way. In twentieth-century Turkey, national opera houses opened in major cities, tickets for performances were subsidised and the Turkish State Radio and Television broadcast daily programs. Yet, in spite of all these efforts to promote it among the public, operatic culture remained a trademark of the Ankara bourgeoisie and it was not internalised by Turkish society as a whole. In a very short time, popular culture superseded opera in the popular imagery. Eventually the state budget allocated for the National Opera and Ballet was reduced year by year, which led to a decrease in the number of performances. As a final stroke, in 2006 the Turkish Parliament passed an Act to demolish the Atatürk Culture Centre in Istanbul in order to build a new cultural centre.

Republican reforms in Turkey aimed at radical changes in legislation, bureaucracy and state structure as well as at less institutional but extremely pervasive innovations like the imposition of a particular kind of music and changes in the daily lives of ordinary Turks. It is understandable that this kind of reform would eventually trigger a period of disagreement and tension. After the transition to multi-party politics in 1946, a struggle for power took place over national cultural values. From the 1950s onwards a wave of migrants poured in from the countryside to settle in squatter towns on the peripheries of the big cities. This experience of urban liminality, accompanied by severe economic problems endured by large sections of the Turkish population, created a peripheral culture identified as the culture of arabesque, which was to assume central importance in the last decade of the century.³²

³² Martin Stokes, *The Arabesque Debate. Music and Musicians in Modern Turkey* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

After the 1980s a new idea of national culture developed: the so-called Turk Islam Synthesis, in which Islam played a fundamental role. As pointed out by Nilüfer Göle, this period has marked the resurgence of a culture that is autonomous from the state.³³ This 'other' Turkey made its declaration of independence from the Kemalist state elite and introduced its distinct cultural identity as an alternative to the westernized one that had previously been imposed. A striking illustration of the resurgence of popular culture in Turkey is the rise, after the end of the 1980s, of the formerly repressed arabesque culture, this time with the support of the new ruling elite which identified itself within the context of the Turk Islam Synthesis culture. With a drastic turn, Turkish State Television began to look at arabesque from a less critical angle, and arabesque performances started to reappear on Turkish State Television. During this time, the forms of Western classical music such as opera almost lost their priority place in Turkish television and radio. After the 1980s the Kemalist state elite was no longer considered as the exclusive source of modernity Turkey. In spite of its effort to inject Western culture into Turkish society, the Kemalist elite had remained alienated from the majority of Turkish society.

³³ Nilüfer Göle, "Liberal Yanılgı (Liberal Complacencies)", *Türkiye Günlüğü (Turkey Diaries)* 24 (1993).

The Political Functions of Opera

The possibility of identifying with operatic performance has been completely different for Italian and Turkish audiences. Nineteenth century Italian opera presents tropes of patriotic identification, while confirming the traditional presentation of Turks as the Other. According to Bruno Nettl, if music is considered as the expression of an identity it can play a deep political role by negotiating relations between unequals; it may work as a tool either in the hands of a dominant group to reinforce its hegemony, or in those of a dominated population to fight back.³⁴ In nineteenth-century Italy opera was a site for the utterance of patriotic feelings, and

³⁴ Nettl, *The Study of Ethnomusicology*, 256.

opera houses had the civic function of creating a public sphere. In Gramscian terms, opera was important for the 'articulation' of national identity in both meanings of the term: as expression (of patriotic feelings) and as joining together (civil society).

The aim of this article has been to demonstrate that opera does not retain everywhere the same political function in relation to national identity. The role of opera in the articulation of patriotic feelings has not been transported successfully to Turkey, despite the efforts of the national elites to promote a new identity associated with the West. Its function in relation to national identity did not travel along with scores, composers and singers. This shows not only that musical values change according to time and space, but that political functions are also culturally specific: different positionings affect the ways cultures are articulated and become functional.³⁵

³⁵ Cook, *Music*, 17.

The national symbols of high culture, namely opera houses and international concert halls, remained marks of high status in Turkey and never served the purpose of constructing and disseminating a sense of belonging as happened with the Italian community. According to Anthony Smith, where there is no common set of symbols it is vital to select multiple symbols that encourage diverse groups' allegiances to a national project. He claims that the specificity of ethnic collectivities is to be found in the totality of their symbology; this was the case with the construction of the operatic Italian imaginary, out of a re-working and combination of Hellenic-Roman tropes and Catholic imagery.³⁶

³⁶ Anthony Smith, *Nationalism and Modernism* (London: Routledge, 1998).

A national cultural hegemony can be achieved if it is able to offer credible points of identification. In spite of efforts by the state elite to promote the appreciation of opera among Turkish society, opera here has remained one of the eccentricities of the bourgeoisie. This image was underlined through popular sitcoms, musical comedies and cartoons in the 1960s and 70s. For example, the most popular Turkish sitcom, *Kaynanalar* (Mothers-in-Law), is based on the story of two families from different cultural backgrounds. Most of the running gags are about the eccentricity of the mother of the bourgeois family, who is a retired opera singer. In comparison with the Italian case, where opera played a role in creating a sense of belonging, in Turkey opera houses served only to highlight the lines dividing the progressive Kemalist elite from other sections of Turkish society.

Therefore, even if a cultural practice is exportable, its political function does not always travel unimpaired across borders, and it probably does not even travel across time, since opera does not play the same function in contemporary Italy as it used to in nineteenth-century pre-unitarian states. Further studies on the political function of performing opera in diverse historical and social contexts will contribute to an understanding

of the cultural history of nation-building, while providing deeper insights into the study of the drives behind operatic performances. More specific functions could be investigated in order to articulate a methodology of enquiry into the cultural history of opera, which should become more interdisciplinary as well as intercultural.