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Review

Michele Girardi, *Puccini. His International Art*. Translated by Laura Basini. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000.

'La maledizione di Fausto'

A new book on a famous figure from the past should challenge the previous critical outlook; that much we may take for granted. However, when the critical tradition is as odd, polarized, and opinionated as is Puccini's, difficulties arise, especially over the stance to be assumed. Although staples in the repertoires of opera houses around the world, Puccini's operas seem to inspire a sort of guilty enjoyment that gives way either to harsh criticism (if not outright dismissal) or to strenuous defense. Michele Girardi's *Giacomo Puccini. L'arte internazionale di un musicista italiano*,[1] now available in English translation, takes a clear position: from the start one of its goals is to defend Puccini against his critics, relentlessly and passionately. Even in the English title we find echoes of a critique often cited as the origin of all evils: Fausto Torrefranca's caustic 1912 *Giacomo Puccini e l'opera internazionale* (*Giacomo Puccini and International Opera*).[2] Torrefranca devoted 133 pages to demonstrating, in a tone sometimes condescending, sometimes spiteful, that Puccini – both the man and his work – was the worst possible news for Italian art (and consequently for humanity). Torrefranca was so engrossed in nationalist propaganda, that he used 'international' as the ultimate insult to level against the contemporary artistic tendencies that he saw epitomized by Puccini; both the man and his work had in his view forfeited Italian identity for the sake of commercial success. Instead, he advocated as a properly Italian *Volkskunst* a 'pure, modern music,' rooted in the tradition of early eighteenth-century instrumental works of Giovanni Platti *et al*.[3] The title of Girardi's book seems to answer Torrefranca's by reversing the terms, claiming from the start that Puccini's art is indeed international, and that that is a good thing. Numerous references throughout the book to Wagner, Debussy, Strauss, Stravinsky, and many others, seek to demonstrate how Puccini's music, far from being provincial or too Italian, participates in the contemporary European milieu.[4]

Quite frankly, it is difficult to regard Torrefranca's booklet as much more than a spoof of perverted 'crocianesimo,' and one wonders why it has been so influential in recent Puccini's reception. But Girardi must confront its critical legacy, for Torrefranca was followed by many other, more prestigious, critics (can ever we forget Joseph Kerman's dismissal of *Tosca* as 'that shabby little shocker'?[5]); and Puccini-bashing is a phenomenon

[1] *Giacomo Puccini. L'arte internazionale di un musicista italiano* (Venice, 1995).
[2] Fausto Torrefranca, *Giacomo Puccini e l'opera internazionale* (Turin, 1912).
[3] *Ibid*., 16 and *passim*. See also Mosco Carner, *Puccini: A Critical Biography* (London, 1958; 3rd ed. 1992), 291; Roger Parker, 'Analysis: Act I in Perspective,' in Mosco Carner, *Giacomo Puccini: Tosca*, Cambridge Opera Handbooks (Cambridge, 1985), 117; Arthur Groos and Roger Parker, *Giacomo Puccini: La bohème*, Cambridge Opera Handbooks (Cambridge, 1986), 131–3.
[4] The original Italian title (*L'arte internazionale di un musicista italiano*) seems even more transparent in this regard.
[5] Joseph Kerman, *Opera as Drama* (New York, 1956; repr. Berkeley, 1988, London 1989), 205.

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not easily confined to the past.[6] Girardi's reaction to this legacy produces an all-pervading revisionist tone that has the ring of *excusatio non petita*. Most importantly, though, it testifies to an underlying need, generally felt by those brave critics and musicologists who have decided to take Puccini seriously: a need to demonstrate that this is indeed a 'serious' subject, to defend Puccini's art against the old, reiterated charge of being trivial and unworthy of scholarly attention. Thus the first statement in chapter 1 ('A Dynasty of Composers') equips Puccini with a pedigree, claiming that 'The impressive musical lineage of the Puccini family is surpassed only by that of the Bachs'; in the next paragraph, 'Musicians' blood also ran in Puccini's maternal line' (1). One who came from such a long line of musicians can hardly be considered a *parvenu*. Two pages later, Puccini's early career is dignified by analogy with Verdi's: 'It might be better, then, to note the first of several important similarities between the careers of Puccini and Verdi. In both cases, after their first precocious displays of talent, their families and communities sought to put them to work in local musical life. Busseto was more provincial than Lucca, but both men were earmarked to be organists in their respective towns' (3).

