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# Neapolitan elements and comedy in nineteenth-century opera buffe

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**Abstract:** This essay examines the attributes of some typical opere buffe by Vincenzo Fioravanti, Nicola De Giosa, and Errico Petrella that may count as particularly Neapolitan. Contextualizing these 'Neapolitan' elements – especially the 'Neapolitan characters' like Pulcinella, and the use of local dialect and spoken dialogue – demonstrates their function in the comedy of these works, which rests on the multifarious, complex and yet direct connections between theatrical events and the real world surrounding them.

Although in the course of the nineteenth century local operatic traditions continued to disappear in most of Italy, in Naples until at least 1870 composers and librettists continued to create comic operas characterized by the use of Neapolitan dialect and a particular comic dramaturgy for the public of the small local theatres like the Nuovo or La Fenice. Gaetano Donizetti, Saverio Mercadante, and Giovanni Pacini wrote operas for these theatres, in addition to innumerable now-forgotten composers. This essay will examine the attributes of some typical opere buffe by Vincenzo Fioravanti, Nicola De Giosa, and Errico Petrella that may count as particularly Neapolitan. Some of these attributes were retained from the eighteenth century; others were later.

Contextualizing these 'Neapolitan' elements demonstrates their function for the comedy of these works, which rests on the multifarious, complex and yet direct connections between theatrical events and the real world surrounding them. The specifically local character of Neapolitan opera buffa was the reason that only a handful of the 280 works composed for the Teatro Nuovo – the center of this genre – found their way to northern Italy.[1] In 1842 the renowned comic bass Carlo Cambiaggio revised Fioravanti's *Il ritorno di Pulcinella da Padova* (Naples 1837) for the Teatro Re in Milan. In the foreword to the libretto he noted that the need for a revision lay in the differing conventions of northern and Neapolitan comic opera:

> Having discovered not a few beauties in this score, I found the enthusiasm for it fully justified; but I was very sorry to learn that if this opera was performed in the rest of Italy as it was in Naples and Rome [where there was a Neapolitan community] it would not have the same effect, because of the intrusion of Neapolitan dialect, and because of the too-prolix spoken scenes. I acquired a copy of this opera in the normal manner, adjusted the text, versified and set to music the recitative according to our use, changed certain prose scenes with good dramatic situations to musical ones, like the Finale of Act 1, kept all the best of Maestro Fioravanti's music, and enriched the opera with new pieces with the assistance of Maestro Eduardo Bauer.[2]

[1] For a listing of the operas composed for the Teatro Nuovo, see Franz Stieger, *Opernlexikon* (Tutzing, 1983), vol. iv no. 2.

[2] IL RITORNO / DI / COLUMELLA / DA PADOVA / MELODRAMMA BUFFO IN TRE ATTI / RIDUZIONE / di Carlo Cambiaggio / DA RAPPRESENTARSI / NEL TEATRO DELLA COMMUNE / Il Carnovale 1844 / BOLOGNA / NELLA TIPOGRAFIA DELLE BELLE ARTI, 3.

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The conventions mentioned by Cambiaggio, namely spoken dialogue and Neapolitan dialect, were so powerful that occasionally even north Italian operas were provided with them for performance in Naples.[3] In this essay I will clarify and amplify these conventions more closely in an attempt to understand the conception of the genre, at the center of which was comedy.

## Opera buffa and spoken dialogue

Spoken dialogue in opera buffa was not accepted outside Naples. Various efforts to introduce it in Venice in the late eighteenth century had a success of comparable brevity to the Milanese experiment of 1851,[4] since many Italians of that time found the interruption of music by speech repellent. For example, the theorist Carlo Ritorni could countenance the use of spoken dialogue in French opera, but despised it in Italian opera, thinking it completely inappropriate; his comparison is extraordinarily vivid (not to mention racially problematic):[5]

> I know that usage can make any practice seem normal, just as among the Chinese there are certain men [so] accustomed to beating, that they volunteer themselves as substitutes at court for the rich condemned to this punishment and, to the conscious satisfaction of the justice system, bear the pain for them. However, it is not for the fine arts to accustom themselves to such absurd and displeasing practices, but rather to sweet and gentle sensations.

