Cambridge Opera Journal, **23**, 3, 191–200 © Cambridge University Press, 2012
doi:10.1017/S0954586712000109

Review article
A passion for Italy

Giovanni Gavazzeni, Armando Torno and Carlo Vitali, *O mia patria: storia musicale del Risorgimento, tra inni, eroi e melodrammi*, preface by Philip Gossett. Milan: Dalai, 2011.

Simonetta Chiappini, *O patria mia: passione e identità nazionale nel melodramma italiano dell'Ottocento*. Florence: Le Lettere, 2011.

A large number of events in Italy punctuated the 150th anniversary of Italian Unification in 2011, ranging from public lectures to academic conferences and publications, from concerts to TV programmes. Initiatives were launched at both the local and national level, albeit often forced to reckon with limited budgets owing to the economic crisis. Some traces of this wave of activities are still visible today, well into 2012, as are some of the more spontaneous manifestations of the revived patriotic feelings that marked this 'Italian year': perhaps a *tricolore* hanging from the window or balcony of a private house. However, a retrospective glance is now possible – one that may reveal some of the leitmotifs that underpinned the cultural aspect of these national celebrations.

Overall, this programme – I use the singular in order to highlight some general trends – developed around two central themes: on the one hand, the key events and protagonists of the so-called Risorgimento; on the other, a number of issues related to Italian identity. That these two themes are by no means unrelated is all too self-evident, at least to Italians and those with some knowledge of Italian history. Indeed the Risorgimento – the phase of political and national 'resurgence' that led to the birth of the Italian nation-state in 1861 – has become an integral part of Italy's self-image.[1] Such a circumstance is easily demonstrated by the appropriations of this period of Italian history by a wide variety of political groups throughout the last century and a half.[2] The special connection between the Risorgimento and (post-Unification) Italian identity – the reason why those decades in Italy's nineteenth-century history have for so long been crucial to Italians' perception of their national Self – has nevertheless rarely come under scrutiny. Why, 150 years after

[1] This, at least, is the most common definition of the term 'Risorgimento'. The word has acquired several meanings. As an historical period, it designates the years (usually 1815 to 1861 or 1870) that preceded Italy's political unification, and that were characterised by a series of wars and revolutions (in Italy as elsewhere in Europe). In a wider sense, 'Risorgimento' refers to various ideological, economic, social and cultural phenomena that characterised the Italian peninsula from the late eighteenth century until well after Unification. In both meanings, the Italian Risorgimento must be seen in close relation to European events and transformations. A third way of understanding the term is, in Lucy Riall's words, as 'a view of history': 'a rhetorical device' used for a retrospective re-reading of the Italian past according to present needs and political agendas. For two excellent introductions to the historiography of the Risorgimento, see Lucy Riall, *Risorgimento: The History of Italy from Napoleon to Nation State* (New York, 2009), 37–52, here 39; and Gilles Pécout, *Il lungo Risorgimento: la nascita dell'Italia contemporanea (1770–1922)*, Italian edn by Roberto Balzani, trans. Marco Di Sario (Milan and Turin, 2011), 3–27.

[2] Two examples will suffice: first, the fascists' establishment of the Risorgimento as the precursor to the regime, which in their view constituted the culmination of the process of 'resurgence' that had begun in the nineteenth century; second, Antonio Gramsci's assessment of the Risorgimento as a 'passive revolution', in which the defeat of the democrats by the moderates meant the failure of any attempt to introduce social and political change.

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its conclusion, are Italians still talking about the Risorgimento in such an emotionally engaged way?

What this question suggests is that we investigate further the language, the rhetoric and the images through which the Risorgimento was represented in the later nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Far from constituting only a temporal frame or a 'container' for the deeds of Great Men (Mazzini, Garibaldi or Vittorio Emanuele II, to cite only a few) with continuing iconic status, the Risorgimento has also exerted a special appeal in its own right. What is more, while it has continually encouraged new political and socio-economic interpretations, it also seems to have been capable of transcending divisions and historical watersheds. In the minds of Italians it has, in short, remained an *idée fixe*: one whose long-lasting interest and ceaseless outpouring of possible meanings point to its essentially mythical nature.