This kind of anxiety about legitimizing Puccini as a true artist is nowhere more evident than in passages dealing with the delicate issue of self-borrowing. Puccini often took melodic ideas, segments or whole pieces from his non-theatrical production and recycled them in the operas (nine of the twenty or so 'Songs and other vocal works' were relocated into operas, and the same happened to his even smaller output of instrumental music).[7] The section in Chapter 1 that first addresses the issue interestingly indicates that this group of pieces might be seen as a 'reservoir of inspiration' from which musical ideas were taken; but the word 'inspiration' suggests that such a practice also has a lot to do with the composer's creativity. And in fact we are soon introduced to Torrefranca at his nastiest: as Girardi quotes, 'Puccini is lazy . . . one opera on average every four years, with the help of repetitions within the opera and rehashes of preceding works, can certainly count as laziness.'[8]

Girardi tackles the matter head on, stating that self-borrowing, a practice dignified by venerable tradition, is justified in Puccini's case by the dramatic relevance of the borrowed passages in their new context:

> The most cogent reason for reusing existing music was the relevance of the dramatic context into which it was to be placed . . . Whatever the situation, there is nearly always a logical connection . . . Puccini always knew how to insert the recycled passages at the most suitable place, so that when reheard in the new context they do not jar stylistically with their surroundings. (pp. 10–11)

So, for example, the *Tre minuetti* for string quartet (1884) turns up as *dance* music in *Manon Lescaut*, Act II; a melodic idea from the song 'Ad una morta' ['To a dead woman'] is adapted for Roberto's aria 'Torna ai felici d' ['Go back to happy days'] in *Le Villi*, to express his 'melancholy nostalgia'; and so on. In conclusion:

> These examples reveal that the 'rehashing' process is far from being the product of laziness, but demonstrates the unrestricted nature of Puccini's imagination, which was capable of inventing a dramatic world before having a libretto to which to adapt it. Moreover, they confirm the primacy of

[6] See for instance Jerry Fodor's review of Girardi's book in the *London Review of Books*, 22/21 (2 November 2000), 32. Fodor extends to all Puccini lovers his own inexplicably ambivalent response: 'One is often moved to be sure; but there is also a sense of being complicit in something not entirely nice. The puzzle about Puccini is why this should be so.' One wonders (I do) whether such reactions (the kind that involve guilty pleasure) relate more to the listener or to the work. Maybe the more interesting puzzle here is not 'about Puccini,' but about the author himself.

[7] See the 'Catalog of Works' in Girardi, *Puccini*, 489–98.

[8] Torrefranca, *Giacomo Puccini*, 43; quoted in Girardi, *Puccini*, 10.

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melody even in his early years, and explain why he had no difficulty in adopting leitmotivic techniques: in his mind the dense interweaving of melodic ideas was governed by clear typological criteria, which allowed him to choose the most suitable themes to characterize the drama organically, in both orchestral and vocal terms. (12–13)

Leaving aside the assumption here of music's 'fixed' semantic content, and not worrying about which sort of 'typology' might have guided the composer in his choice of borrowings, it is still the case that the 'logical connection' between the borrowed passage and the new dramatic context appears at times rather 'stretched,' and at times merely circumstantial – as in the case of the *mattinata* 'Sole e amore' reused in the Rodolfo-Mimì duet in Act III 'Addio dolce svegliare alla *mattina*' (138).

But why do we need justification for the practice of self-borrowing? It is, after all, an old issue, confronted by scholarship on opera composers such as Handel, Rossini, Bellini, and many others;[9] but in Girardi's book it is so tied up with the general revisionist approach that it is worth some further thought. His anxiety to refute Torrefranca's accusations leads him to look for reasons to reinstate the composer's creative talent and autonomy. What is at stake, then, is the 'ethics' of the operation, the moral conduct of the composer: in an aesthetic realm where the 'idea' is the sacred, original creation of the mind of the artist, self-borrowing necessarily appears as illicit, as 'cheating.' But is it 'licit' to impose this frame on Puccini – the man or his work? Not only might it do an injustice to the work to read it through the lens of moral criticism of the man, but more significantly, it might trap us in a web (under Torrefranca's spell) that prevents us getting to the real question: namely, why these operas are so interesting and powerful.

The defensive attitude was perhaps a necessary 'fault' in a book first published in 1995. Since then the state (and status) of Puccini research has changed remarkably, thanks to the commitment and courage of a group of scholars, prominent among them Girardi himself, who founded the Giacomo Puccini Research Center in Lucca (1996) and the bi-annual journal *Studi pucciniani* (1998).[10] All this offers to Puccinians (and non-Puccinians) an arena programmatically open to a variety of approaches, which will, one hopes, prompt more research and generate a wider range of interpretations. Most important, it might help to establish, once and for all, the topic's worthiness as an object of scholarly inquiry.