The situation in Naples was quite different; Indeed, the use of spoken dialogue constitutes a fundamental difference in conception from both northern and southern Italian opera buffa, as it had a decisive share in the dramaturgy over and above the usual functions of recitative (pushing the plot onward and connecting musical numbers). It can even be argued that the integration of spoken dialogue into opera was an important factor in the strengthening of dialect opera in the first half of the nineteenth century. Opéra comique was certainly one influence on this process: the first version of Paisiello's *Nina ossia La pazza per amore* (1789), whose libretto was based on a *comédie larmoyante* by Benoît-Joseph Marsollier des Vivetières, already includes it. But it was not until decades later that Paisiello's opera, which was written for the Neapolitan court in Caserta and not for a Neapolitan theater, was followed by further examples, as in the aftermath of the French occupation

[3] For example, in 1818 the part of Don Magnifico in Rossini's *La Cenerentola* was translated into dialect; the same thing happened in 1826 when Donizetti revised *L'Ajo nell'imbarazzo* as *Don Gregorio*, and there, moreover, the recitatives were changed into spoken dialogue. Occasionally even serious operas were given the same treatment: for instance, Bellini's *I Capuleti ed I Montecchi* was performed in Naples' Teatro La Fenice with spoken dialogue. See Valeria Rea, 'Il Teatro ''La Fenice" di Napoli 1813–1846,' *Estratto dell' Archivio Storico per le Province Napoletane* (Naples, 1996), 311.

[4] Giorgio Giacchetti wrote two libretti with spoken dialogue: *Il magnetismo* for Achille Graffigna, and *Il sindaco babbeo* for a few of Lauro Rossi's students at the Milan Conservatory, among whom was Amilcare Ponchielli. See my *Musikalisches Drama und Boulevard. Französische Einflüsse auf die italienische Oper im 19. Jahrhundert* (Stuttgart and Weimar, 2002), 193–5.

[5] Carlo Ritorni, Ammaestramenti alla composizione d'ogni poema e d'ogni opera appartenente alla musica (Milen, 1841), 121.

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(1806–1815) opéra comique became widely accepted. Evidently Andrea Leone Tottola, the *poeta* of the royal theaters and a librettist for Rossini and Donizetti, played a significant role in this change of taste.[6]

Equally, if not more important in Neapolitan opera buffa's assimilation of spoken dialogue was the strong tradition of popular theater, absent in other parts of Italy. The public in Naples was accustomed to spoken dialogue, and, unlike singers elsewhere in Italy, the Neapolitan performers were routinely good enough actors to offer this dialogue a manner that resembled that of the spoken theater. Above all, however, spoken dialogue allowed an almost direct transfer of essential elements of spoken theater to the operatic stage. The affinity between dialect opera and dialect drama animates all aspects of the theatrical discourse and is implicated in the appearance of 'Neapolitan characters'[7] and the use of stereotypical, oft-repeated situations. Spoken theater was important in the cultural life of Naples because it absorbed material from other regions; this then affected the material of Neapolitan opera. For example, Alessandro Manzoni's famous novel *I promessi sposi* is hardly recognizable in the opera buffa of the same name by Luigi Bordese, since, as the librettist Giuseppe Checcherini acknowledges in his preface, he reworked not the novel itself, but a play-version performed in the Teatro dei Fiorentini.[8]

The spoken dialogues of Neapolitan dialect opera often constitute small self-sufficient theatrical events with only minor connections to the main plot. However their comedy enchanted the public. Just as in the *commedia dell'arte*, though perhaps to a lesser extent, *what* was played was of less interest than *how* it was performed. Contemporary critics point to the surprising capabilities of Neapolitan comic basses in creating a comic atmosphere:

> The buffi of the Neapolitan company are priceless comedians. One of them, De Biase, is really a first-rank artist: short and fat with a face like a full moon and a cheerful disposition, with an inexhaustible vein of jokes, he only has to walk onstage to make people roar with laughter.[9]

A scene from Tottola's libretto *Pulcinella marito, e non marito* (set by Petrella, 1830) can illustrate the comic elements equally characteristic of popular spoken drama and

[6] Vittorio Viviani, *Storia del teatro napoletano* (Naples, 1969), 563.