The two books discussed here, both published in the context of last year's celebrations, draw attention to the two strands of cultural interest outlined above. *O mia patria: storia musicale del Risorgimento, tra inni, eroi e melodrammi* aims at telling the history of the Risorgimento from a particular perspective: that of the country's musical life (or at least some aspects of it) during the period. The question of Italian identity does at times emerge: 'a nessuno sfuggì quanto Verdi avesse contato nella formazione della coscienza nazionale' ('nobody was unaware of the extent to which Verdi had contributed to the shaping of the national conscience', 120), claims Giovanni Gavazzeni, reiterating a common trope in the Verdi literature, one recently called into question by several scholars.[3] Later on, Carlo Vitali claims that 'il teatro lirico è lo specchio dell'Italia ottocentesca con tutte le sue contraddizioni' ('opera is the mirror of nineteenth-century Italy, in all its contradictions', 262). Overall, however, this multi-authored volume is not concerned with Italian identity. Focused on, but not restricted to, opera during the half century that preceded Italian Unification, it mostly offers a compendium of cases of musical censorship, of composers' attitudes to the political events of the time, as well as an attempted reconstruction of the nineteenth-century Italian opera 'industry'. Throughout, the emphasis is on composers (their lives, political views and compositional intentions) and their works (particularly the librettos of those works); there is little room for accounts of the reception of those operas traditionally regarded as *risorgimentali*.

The book's general stance is made clear in the preface, which makes up a substantial portion of the book, and is written by the distinguished opera scholar Philip Gossett. Gossett starts by putting the volume into context, evoking the Italian anniversary and its consequent revaluation of the Risorgimento, not least from a musical point of view (7).

[3] The traditional view according to which Verdi's early operas made a major contribution to the awakening of Italians' national conscience in the 1840s and 1850s has recently been reassessed, and has become the focus of considerable musicological research and even controversy in the last few years. For this revision, see in particular Roger Parker, *'Arpa d'or dei fatidici vati': The Verdian Patriotic Chorus in the 1840s* (Parma, 1997); Mary Ann Smart, 'Liberty On (and Off) the Barricades: Verdi's Risorgimento Fantasies', in *Making and Remaking Italy: The Cultivation of National Identity around the Risorgimento*, ed. Albert Russell Ascoli and Krystyna von Henneberg (Oxford and New York, 2001), 103–18; and Peter Stamatov, 'Interpretive Activism and the Political Uses of Verdi's Operas in the 1840s', *American Sociological Review*, 67/3 (2002), 345–66. For more or less strenuous defenders of Verdi's political image, see George W. Martin, 'Verdi, Politics, and "Va, pensiero": The Scholars Squabble', *The Opera Quarterly*, 21/1 (2005), 109–32; and Philip Gossett, '"Edizioni distrutte" and the Significance of Operatic Choruses During the Risorgimento', in *Opera and Society in Italy and France from Monteverdi to Bourdieu*, ed. Victoria Johnson, Jane F. Fulcher and Thomas Ertman (Cambridge, 2007), 181–242.

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He then notes that many of traditional views about Italian composers of the time have been nurtured by anecdotes contained in the later nineteenth-century biographical literature (7), ones that have recently started to be reassessed by what he calls 'serious' scholars (8). Gossett's statement would seem to promise a direct confrontation with the problem: a discussion of when and why some of Italy's most famous nineteenth-century composers, particularly Verdi, became transformed into mythic political figures in the Italian popular imagination. This is, as most opera scholars and historians of Italy will agree, a question that still awaits an answer. Gossett's essay – which, owing both to its extensiveness and the level of detail involved in parts of the discussion, reads less as the book's preface than as its first chapter – nevertheless focuses on other topics: in particular, Rossini's (somewhat dubious) patriotic credentials, a number of operas that underwent government or ecclesiastical censorship, a repertory of patriotic anthems written around 1848 by little-known composers, and finally Verdi. The title of this last section, 'Verdi e il suo mito' ('Verdi and his myth', 26), does not entirely reflect what most interests Gossett, which is Verdi's relationship with the censors and the compositional history of some of his operas.[4] In fact, Verdi's political myth – the long-established belief that the composer made a special contribution to the awakening of Italians' national conscience in the 1840s and 1850s, hence his status as the Risorgimento composer *par excellence* – is hardly touched upon. More than the absence of discussion of this topic, however, what might invite reflection is Gossett's final paragraph:

> Senza alcun dubbio l'immagine di Verdi fu mitizzata e il suo impegno parlamentare fu minimo. Anche se molte cose su di lui sono state scritte e raccontate, la forza, l'intensità e la bellezza della sua musica restano innegabili. Comunque si giudichi il coinvolgimento suo e quello dei musicisti italiani negli avvenimenti di quegli anni, resta il fatto che quel periodo ci ha lasciato molte delle più belle pagine musicali di tutti i tempi. (48–9)
>
> [Without any doubt the image of Verdi was mythologised and his parliamentary contribution was minimal. Even if many things about him have been written and recalled, the force, the intensity and the beauty of his music remain undeniable. However one assesses his and other Italian musicians' involvement in the events of those years, there remains the fact that this period has bequeathed to us some of the most beautiful music of all time.]

These words clearly acknowledge that a part of Verdi's *risorgimentale* image was a product of invention. But they also betray an urge to defend the power of Verdi's music against the menacing possibility of a demystification of his political status. It is as if, in Gossett's view, the latter process could bring about a corruption of the beauty and artistic achievements of Verdi's operas; as if – and this idea might be even more disquieting – a new disenchantment about Verdi's political role in Risorgimento Italy might cause a sudden erasure of all that his operas have meant to Italians up to the present day.

Many of the more traditional views about Verdi (and, more generally, about Italian opera) and the Risorgimento are likewise enthusiastically reiterated in Gavazzeni's essay, 'Il melodramma ha fatto l'Unità d'Italia' ('Opera made Italian Unification'). There is no need to pause here over the restatement of such tropes (see, for instance, pp. 117, 120

[4] This is also the perspective from which Gossett has addressed the topic of Italian opera (or music) and the Risorgimento elsewhere. See, for instance, his '"Edizioni distrutte" and the Significance of Operatic Choruses During the Risorgimento'. Some of the methodological problems involved in this particular approach to the significance of opera for the Italian national movement, and for Italian identity, appear first in Gossett's article, and arise again in his preface to *O mia patria*. I shall not address them in this essay, which aims for a wider overview of the on-going debates.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0954586712000109 Published online by Cambridge University Press

and 142). It may nevertheless be worth noting something that emerges rather clearly in this chapter: that Verdi has traditionally been seen as the culmination of a process, the climax in the development of an Italian political and national conscience around the mid-nineteenth century. According to this formulation, Verdi is preceded, at a still 'imperfect' stage of accomplishment, by his three most illustrious colleagues: Rossini, 'patriotta senza importanza' ('a patriot of no importance', 63); Bellini, 'il mancato "carbonaro"' ('the failed "carbonaro"', 88); and Donizetti, in whom Mazzini placed great hopes for the resurgence of Italy by way of a regeneration of its musical theatre ('Le premonizioni di Donizetti' – 'Donizetti's premonitions', 100). Next to these three, all unfulfilled as truly 'patriotic' composers, Verdi emerges as the incarnation of that crescendo in Italian national feeling that led to the 1848 revolutions and, later, the second war of independence and Italian Unification. He is the one who deserves the fully positive epithet of 'padre "musicale" della patria' ('the homeland's "musical" father', 117).

The idea that sustains this pyramid of 'political' composers would seem to run parallel to two traditional assumptions. First, a belief in nineteenth-century musical progress: the idea, in this case, that each composer brought opera's musical and dramatic means of expression to a higher degree than his predecessors. Particularly in the golden age of music analysis (the 1970s and 1980s), Verdi scholars made repeated efforts to show how their composer attained increasing musical and dramatic continuity in his works, overcoming the traditional separation between recitative and aria and using musical forms with greater freedom. (Another 'positive' development, at least from our modern point of view, during the later nineteenth century was the emergence of increasing attention to composers' intentions in the staging of their works, which were more and more often performed in their entirety and without interpolations.) The second idea that supports the musical-political pyramid, however, has less to do with music than with history, more precisely with historical views of the Italian Risorgimento. There is a sense in which the events of 1860–1 are sometimes seen (and were seen in the past) as a pole of attraction: as both the ultimate end to which all Italy's political strivings of the previous decades inevitably pointed, and a new degree zero in the country's history. According to this view, Unification was the result of a hidden, positive force driving history (what Christopher Duggan has recently called, borrowing the title from Verdi's opera, the 'force of destiny'): a force not unlike that which supposedly drove music through its various developments at the same time.[5] It might be because of this (questionable) correspondence that Gavazzeni tends to read such a strong link between political and musical events:

> Questa la temperie in cui prese le mosse il teatro musicale di Giuseppe Verdi, il compositore che assunse gli stimoli ereditati dalle generazione del 'Conciliatore' e le aspirazioni riformatrici indicate da Mazzini *in grado incomparabilmente più elevato dei suoi predecessori*, fossero il Sovrano Rossini, o i suoi 'protetti' Bellini e Donizetti che pur avvertirono in forme diverse l'avanzare delle nuove istanze unitarie … *Il melodramma con le sue inconvenienze ha realizzato anche lui la sua unità, raggiungendo lo scopo*, voluto da Mazzini, di eliminare le opere sminuzzate in centoni e bandire le serate in cui si mescolavano un atto di un'opera e un altro di diversa provenienza. (61–2, italics added)

[5] As Duggan has argued, the political events of the Risorgimento were often seen by contemporary and later nineteenth-century Italians as the visible manifestation of 'a force, a hidden hand, which was directing the course of history towards predetermined goals'; see Christopher Duggan, *The Force of Destiny: A History of Italy since 1796* (London, 2008), xvi. The long-established teleological view of the Risorgimento, as a process unfolding towards and culminating in Italy's political unification, has also been discussed by Derek Beales and Eugenio F. Biagini; see their *The Risorgimento and the Unification of Italy* (Harlow, 2002), 2.

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[Such is the climate in which Giuseppe Verdi began composing for the theatre; he is the composer who took on the stimuli of the generation of 'Il Conciliatore' and Mazzini's reforming aspirations *to an incommensurably higher degree than his predecessors*, whether the Sovereign Rossini, or his 'protégés' Bellini and Donizetti, who nevertheless sensed in different ways the progress of new calls for unification … *With its* inconvenienze*, opera too achieved its own unity, reaching the goal* that Mazzini had wished for: to do away with operas shred into pieces and evenings in which acts from different operas would be mixed together.]

Of the book's three authors, the most sceptical about the relationship between opera and Italian nationalism in the early nineteenth century appears to be Carlo Vitali, whose chapter addresses opera from a wider cultural and socio-economic perspective ('Opera, affare di Stato' – 'Opera, a State Business'). Vitali seeks to provide a portrait of the whole business of opera with all its various systems and actors (impresarios, librettists, editors, critics, etc.). Only in the second part of his essay does he address the problem of whether 'il melodramma fu davvero veicolo trasversale di propagazione dei valori patriottici' ('opera really was a cross-party means for the propagation of patriotic values', 262), claiming that 'la risposta è ardua e nient'affatto univoca' ('the answer is difficult and by no means univocal', 262). Vitali's merit rests less in any attempt to open new perspectives on this topic – he mainly draws on John Rosselli's (262) and Peter Stamatov's work (266) – than in his effort to put into some perspective Verdi's (277–9) and Rossini's (279–92) inflated images as respectively a committedly political and a staunchly reactionary composer.[6]

The last chapter of *O mia patria*, written by Armando Torno, is a short biography of an Italian patriot, Piero Maroncelli. In spite of his musical interests and relationships with the most famous composers of his time, Maroncelli never managed to gain a place in the pantheon of Italy's Risorgimento musicians. This circumstance – Torno argues – is due to the fact that he failed to compose any operas:

Non compone un'opera di successo, anzi di lui non conosciamo, al di là delle notizie su qualche composizione sacra o poetica, nemmeno un debutto lirico in teatro; non lascia insomma neanche una nota in grado di far fremere per l'amor di patria… (301)

[He did not write any successful operas; indeed, among the religious and poetic compositions, there was not a single operatic debut; in short, he left no music that might have aroused feelings of patriotic love…]

The inclusion in this volume of the biography of a little-known Italian musician is certainly worthwhile. Yet the fact that Maroncelli was primarily a patriot – that he was chosen because of his commitment to politics – confirms the rather narrow perspective on opera and nineteenth-century Italian history offered by *O mia patria*. One wonders, nevertheless, whether there might be new ways of telling the parallel histories of nineteenth-century opera and the Italian national movement; whether there could be an alternative route for renovating our emotional engagement with both opera and the Risorgimento; something, at least, less clichéd than Gavazzeni's confident credo: 'Non è un paradosso: il Risorgimento s'identifica nel canto. Cantavano tutti' ('It is not a paradox: the Risorgimento identifies itself with singing. Everybody sang', 53).

