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INTRODUCTION

Sounding (Out) Nineteenth-Century Italy

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Opera has long served as the 'soundtrack' of modern Italy. The most clamorous example of this is that, in both the popular and scholarly imagination, operatic activity on the nineteenth-century peninsula has been routinely associated with the Risorgimento: the struggle for independence and unity that led to Italy's birth as a nation-state in 1861. For many years, it was widely believed that opera played a pivotal role in fuelling patriotic fervour and discourse, with political 'messages' embedded in librettos, choruses promoting national fellow-feeling, and the famous cry of 'Viva VERDI!' carrying a double meaning.[1] More generally, vocal – particularly operatic – sound has been the primary aural marker of Italy and Italianness for well over two centuries. Travel accounts by foreign visitors during the Grand Tour era already emphasized an Italian propensity for singing, a sonic imaginary reinvigorated during the first COVID-19 lockdown, when hundreds of Italians joined virtual choruses of 'Bella ciao' and 'Va pensiero' from their balconies.[2] Indeed, while research by musicologists and cultural historians in the last 30 years has effectively debunked the myth that (certain) operatic works and composers were central to Italy's mid-nineteenth-century national awakening, the notion of an Italy and an Italian people united by voice remains enduringly powerful.[3]

An unexpected proponent of this trope in the 1970s was Murray Schafer, the Canadian composer and environmentalist who is now regarded as a foundational figure in sound studies. In a study of the northern Italian agricultural village of Cembra, Schafer described not only the local soundscape but also the broader soundscape of the entire peninsula as 'a vocal soundscape'. He explained that 'voices come from all directions, from inside and outside, from men, women, children, birds and animals'.[4] Schafer's goal was to document Cembra's sonic environment as faithfully as possible, hoping to preserve it from the erasure caused by modernization; he used recording equipment to capture some sounds and preserved others through written descriptions. Yet his focus throughout remained on the

[1] For a recent overview and persuasive critique of traditional views on opera and the Risorgimento, see Mary Ann Smart, *Waiting for Verdi: Opera and Political Opinion in Nineteenth-Century Italy, 1815–1848* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018).

[2] See Vanessa Agnew, 'Hearing Things: Music and Sounds the Traveller Heard and Didn't Hear on the Grand Tour', *Cultural Studies Review* 18/3 (2012): 67–84; and Jason Horowitz, 'Italians Find "A Moment of Joy in This Moment of Anxiety"', *The New York Times*, 16 March 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/14/world/europe/italians-find-a-moment-of-joy-in-this-moment-of-anxiety.html.

[3] The work of Roger Parker, Birgit Pauls, Mary Ann Smart and Axel Körner has been key to demystifying the political myth of Verdi in particular. Further scholarship on this subject is cited in chapters one and six of Smart, *Waiting for Verdi*.

[4] R. Murray Schafer, *Five Village Soundscapes* (Vancouver: ARC Publications, 1977): 16.

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human voice. 'Voices in the streets are clear and present. Those from indoors are reverberant and hollow'.[5] Schafer even examined various building materials – stone, tile, plaster, wood – to understand their effects on the transmission of voices. Enacting a slippage from local to national and from scientific description to stereotyping, he then concluded that, 'if Italians are egotistical, it takes the form of sheer vocal exuberance'.[6]

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The four essays in this special issue challenge these long-standing beliefs in the opera- and voice-centricity of modern Italian sonic cultures. They examine a variety of Italian attitudes to sound and listening during the long nineteenth century, drawing on social, cultural and historical-scientific perspectives. Their topics span from tuning practices to telephonic listening, from mechanical organs to sonic techniques of colonization and resistance in Libya. Collectively, the essays expand the spectrum of sounds traditionally associated with Italy and Italianness, a result of the authors' attendance to media environments – the lab, the fairground, the battlefield – that extend both beyond and behind the operatic stage. The authors' exploration of diverse geographical contexts simultaneously sheds light on underexamined regions of modern Italy, its empire and its diaspora, such as Libya, Staten Island and Cuba. The fact that several of the contributors investigate the use and discursive histories of sound technologies normally associated with the rise of acoustic modernity in the late 1800s furthermore challenges the notion that Italy played an only minor role in these developments, especially in comparison to northern European countries such as England, Germany or France.[7]

A first key outcome of this collective investigation is the filling of a gap in existing scholarship. To date, most historical studies on Italian sonic and auditory cultures outside the realms of music and opera have come from art and architectural historians working on the early modern period. Niall Atkinson, Deborah Howard and Laura Moretti have produced rich accounts of the soundscape of Renaissance Florence and the acoustic properties of Renaissance Venice's churches.[8] In the field of musicology, Franco Piperno, Simone Caputo and Emanuele Senici have curated a volume that explores both urban and rural Italian soundscapes from a range of geographical, historical and critical perspectives, yet their book only briefly touches on the nineteenth century.[9] Aside from some excellent research on Puccini and on Futurism[10] and a growing body of ethnomusicological work on sound-making and listening practices in regional milieus,[11] scholars of modern Italy have largely overlooked the intersection of music, sound and aurality with the peninsula's

[5] Schafer, *Five Village Soundscapes*, 17.