[7] An early use of the term 'Neapolitan characters' is to be found in a letter of the composer Nicola De Giosa to the librettist Raffaele d'Ambra, who, in working on the libretto for a new opera *Don Tiberio a Posilipo* (never set to music), commented on the general conditions of north Italian opera: 'change it for me into Italian, without prose, and as concisely as you can. And it is certain that those Neapolitan characters will not lose much in their "Italian transformation" because without our exaggerations they belong to all the people.' Quoted in Franco Carmelo Greco, 'Immagini della città sulla scena musicale napoletana dell'Ottocento,' in *Gli affetti convenienti all'idee. Studi sulla musica vocale italiana*, ed. Maria Caraci Vela, Rosa Cafiero and Angela Romagnoli (Naples, 1993), 367.

[8] The dissemination of Carlo Goldoni's comedies was crucially driven by the arrangements by Filippo Cammarano, brother of Verdi's librettist, Salvatore. See Franco Carmelo Greco, 'Napoli, teatro e città nell'ottocento. Lingua e fantasmi di un'auto-rappresentazione durata un secolo,' in *La scena illustrata. Teatro, pittura e città a Napoli nell'ottocento*, ed. Greco (Naples, 1995), xif.

[9] *Gazzetta musicale di Milano* (1875), 251.

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opera buffa in Naples. Giocondo and his servant Pulcinella are trying to get into a tower, where their beloveds are held prisoner:

GIOCONDO Coraggio! ecco la stanza sottoposta, che sicuramente corrisponde al finestrino. [*Buck up! Look, there is the room which certainly belongs to the window.*]
PULCINELLA Ah! Giocunno mariuolo! che t' ha fatto sta povera noce de cuollo mio! [*Oh! Giocondo, you are a crook! What has my poor neck done to you?* (that you want me to break it).]
GIOCONDO Coraggio, ti replico, ed imitarmi (*arrampicandosi discende al piano*) io sono disceso. [*Come on, follow me.* (he climbs down to the floor) *I'm down.*]
PULCINELLA Sì sciso? e statte buono, ca io me ne torno . . . [*You're down? Then take care of yourself; I will return to . . .*]
GIOCONDO Scendi, o ti brucio il cervello! (*impugnando una pistola.*) [*Come down here, or I'll blow off your head* (he takes out a pistol)]
PULCINELLA Ma cheste so azione da zeppolajuolo! [*But this is the kind of thing a pastry seller would do!*]
GIOCONDO Poggia il piede sul cornicione, e poi slanciati facendo un salto. [*Put your feet on the ledge, and then turn around while jumping.*]
PULCINELLA E tu sì ausato ad abballá ncoppa a la corda; ma io so stato sempe n'abballarinolo de passagaglia. [*You are foolhardy enough to dance on a rope, but I have only ever been a passacaglia-dancer* (i.e., he is no acrobat.)]
GIOCONDO Presto, o ti trascinerò abbasso! [*Quick, or I'll pull you down!*]
PULCINELLA Chiano, chiano! lassame alommanco fa li cunte, si m'aggio da rompere la capo, o qualche gamma. . . (*scende a stento, e co' suoi lazzi*) ah! arrassosia! le stentina me so sagliute ncanna! [*Slowly, slowly! let me figure out whether it's my head or my leg I have to break . . .* (descends laboriously, and with his lazzi) *Ah! Be off! All that work has put my guts in my throat!*]
GIOCONDO Ci siamo finalmente! [*There we are finally!*]
PULCINELLA Gnorsì, p'essere accise tutte duje? [*Yes, Mister; and both of us to be killed.*]
GIOCONDO Non ti avevo detto, che il castello è deserto? coll'ajuto di una lunga scala siamo saliti su i merli, e colla scala medesima abbiamo guadagnato l'alto di questa torre. [*Didn't I tell you that the castle was deserted? With a long ladder we climbed on the battlement, and with the same ladder we reached the top of this tower.*]
PULCINELLA E pregammo lo Cielo, che no la saglimmo n'auta vota pè scennere pò pè la funa. [*And let's pray to God that we don't have to climb it again and come down on a rope.*]
GIOCONDO Ma qui non è Romilda, nè Giulietta! [*But neither Romilda, nor Giulietta are here!* ]
PULCINELLA Statte a bedè, che avimmo fatte zero niro! chelle saranno asciute a piglià no poco d'aria, e nuje restammo ncastagnate ccà dinto! [*You will see that we have a black zero* (i.e., a flop)*! They are out to get some fresh air, and we are captive here.*]
GIOCONDO Che siano in quel gabinetto? ah! sì! eccole là! Romilda? Giulietta? [*Who is in this room? Oh! Yes! There they are! Romilda? Giulietta?*]
ROMILDA (*di dentro*) Chi chiama? [*Who's calling?*]
GIOCONDO Il tuo Giocondo! [*Your Giocondo!*]
PULCINELLA Addavero! ah! ca già m'è passata la paura! [*Indeed! Oh! I'm no longer afraid!*][10]