Setting aside the numerous defensive remarks, *Puccini: His International Art* offers much more to the reader: Girardi's genuine passion as a musician and as a listener renders this book fresh and stimulating. The chapters devoted to the operas offer a fascinating journey of discovery through the music. Girardi encourages listeners to look deeper into the score, guiding them through the complicated web of thematic recurrences and quotations without an oppressive parade of graphs.

Some have lamented the lack of an analytical system in Girardi's treatment of the music, but it might be argued that this kind of life-and-works survey does not aim at providing 'analysis' of the music (at least not in the Anglo-American sense of the word), nor does it aim at satisfying the 'hard core' needs of music theorists.[11] Moreover, and without denying

[9] For a recent investigation, see Mary Ann Smart, 'In Praise of Convention: Formula and Experiment in Bellini's Self-Borrowings,' *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, 53/1 (Spring 2000), 25–68.

[10] For information on both, see the Center's web site: www.puccini.it.

[11] See Helen Greenwald's review of the 1995 Italian edition, in *Notes*, 53/3 (March 1997), 803–4: 'The more compelling issue is Girardi's analytical method, which is at best unrigorous, at worst confusing . . . Music theorists will criticize the lack of discipline. Girardi's presentation of large structures, in particular, shows little consistency in its approach from work to work.'

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the appropriateness of more systematic approaches, it is exactly the lack of an overarching system that allows the writer the necessary flexibility to illustrate the complexities of musico-dramatic techniques throughout the entire opus. We might recollect in this respect a passage by William Drabkin (a card-carrying theorist of the Anglo-American 'school'), stating that the inadequacy of traditional analytical methods to account for what is considered 'most Puccinian' in Puccini's music is also determined by the programmatic search for unifying elements (tonal and/or thematic) in and among works.

> If Puccini failed, in his collected work, to establish a valid aesthetic of opera composition, or to live up to those of his great predecessors, then the enormous success which many of his stage works have enjoyed must be the result of an extraordinary ability to focus on the problems relating to the single art-work, without the benefits of a governing system or of elements of what one may wish to call a steadily maturing 'personal style.' . . . But if we concern ourselves less with discovering unity in Puccini's scores, or consistency in the application of a system, or even features common to many of his operas, and instead follow Tovey in the search for *integrity* in the individual art-work, we shall probably be in a better position to discover the elements of mastery which inform a score like *La bohème*.[12]

The difficulty of reading a score according to its own principles and 'integrity,' of resisting the temptation to find an underlying unified system (another strategy for the defense of the work's aesthetic value), is well illustrated in Girardi's chapter on *La bohème*. He maintains that the opera's recurring themes tend to elude fixed referential content, and are instead often used ambivalently, in association with different dramatic situations. A case in point is in Act I, when Rodolfo declares his love ('Talor dal mio forziere') to a melody anticipated during the preceding scene of the landlord's visit to the bohemians. The remoteness of the two situations compelled William Ashbrook to deny any intentional dramatic connection.[13] Girardi answers Ashbrook by saying that 'it is unlikely that Puccini was unaware of this, or of other analogous cases.' Rescuing the composer from absent-mindedness, he asserts that:

> Ambivalence on the semantic level, however, does not mean a lack of justification in terms of dramatic logic: the subtle connection between one theme and another reinforces the impression that a common aura surrounds the characters and their actions, all of them part of a single *Bohème*. (118–9)

We might dismiss this position as an extreme attempt to find dramatic unity within the opera's title, but it is worth remembering how complex it is to handle these recurrences in Puccini's music. Drabkin, for example, offers a no less puzzling alternative solution to this question: he invites the 'analyst' to stop listening for common themes and unifying devices, as our ears have been trained to do, because this might lead to hearing in a score 'more than we were intended to.'[14] Instead, he recommends that we 'take a more neutral view' and consider the option of compositional necessity and musical logic. So, for instance, the similarly disconcerting final quote of the '*zimarra*' theme could be seen 'as a simple linear elaboration of the final tonic,' and not as a thematic recurrence carrying some sort of symbolic meaning.[15] Drabkin suggests in these cases that we consider music as 'just music,' stripped of all the rest we hear and see: but isn't music in opera always available to 'merely' musical interpretation (i.e. not only when it eludes a unifying dramatic system of signification)? Can it really be sterilized of any dramatic content?

[12] William Drabkin, 'The Musical Language of *La bohème*,' in Groos and Parker, *Giacomo Puccini: La bohème*, 80–101, here 101.

[13] 'It seems strange to introduce one of the main melodies of the score by a comic variant. Perhaps Puccini was unconscious of the undeniable resemblance'; William Ashbrook, *The Operas of Puccini* (London, 1968; repr. Ithaca, 1985), 57 n. 12. Also mentioned by Drabkin, 'Musical Language,' 84.