[6] Schafer, *Five Village Soundscapes*, 17.

[7] Perceptions of nineteenth-century Italy as culturally and technologically backward were and are linked to broader historical views of the country as the exotic South of Europe. See, in particular, Roberto Dainotto, *Europe (in Theory)* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

[8] Niall Atkinson, *The Noisy Renaissance: Sound, Architecture, and Florentine Urban Life* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2016); Deborah Howard and Laura Moretti, *Sound and Space in Renaissance Venice: Architecture, Music, Acoustics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

[9] Franco Piperno, Simone Caputo and Emanuele Senici, eds, *Music, Place, and Identity in Italian Urban Soundscapes circa 1550–1860* (London: Routledge, 2023).

[10] Arman Schwartz, *Puccini's Soundscapes: Realism and Modernity in Italian Opera* (Florence: Olschki, 2016); Gavin Williams, 'A Voice of the Crowd: Futurism and the Politics of Noise', *19th-Century Music* 37/2 (2013): 113–29; and, by the same author, 'Futurist Timbres: Listening Failure in Milan, 1909–1914', in *The Oxford Handbook of Timbre*, ed. Emily I. Dolan and Alexander Rehding (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021): 321–43.

[11] See, for example, Roberta Tucci, ed., *I 'suoni' della Campagna romana. Per una ricostruzione del paesaggio sonoro di un territorio del Lazio* (Rome: Rubbettino, 2003); and Lorenzo Ferrarini and Nicola Scaldaferri, *Sonic Ethnography: Identity, Heritage and Creative Research Practice in Basilicata, Southern Italy* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020).

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various geographical contexts, changing technological landscapes and broader sensory regimes.[12]

The overarching goal of the essays collected here is not so much to dismiss opera and the Italian voice, a move that would be unjustified considering the central role of operatic music and vocality as markers of Italian identity both during the nineteenth century and beyond. At least two essays – by Ditlev Rindom and Marco Ladd – position the mechanical sounds they investigate as adjacent to or extensions of the opera house. However, more broadly, the essays aim to reassess the place of both opera and voice within a larger framework of sonic practices, instruments and experiences that merit attention in their own right. The essays examine both musical and non-musical sound activities and thoughts, navigating the intersections of different disciplinary fields – particularly music and science. As Ladd puts it, the 'fluidity of sonic practices across a variety of media' should caution us against 'exploring alternative sites of sonic culture ... in isolation', encouraging us instead to retrace what were often intersecting arenas of sound experimentation and discourse.

Through their diversity of topics and approaches, the essays also broaden the range of voices that have shaped the sonic discourses on modern Italy and its colonies. They bring questions of power to the forefront by putting the views of travellers, critics and musicians into dialogue with the lesser-known perspectives of scientists, instrument manufacturers, soldiers, and members of colonized communities. Taken together, the essays present a compendium of methodologically diverse sonic histories of the Italian nation between the late eighteenth and early twentieth centuries: histories that highlight the many contributions Italy – including its 'peripheries' – made to the emergence of acoustic modernity during this period.

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The issue begins with an essay by Ellen Lockhart that examines a rich body of Italian writings on musical sound spanning the late eighteenth to late nineteenth century. Following up explanations of Giuseppe Tartini's *terzo suono* in the studies of later theorists, Lockhart retraces a series of successive shifts in understandings of musical sound and attitudes to temperament and tuning that time and again reconfigured the relationship between nature and science on the one hand, and music theory and aesthetics on the other. Lockhart's investigation hinges on what she calls 'music-adjacent sound': 'sound that is not precisely music, nor is it strictly non-musical'; sound through which 'the conditions for music-making were and still are established'. Ultimately, Lockhart argues that paying attention to how Italians theorized musical sound through listening experiments conducted outside of performance contexts can not only illuminate shifting ideas about music, sound and nature, but can also position Italy more prominently in a field of nineteenth-century thought where the country is often seen as having lagged behind.