[10] IL GIORNO DELLE NOZZE / OVVERO / PULCINELLA MARITO, / E NON MARITO / POESIA / DEL SIG. ANDREA LEONE TOTTOLA, AUTORE / MELODRAMMATICO DE' REALI TEATRI / DI NAPOLI / MUSICA DEL MAESTRO NAPOLITANO / SIG. ERRICO PETRELLA / Da rappresentarsi nel Teatro Nuovo sopra / Toledo il Carnevale del corrente anno 1830. / NAPOLI / Dalla Stamperia di Gio. Battista Seguin, 30–2.

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Of course this kind of comedy was possible in recitative, but spoken dialogue was far better suited to improvisation and interaction with the audience. Although improvisation was practiced in other parts of Italy it played a far greater role in Naples. This difference in audience preference was clear in a Milanese review. Neapolitan comic opera was performed there with recitatives in place of spoken dialogue; nevertheless, the Neapolitan performer did not refrain from his usual practice of diverging from the text:

> Like all Neapolitan comedians, Fioravanti was not content simply to reproduce the character, but caricatured him somewhat, adding *lazzi*, words, and whole scenes to the libretto; but he could do this with such parsimony and decorum, that our audience, not especially kind to scenic blandishments, laughed and let him do it.[11]

Although even the *lazzi* in Neapolitan theater of this period were fixed in writing, it was expected that performers would expand or elaborate on them.[12] In part this got to be a kind of conversation with the audience. In a review of Nicola De Giosa's *Don Checco* (1850) we read of the famous comic bass Raffaele Casaccia, who played the title role: 'Casaccia toiled terribly and was nevertheless much applauded. But [it must be said] once and for all, that it is not amusing when he starts dialogues with the audience about his misery. A true actor plays his part and does not recount his miseries or those of his friends.'[13] But the irritation of the reviewer was not generally shared; other voices of the time valued the close connection between stage and audience. 'The singers and the public entertain each other,' noted a critic in 1851, 'every evening the former add new fashions and graces; every evening the latter push for and encourage new attempts.'[14]