Simonetta Chiappini's *O patria mia: passione e identità nazionale nel melodramma italiano dell'Ottocento* clearly attempts to provide this broader view of Italian opera. To begin with, her analysis extends over a longer chronological period, one stretching from the late

[6] See John Rosselli, *The Opera Industry in Italy from Cimarosa to Verdi: The Role of the Impresario* (Cambridge, 1984), esp. 165–7; and Stamatov, 'Interpretive Activism'.

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eighteenth to the early twentieth centuries. Furthermore, her book claims no special status or place for the Risorgimento in nineteenth-century Italian history; it rather treats the Risorgimento, at least from a musical-historical point of view, as part of a longer story. Chiappini's focus is less the Risorgimento than Italian identity as shaped by and expressed through opera. Her book thus draws attention to the second aspect of last year's Italian celebrations, mentioned at the beginning of this article.

The book is divided into three large sections, each corresponding to a different historical-political period: 'La serva Italia' ('Enslaved Italy'), 'Il Risorgimento. La "rigenerazione" attraverso la musica' ('Risorgimento: "regeneration" through music') and 'Melodramma e Unità d'Italia' ('Opera and the Unification of Italy'). Each chapter within these sections addresses a particular topic: from foreign images of Italy during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries to the theme of marriage as represented in both opera and nineteenth-century Italian society; from the gradual transformation of operatic voices to the role and meanings of the romantic heroine; from the 'crisis' of Italian opera after Unification to the relationship between *melodramma* and *italianità* in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As is suggested by some of these topics, one of the most valuable aspects of the book is Chiappini's willingness to 'read' opera in close connection with nineteenth-century Italian culture and society, rather than as an isolated phenomenon. There is a sense, however, in which the book's main difficulties stem precisely from what are in many ways its most valuable features: Chiappini's attempt to look at opera through the looking glass of social (and sometimes political) processes, and the long chronological period that constitutes her frame of reference.

As to the first point, the problem appears most obviously when Chiappini seeks to identify ways in which political and historical processes came to be reflected in music. One example occurs when she addresses the rhythmic impetus of cabalettas, particularly those sung by some of Verdi's early heroines. Talking about the cabaletta from Odabella's entrance aria in the prologue of *Attila* ('Da te questo or m'è concesso') – but making a claim that seems to apply more generally to the cabaletta as a form during the 1840s – Chiappini argues that

> lo *slancio* ritmico della *cabaletta* si sposa perfettamente col clima patriottico, incita al fervore dell'azione, elettrizza la platea con un virtuosismo aggressivo, che si dimostra uno dei segni esortativi più espliciti dello spirito risorgimentale. (114)
>
> [the rhythmic *impetus* of the *cabaletta* matches perfectly the patriotic climate: it encourages action, electrifies the audience with an aggressive virtuosity that proves to be one of the most explicit hortatory signs of the Risorgimento spirit.]

If the cabaletta, as developed by Verdi in his operas of the 1840s, was one of the musical elements that corresponded to or reflected what Chiappini calls the 'spirito risorgimentale', any change in those historical conditions must inevitably cause a change in the use of that musical form:

> La sconfitta dell'ipotesi repubblicana e democratica produsse un duraturo ripiegamento, chiaramente rintracciabile nel mutamento del clima culturale e artistico, in musica nell'allentamento dello slancio *cabalettistico* e nell'affievolirsi del carattere rumorosamente epico del melodramma. (7)
>
> [The defeat of republican and democratic ideas caused a lasting retreat, clearly recognisable in the new cultural and artistic atmosphere, in music through the weakening of the cabalettas' impetus and the fading of opera's noisy epic character.]
>
> Con la sconfitta delle forze democratiche, successiva al fallimento delle Repubbliche romana e veneziana, anche sulla scena il clima cambia: il piglio delle eroine si smorza, la loro voce perde di bellicosità e vigore, per divenire ripiegamento lirico, più intimo e 'cantabile', sui temi privati del sentimento amoroso e familiare. (115)

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[With the defeat of the democrats, which followed on from the failure of the Roman and Venetian republics, the atmosphere also changes on stage: heroines' resolute attitudes fade, their voice loses its bellicose character and vigour, and effects a lyrical, more intimate and 'cantabile' retreat into the private themes of love and familial affection.]