The second essay, by Rindom, looks at acoustic experiments – again at the intersection of music and science – that reflect changing conceptions of vocal sound. Rindom directly addresses the question that prompted this special issue: how can we rethink nineteenth-century Italian sonic cultures in ways that both acknowledge and challenge the centrality of opera? His essay focuses on Antonio Meucci's telephone, first conceived as an acoustic

[12] This said, Delia Casadei has provided a fascinating account of the geopolitical uses of Italian vocality during and after the Crimean War in her 'A Voice that Carries', in *Hearing the Crimean War: Wartime Sound and the Unmaking of Sense*, ed. Gavin Williams (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019): 150–74. Two further, article-length exceptions to the trend just described have come from scholars of medicine and literature: see Lorenzo Lorusso and Alessandro Porro, 'Coloured-Hearing Synaesthesia in Nineteenth-Century Italy', in *Neurology of Music*, ed. F. Clifford Rose (London: Imperial College Press, 2010): 239–56; and Damiano Benvegnù, '*Il suon di lei*: On the Poetic Ecology of Leopardi's Soundscapes', *Costellazioni. Rivista di Lingue e Letterature* 10 (2019): 33–50.

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device at Florence's Teatro della Pergola in 1834. Rindom treats the theatre as a space of acoustic innovation on multiple levels. Within this space, ideas of the Italian voice evolved alongside growing demands for audiovisual integration on stage – demands that Meucci's telephone seemed poised to address from backstage. In addition to tracing the developments of his device in Havana and New York, where Meucci spent the rest of his life and career, Rindom examines the telephone as an object both material and discursive: an object capable of moving across different domains of knowledge, just as the sonic environment of the *teatro all'italiana*, far from being distinctive to Italy, was reproduced hundreds of times abroad.

Audiovisual concerns, and a recognition of sound technologies as more than just material objects, are also central to Ladd's cultural history of the fairground organ, one of several types of nineteenth-century organs. Ladd begins by tracing the soundscape and economic organization of early cinema back to an earlier, nineteenth-century tradition of popular entertainments in which fairground organs were compelling audiovisual attractions in their own right. He then strives to recover the multiple layers of these instruments' Italianness, tied to the nationality of their supposed inventor, their operators and their repertoire. Ladd's account not only emphasizes (once again) the significant geographical and discursive mobility of the fairground organ, but also offers a more positive and active view of Italy's contribution to the history of nineteenth-century mechanical instruments – a view that moves beyond the stereotype of the Italian street musician that has dominated previous accounts.

The final essay, by Peter McMurray, takes us to Italy's peripheries and explores its 'others' during the Age of Empire. The essay examines the roles that sounds and sound technologies played during the Italian invasion of Libya of 1911–12, also known as the Italo-Turkish War. Drawing on a wide range of sources – journalistic accounts, poems, songs and soldiers' letters – McMurray unravels the various meanings and functions that sound practices held on each side of the conflict. His aim is not just to recover a rich colonial/imperial archive in which sound meant and did different things depending on who produced it or received it. Crucially, McMurray also shows how 'Italian sonic geographies of that period were inextricably tied to Italian imperialism', to the point that we cannot fully understand Filippo Tommaso Marinetti's Futurism or Guglielmo Marconi's wireless telegraphy without also acknowledging their 'global entanglements'.

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Two key points of contact between the essays deserve brief mention. First, the recurring 'silences' that underpin each investigation are manifested in various ways: as archival silences (subaltern voices suppressed by the voices of their colonizers/oppressors); or the pauses before military attacks; or the absence of auditory evidence (in contrast to, say, literary or visual records); or missing sounds (sounds that should have been detected but were not); or sounds beyond the range of human hearing. While – sensibly – none of the contributors argues that these gaps or absences are uniquely 'Italian', their collective observations encourage further reflection on the distinct challenges that researching the sonic cultures of different countries presents to scholars.

Second – and finally – it is worth noting the reduced emphasis the essays place on cultural representation, especially in comparison to previous scholarship on Italian opera and voice. While both Rindom and Ladd examine how certain sounds or sound technologies were constructed as Italian inventions or symbols of Italian excellence, their focus is not just on the question of representation but also – to quote Lorenzo Ferrarini and Nicola Scaldaferri – 'on what sound *does*, and on what it allows people to do'.[13] One might argue

[13] Ferrarini and Scaldaferri, 'Introduction', in *Sonic Ethnography*, 1–19, here 5 (italics mine).

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that this partial shift of emphasis – from culturally symbolic meanings to the embodied experiences, technical experiments, and acts of violence or resistance in which sound theorists, sound-makers and listeners engage – is a natural consequence of expanding the study of Italian sonic cultures beyond opera, and even beyond music. In other words, when we set aside the powerful forces that have traditionally shaped nineteenth- and twentieth-century perceptions of Italy and Italians, we are left with a refreshed understanding both of the soundscape of modern Italy and of the strategies and priorities that defined Italians' relationship with sound.

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