## Realism and comedy

The close connection with the audience is also evident in the works themselves. The locations depicted in many opere buffe are precisely identifiable: for example, the introduction to Luigi Ricci's *La festa di Piedigrotta* (1852), written for the Teatro Nuovo, describes the Piazza della carità, just a couple of streets away from the theater, and crossed by many audience members on their way to the show. But it is not only the stage sets that refer to Naples; just as in the dialect opera of the eighteenth century, the characters demonstrate a 'tendency to involve themselves in scuffles, arguments, etc., that have little to do with the plot, but present a picture of Neapolitan life and the volatile and extrovert nature of some of the city's inhabitants.'[15]

The purpose of the multiple allusions to Naples and the 'Neapolitan way of life' was to create a frame of reference for this specific kind of comedy. This mainly relied on the spectator recognizing an altered version of himself and his daily

[11] *Gazzetta musicale di Milano* (1869), 402.
[12] Giulio Trevisani, *Teatro napoletano. Dalle origini a Edoardo Scarpetta. Fenice del teatro*, 3 (Parma, 1957), xxx.
[13] *Gazzetta musicale di Milano* (1850), 129.
[14] *L'Omnibus* (17 May 1851), 231. Quoted in Greco,' Immagini della città' (see n. 7), 342.
[15] Michael F. Robinson, *Naples and Neapolitan Opera* (Oxford, 1972), 190.

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surroundings, and being made to laugh by that recognition. Volker Klotz's broad observation that the comedy of ridicule consists in the distortion of accustomed routines and relationships is obviously pertinent here.[16] From this point of view comedy originates from the discrepancy between the predictable – the 'normal', what the spectator has learnt from his life experience – and the staged events, which stand in a comic false relation to each other. According to Helmuth Plessner comedy grows from a kind of non-sense which 'presents itself and wants to be accepted as a unity, but in which a norm is distorted by apparent obedience to it, thus producing comic conflict'.[17] That is, in order to allow the conception of *comic distance* to grow in the mind of the spectator, there needs to be not only a difference between stage and life, but also a disfigured norm or convention.

Disguise, unmasking, parody and travesty, etc. are, according to Freud, the classic locations of comic distance.[18] These elements are concentrated in the 'Neapolitan characters' of dialect opera. The Neapolitan dialect – the language of their own ethnic system of reference – directed the particular attention and sympathy of the audience members to these characters. These characters were additionally important to the idea of dialect opera more broadly considered, since they also appeared in works played beyond Naples. Here the use of dialect was generally justified by the fact that the figures in question were Neapolitans who had left their homeland unwillingly and yearned for it. In Luigi Bordese's already-mentioned *I promessi sposi* Don Abbondio (in Manzoni's novel a priest but here the mayor of Lecco since clerics were not allowed on the stage), is turned into a Neapolitan. He is characterized by a stereotype – fear of work – which audience members would have recognized as often applied to themselves, and the comedy consists both in their recognition of this connection and in its isolation and exaggeration:

DON ABBONDIO Oh poveriello a me! mo aggio da rifà tutto lo contratto nuzziale nfra li sposi promessi Laurenzo Tramaglino, e Lucietta Mondella. Pozza stà buono chi mme consigliaje a venì da Napole a sto paese pe m'accetà no territorio; accetaje sta carreca de Sinnaco, e mo m'attocca a lavorà juorno, e notte, notte, e juorno.[19] [Oh, poor me! Now I have to re-do the whole marriage settlement between Laurenzo Tramaglino and Lucietta Mondella. May he who advised me to leave Naples and come here be happy; I agreed to become mayor, and now I have to work day and night, night and day!]

On the relatively rare occasions when such scenes were played outside Naples, they were heavily revised**,** since they were sufficiently tied to their immediate context that they were largely incomprehensible beyond Naples; in any case they did not have the desired comic effect. One example illustrates the kind of revision undertaken.