In other words, the 'spirit' of the times – a sort of *Zeitgeist* – seems unequivocally to explain musical changes. It is as if composers' individual (and constantly changing) views on operatic composition, in addition to numerous other factors (foreign influences, the transformation of operatic voices, the actual singers available for a given performance, etc.), bore little relevance to such transformations. Above all, this particular view of Italian opera's developments tends to assert that musical composition – regardless of who makes it and in what exact context – depends on hidden forces of history: ones from whose influence we may ultimately not be able to escape.

Moving to the second issue I mentioned – the book's long chronological span – I would not want to suggest that Chiappini's analysis lacks historical grounding. Indeed, in dealing with subsequent moments of Italian history and the history of opera, she cites a large number of sources from the period, seeking as she does to offer historically informed views on particular issues. An example may be found in Chapter 2 of Part One, where Chiappini runs through a list of stereotypes of Italy and the Italian character – particularly those dealing with song and music – common among late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century foreign writers (25–44). However, there are two ways in which Chiappini's chronologically expansive project poses certain problems.

First, she shows a tendency, at least on a general level, to repeat the traditional view of Italy's nineteenth-century history and the history of Italian opera as a parabola culminating around the time of Unification. This moment marks both the fulfilment of the Risorgimento project – a project aiming at Italy's 'resurgence' for which opera supplied, in Chiappini's words, the 'soundtrack' (5) – and the beginning of a period of political, economic and operatic crisis. The narrative underpinning this view of both Italian history and Italian opera, in other words, travels from a state of decadence to a phase of 'resurgence' or regeneration and finally back to decline. In Chiappini's account, the latter process – Italy's post-Unification 'crisis' – is affirmed particularly in its musical manifestations:

Dalla metà dell'Ottocento, fino all'ultimo decennio del secolo, il melodramma riuscì sostanzialmente solo a riprodurre se stesso in modalità monumentali e decorative. Esemplare di questo disorientamento il fallimento del progetto collettivo per una solenne *Messa di Requiem* in onore di Gioacchino Rossini … Questo fallimento rivelava che, se il melodramma aveva accompagnato, come una azzeccata colonna sonora, il movimento per l'unità nazionale, pur senza averlo sempre coscientemente voluto, non riusciva a cantare consapevolmente la fase della costruzione post-unitaria … nel quarantennio successivo all'Unità l'opera sembrò perdere il carattere distintivo di punto di riferimento socialmente organico, sia dal punto di vista linguistico che culturale, che aveva mantenuto in precedenza. (167–9)

[From the 1850s to the last decade of the nineteenth century, opera was only able to reproduce itself in monumental and decorative forms. One sign of this disorientation was the failure of the project for the composition of a solemn, multi-authored *Requiem Mass* dedicated to the memory of Rossini … This failure revealed that, if opera had functioned as the perfect soundtrack to Italian Unification, if at times unconsciously, it was nevertheless unable knowingly to celebrate in song the phase of post-Unification construction … during the four decades that followed Unification, opera seemed to lose its previously distinctive function as a socially organic point of reference, both from a linguistic and a cultural point of view.]

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Italian opera's 'crisis' after Unification is, of course, a leitmotif of many histories of opera.[7] The fact that – if we exclude Verdi – no opera by an Italian composer dating from the 1860s gained a place in the repertory has encouraged the view that Italian opera 'died' around 1860, causing the start of a gap that would be filled only by the emergence of *verismo* opera in the 1890s.[8] What I find most worrying about this insistence on the idea of late nineteenth-century opera's crisis – and I do not want to argue with the factual evidence, the numbers of operatic successes and fiascos – is that it risks allying itself with another, often-reiterated crisis: the political, economic and intellectual one that affected the newly born Italian nation-state after 1861. Indeed, as Axel Körner has noted, there is a tendency in studies of Liberal Italy to over-emphasise 'the country's cultural pessimism, malaise and decline after Unification', and to overlook its projects of modernisation.[9] As for opera, particularly when this is examined in connection with the (trans)formation of Italian identity, it might be fruitful to search for new, more positive ways of exploring this relationship: rather than focus on Italian opera's failures after 1861, one could, for example, ask how increasingly successful foreign works (both French and German) affected and shaped both Italian national and social identities. There is indeed no reason why a non-Italian work – say one by Wagner – seen in some theatre on the peninsula could not have been as important in this sense as an opera by Verdi or any other Italian composer.[10]