[14] Drabkin, 'Musical Language,' 85–6.

[15] *Ibid*., 83.

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On a more general level, though, Girardi has welcomed the invitation to look at each opera in its own terms, as shown by the book's outline. Each chapter covers an opera according to a distinctive set of issues, ranging from compositional history, biographical details, and cultural background, to a discussion of the literary sources, particular dramatic traits, and musical details.[16] Girardi thus avoids the monotony of a pre-established sequence of subsections (the usual 'genesis – libretto – music – other') by integrating factual exposition and act-by-act commentary with personal interpretive detours. His chapter on *Manon Lescaut*, for example, relates some musical and dramatic procedures to Wagnerian influences (67), while the chapter on *La bohème* has a passage on 'Everyday objects' and their symbolic treatment in the opera (130). The *Tosca* chapter digresses briefly on the opera's 'invented' realistic representation of Rome, invoking Verdi's remark that 'To invent the truth is better, much better' (159).

What might appear a lack of system is in effect one of the features that make this book remarkable, giving an original turn to the otherwise routine 'life-and-work' genre. These digressions break the guidebook tone typical of the genre: instead of presenting 'truths,' they lead the reader down an alternative path, running diagonally across historical narrative and illustration of the score and libretto. Here above all we sense the presence of the author and his distinctive listening attitude, and that we are addressed as listeners in our capacity to interpret the piece. If Puccini's music has ever needed to be defended, this is surely the best strategy: to open it up to intellectual curiosity and creativity, to enhance the perception of the many subtleties in the music and libretto, and to render listeners aware of the source of their enjoyment.

A monograph's implicit promise of extensive, even 'definitive' information, and the unusual wealth of ideas presented here, set high expectations; thus one cannot help noticing the occasional lack of thoroughness. An issue given little space is the operas' *mise-en-scène* or, more generally, their visual aspects. It has often been pointed out that the visual register is central to Puccini's dramaturgy; Mosco Carner, for example, calls it '*optique du théâtre*.'[17] Girardi does devote some paragraphs to this aspect, but always in passing, as an accessory to the 'core' of the operas, score and libretto. We find little more than a footnote devoted to the *disposizione scenica* for *Manon Lescaut*, the last known stage manual compiled and published by Giulio Ricordi; given the amount of information it carries, it would have been worth quoting at some length. Carre's stage manual for the French premiere of *Madama Butterfly* is also mentioned, but ultimately used merely to compare the last two versions of the score; one is left wanting to know more about this manuscript after having been told how influential it was in shaping the composer's 'vision' of the opera. The same applies to the chapters on *Tosca* and *Fanciulla*: the first closes with a discussion of two recent stagings, Jonathan Miller's version for the 1986 'Maggio musicale' in Florence and Patroni Griffi's 1992 film *Tosca in the Settings and the Times* (192, n. 52). The chapter on *Fanciulla* concludes with an intriguing parallel between opera and contemporary western cinema (325–7). In general, one regrets that these marginal comments were not developed any further.

Finally, it would have been interesting to have a richer context for these operas, even though that would probably ask too much of a life-and-works survey. According to this book (and all that have preceded it, for that matter), Puccini seems to have lived and

[16] It is a pity that the table of contents does not list subheadings within chapters, thus informing the reader from the start of the variety of topics addressed in the discussion of each opera.

[17] Mosco Carner, *Puccini: A Critical Biography*, 312. See also the essay by Helen Greenwald in this issue.

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worked in a vacuum: the outside world, when it comes into view, is mainly regarded as an interference to his creativity and productivity. One wonders how a life spanning such turbulent times, and an artistic output extended across thirty years, could remain so unaffected. The end of Risorgimento dreams, the 'rise of modernity,' the Great War, the ascent of Fascism; all this and much more is seen neither to provoke reactions in Puccini as 'man' or 'artist,' nor to leave traces in his work. Girardi is surely right to avoid the simplistic deterministic approach to historical and cultural context that was standard in the humanities until some time ago (at least in Italy); but perhaps we are now ready to take Puccini out of his glass case.

In conclusion, although still trapped in the 'post-Torrefranca' revisionist agenda, Girardi's book will definitely constitute a starting point for future studies on Puccini. Beyond providing a synthesis of earlier monographs, it opens up the operatic text to further scrutiny, arouses the curiosity of the reader/listener, brings to the surface the sophisticated mechanisms of the music, and bridges the gap between fetishistic listening – that which carves out juicy bits, memorable tunes – and 'serious' (but always passionate) study.

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