[16] Volker Klotz, *Bürgerliches Lachtheater. Komödie – Posse – Schwank – Operette* (Reinbek bei Hamburg, 1987), 10.
[17] Helmuth Plessner, *Lachen und Weinen. Eine Untersuchung nach den Grenzen menschlichen Verhaltens* (Munich, 1950), 112, 115.
[18] Sigmund Freud, *Der Witz und seine Beziehung zum Unbewußten* (Frankfurt, 1992), 202.
[19] I PROMESSI SPOSI / MELO-DRAMMA IN TRE ATTI / TRATTO DAL ROMANZO DEL SIGNOR MANZONI / DI SIMIL TITOLO / DA GIUSEPPE CHECCHERINI / PEL TEATRO NUOVO / nell'inverno dell'anno 1830 / PER TERZA OPERA NUOVA / NAPOLI / DALLA TIPOGRAFIA DI GIUSEPPE SEVERINO / Vico Nuova della Pace No. 18 e 19/1830, 10.

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In Petrella's *Le precauzioni* (1851), for example, the Neapolitan *servo sciocco* (dumb servant) Cola goes to Venice to serve the merchant Muzio. When he loses his way he asks for help: 'Vedite monzù; io mme chiammo Cola, non tengò nè mamma e nè patre.' [See, mister, my name is Cola, and I ain't got no mother or father]. In the revised version he prosaically announces 'I'm hungry and thirsty.' Gone is the staged representation of characteristic behavior patterns – the subservient gesture that Cola makes to get a handout, and his recourse to describing his lack of a family.[20] Cola plays his highest card in referring to his mother; his statement is probably not even true, but it would not occur to any Neapolitan to believe him. This reference is simply part of ritual social relations understood by every inhabitant of this city. Petrella himself used this unbeatable argument in a letter to his publishers Giudici e Strada, to reinforce his wish for an advance, saying that he had to send some of that money to his 'cara madre a Napoli.'[21] It seems, then, that audiences outside Naples were less able to see through the ritual exaggeration typical of these interchanges, and the text was accordingly moderated.

Let us look at the representation of this Neapolitan character a little more closely. 'Don Checco is not a true character,' notes Guido Pannain about the title role of De Giosa's extremely successful opera buffa, 'but a mask; a stereotypical figure of brilliant and superficial comicality . . . [That variety of comedy consists of] a gaiety originating in the *lazzo*, made up of jokes, gibes, and dialect pleasantries. Don Checco is a spry old man navigating in a sea of miseries: riddled with debt, persecuted and anxious, tattered and beaten. And above all famished.'[22] The lament about poverty is one of the staples of Neapolitan opera buffa:

DON CHECCO Ed eccome fujenno carreco de diebbete, e senza speranza de pavarle! Non nce persone dinto a sto paese che non ave avuto da llo Conte Roduolfo, e sulo co mme è addeventato llo chiù spietato creditore . . . e po pecchè? . . . ppe doje annate de pesone. M'ave puosto ncuollo n'usciere acossì esecutiva, che non mme lassa de pede . . . Pare mpossibile, tene una gamma, e corre comme a no crapio, e si non mme nfilava de pressa ccà dinto n'avarria attrappato. Allommanco conoscesse sto Conte, mme nce jettarria a lli piede, e cercarria pietà . . . Ma llo pevo si è ca tengo non friddo e na famma ncuollo, che è na portentosa! A te D. Checco Cerifoglio, mo è llo tiempo de la faccia tosta e di lli trastole. Tu aje da magnà dormì ccà gratuitamente, e dimane tanto cammino ca o crepo io, o l'usciere . . .

[There I am now, fleeing and deeply in debt, and without any hope of paying them off. There is no one in this village who has not borrowed from count Rodolfo, and only with me he is such an obstinate creditor . . . and why? because of two years' rent. He has sent his bailiff after me, who follows me everywhere . . . It's unbelievable, he has only one leg and runs like a billy goat, and if I had not managed to get in here, he would have caught me. If I knew the Count, I would throw myself down before him and ask for mercy . . . But instead of this, I am cold and hungry; how wonderful! Don Checco Cerifoglio, it's up to you;

[20] Sebastian Werr, *Die Opern von Errico Petrella. Rezeptionsgeschichte, Interpretationen und Dokumente. Primo Ottocento 2* (Vienna, 1999), 53.
[21] Ibid., 210.
[22] Guido Pannain, *Ottocento musicale italiano* (Milan, 1952), 132.