The second problem related to Chiappini's wide chronological arc is the suggestion of a sense of continuity – or simply the overlooking of the discontinuities – between what was believed in the past and what we believe today. As mentioned above, Chiappini discusses a wide range of nineteenth-century writings about Italy and opera. What is sometimes missing, however, is an awareness of historiographical distance: we lose the sense of who is speaking – whether Chiappini or the nineteenth-century author – and what they are attempting to say. An example occurs when Chiappini introduces Mazzini's passion for opera:

> Mazzini amava l'opera con istinto sicuro, con imprevedibile sensualità; i deliri malinconici di eroine come Desdemona e Anna Bolena lo commuovevano fino alle lacrime forse perché, era 'nato in Italia, ove la musica ha patria, e la natura è un concerto, e l'armonia si insinua nell'anima colla prima canzone che le madri cantano alla culla dei figli'. (85)
>
> [Mazzini loved opera with a sure instinct and with unexpected sensuality; the melancholy ravings of heroines such as Desdemona and Anna Bolena moved him to tears, perhaps because he was 'born in Italy, music's homeland, where nature is a concert and harmony penetrates the soul with the first melody that mothers sing to their children in their cradles'.]

[7] See, for instance, Fabrizio Della Seta, *Italia e Francia nell'Ottocento* (Turin, 1993), 277–8; and Julian Budden, *The Operas of Verdi*, 3 vols. (repr. Oxford, 2001–2), II, *From* Il trovatore *to* La forza del destino, 1–32.

[8] Carlos del Cueto has talked of the 'death of Italian opera' (understood according to the Rossinian tradition) in the 1860s and the development of a new, more European notion of opera; see Carlos del Cueto, 'The Death of Italian Opera', *Opera*, 62/5 (2011), 510–18, here 510 and 518.

[9] Axel Körner, *Politics of Culture in Liberal Italy: From Unification to Fascism* (New York and London, 2009), 3.

[10] Körner, for instance, has explored some of the implications for Italian social identities in Bologna in the 1860s of the staging of operas belonging to different traditions. The nobility mainly loved the 'old' Italian tradition of Rossini, Bellini and Donizetti, while the middle class increasingly became fans of the 'new' repertory of French and German works; see Körner, *Politics of Culture*, 230.

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It is understandable that Chiappini uses a statement by Mazzini himself – the quotation in the paragraph above – to answer the question of why he loved opera so much. Yet there is no attempt to provide a critical view of Mazzini's words, or to explain why, despite their obvious reliance on stereotypical images, such a question might be posed in the first place. The problem, as I see it here and elsewhere, is that this lack of a critical distance from the nineteenth-century source material may give the impression of an unwillingness to historicise the various stereotypes that have affected Italy and Italians for the last two centuries. There is a risk that, in discussing both foreign and autochthonous nineteenth-century views of Italy, we end up perpetuating an 'exotic' image of the country: emphasising continuities to a much greater extent than discontinuities; narrating ourselves and our past with the same emphatic, 'operatic' mode of expression that Gramsci, writing in the 1930s, complained had been affecting Italians' life and culture because of the influence played on them by nineteenth-century (Verdian) opera.[11]

The extent to which a passion for both Italy and opera underpins almost every page of the two books discussed in this article is apparent from the emotional language used by the authors. One further element, though, suggests that theirs is an attempt to offer their readers – most of whom will be Italian – an engaging reading of one segment of their common past: the book's titles. As did plenty of other publications that came out in 2011, both books exploit the emotional power of the word 'patria', a power here emphasised by the addition of the possessive, 'mia'. To any opera lover, at least one of the two titles – *O mia patria* – will immediately evoke the line from Verdi's famous chorus 'Va pensiero': 'Oh mia patria sì bella e perduta!' ('Oh, my homeland so beautiful and lost!'). The underlying implication as to Verdi's role in the Risorgimento is clear, but what interests me more is to ask: whose 'patria' are we talking about, whose national identity are we trying to understand and define? This question may sound banal, but it is crucial in many ways. One of the main problems with these two books, as already noted, is that it is not always clear where the line of separation falls between nineteenth-century and twenty-first-century Italian identity and images. This is partly due to the fact that nineteenth-century sources are used with insufficient contextualisation and critical distance. What is more, the emotional language mentioned above – a language reminiscent of that used by nineteenth-century writers – contributes to this mingling of points of view. This problem, however, might also have to do with a more general need, one felt particularly on the 150th Italian anniversary: a need not to dismiss – indeed to retain a strong connection with – our (Italian) past. Such a sense of continuity is often preserved at the expense of historical accuracy, and, all too smoothly, by nurturing claims about Italy and Italians that are clearly historical but are nevertheless continually reapplied, perhaps unwillingly, to the present-day country.

This problem is not restricted to the two publications in question, which clearly address a broad, mostly Italian audience. It also emerges, if in more subtle ways, from some recent, more specialised literature on Risorgimento nationalism. I am thinking in particular of Alberto Mario Banti's ground-breaking research.[12] Anyone who works on the Risorgimento, particularly cultural historians, will be familiar with Banti's idea of the 'Risorgimento canon': a number of literary, as well as musical and figurative, works featuring recurrent images and themes; ones that, according to Banti, had enormous emotional

[11] See Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Joseph A. Buttigieg, 3 vols. (New York, 2007), III, 263.

[12] See, in particular, Alberto Mario Banti, *La nazione del Risorgimento: parentela, santità e onore alle origini dell'Italia unità* (Turin, 2000, rpt. 2006).

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appeal for the masses and constituted the tool through which Risorgimento nationalist discourse spread and achieved political mobilisation.[13] The merits of Banti's new, cultural approach to Risorgimento nationalism have been acknowledged by many, as have some of the questions that his analysis leaves open.[14] Here I should like to draw attention to the emphasis that he places on 'passion' (or 'feelings' or 'emotions') in describing the mechanism through which nationalist discourse persuaded many Italians to take part in political events. Commenting on Banti's work, Lucy Riall has both praised its positive role in the revaluation of nationalism as a key motivator of the processes that led to Italian Unification, and highlighted some of the problems that stem from Banti's tackling of the issue of emotions.[15] I am, rather, concerned about this aspect of Banti's research – both because I am Italian and on account of the influence Banti's work may have (indeed already has had) on opera studies – since his emphasis on emotions runs the danger of lending further validity to a common stereotype: that we are 'passionate' and our lives are driven primarily by emotions. What is more, because of views rooted in common sense, opera is particularly exposed to the risk of becoming subject to readings that insist on the audience's emotional response to a work's text and music – regardless of where, when and how that work is staged, and who the audience might be. It is perhaps no coincidence that, immediately after mentioning Banti, Chiappini describes

> l'impatto coinvolgente del *medium* operistico, così capace, nella sua retorica del sublime, di smuovere le risposte primarie del pubblico, in modo più dinamico della enfatica letteratura risorgimentale. (127)
>
> [the engaging impact of the operatic medium, so apt, owing to its rhetoric of the sublime, at moving the primary responses of the audience in a more dynamic way than emphatic Risorgimento literature.]

When one puts this sentence into context, it becomes clear that Chiappini is referring to the effect of Italian opera during the 1840s. Yet her tone and emphasis suggest that the statement might aspire to a more general validity.

It is immediately apparent from this last example how easily we can find ourselves in problematic generalisations when we attempt to judge the emotional impact of a given text on a given audience (an audience about whom, in most cases, we know little or nothing); or when we give in to the assumption that literary and operatic texts, as well as the events that marked the history of our country, have exhausted their capacity of always generating new meanings. Ultimately, then, in future work about Italian opera and the Risorgimento, it might be worth considering whether an attempt to offer a less reassuringly 'Italian' view of such topics could be fruitful: whether, in other words, adopting a more critical stance – one that is constantly sceptical about the rhetoric of *italianità* and the over-emotional language that have often characterised the literature so far – could help us let opera and the Risorgimento 'go'. It would not mean to forsake our past. It would rather mean accepting that that past has much more to say; that the way we see it today must be different from the ways nineteenth- or twentieth-century Italians saw it.

Francesca Vella

[13] See Banti, *La nazione del Risorgimento*, esp. 44–5 and 53.

[14] See the debate on the new history of Risorgimento nationalism in *Nations and Nationalism*, 15/3 (2009), 396–460.

[15] See Lucy Riall, 'Nation, "Deep Images" and the Problem of Emotions', *Nations and Nationalism*, 15/3 (2009), 402–9.

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