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now it's time for a daring face and empty talk. You must eat and sleep here for free, and tomorrow I will run, so that either I or the bailiff will die . . .][23]

Don Checco's stratagem – to deceive the others in order to get a meal – must, of course, be successful in a comedy. The innkeeper Bartolaccio mistakes him for the count, who likes to travel incognito, and it turns out that Bartolaccio also owes the count money. In the following excerpt the innkeeper tries to figure out the stranger's identity, and asks him questions that the educated count would be in a position to answer:

[. . .] BARTOLACCIO (È lui, è lui!) [(*It's him, it's him!*)]
DON CHECCO Ma jammo da magnà? [*Do we get to eat?*]
BARTOLACCIO Andiamo . . . Sentite un altro momentino . . . (Questa è l'ultima pruova!) [*Let's go . . . Wait another little moment . . . (This is the last test!)*]
DON CHECCO (Vide chisto comme m'aspetta!) [(*See how he's looking at me!*)]
BARTOLACCIO Credo che siete assai istrutto? [*I would think you are well educated.*]
DON CHECCO E che te pare? Sono il più strutto di tutti . . . (Fusse acciso si capesco chisto che dice!) [*What do you think? I'm the most worn out of all . . . (Damn, I wish I could understand what he says!)*]
BARTOLACCIO Medicina . . . Chirurgia . . . [*Medicine . . . Surgery . . .*]
DON CHECCO Già, già . . . Astrologia, Mineralogia . . . Trastologia. . . e cca è llo forte mio . . . Conoscete sta scienza, Trastologia? [*Yes, yes . . . Astrology, Mineralogy . . . Trastology . . . and this is my strongest . . . Do you know this science, Trastology?*]
BARTOLACCIO Non la conosco . . . [*I don't know it . . .*]
DON CHECCO No? (E mo te la faccio abbedè!) [*No? (And now I will introduce you to it!*)]
BARTOLACCIO (*gettandosi ad un tratto ai suoi piedi*) Signore, giacchè vi siete degnato di onorare la mia osteria, perdonatemi i debiti che ho con voi . . . [(*suddenly throwing himself down at [Don Checco's] feet*) *Mister, since you have lowered yourself to honour my inn with your presence, please forgive me my debts to you . . .*]
DON CHECCO Gli diebbette tuoje? (E trova che paja lli mieje! Ma si llo debbeto è na malatia contagiosa!) Amico, tu sbaglie . . . io sonjo . . . [*Your debts? (I need someone who pays mine! As if debts were a contagious disease!) My friend, you're wrong . . . I am . . .*]
BARTOLACCIO Vi ho conosciuto . . . sì, si commandate, voi avrete tutto da me . . . al momento pranzi, alloggio, onori, ma ditemi se lo siete . . . [*I recognized you . . . Yes, just give me orders and I'll give you everything . . . meals, lodging, honors, whenever you want them, but tell me if you are . . .*]
DON CHECCO Mme daje a magnà tutto? [*You'll give me whatever I want to eat?*]
BARTOLACCIO Si, si. . . ma ditemi se lo siete . . . [*Yes, yes . . . but tell me if you are . . .*]
DON CHECCO Chi aggio da essere? [*Who should I be?*]
BARTOLACCIO Il Conte dei Ridolfi . . . [*The Count of Ridolfi.*]
DON CHECCO (Lo creditore mio!) Io . . . già . . . (se magnà e bonanotte) lo sono cotello [. . .] [(*My creditor!*) *I . . . yes . . . (eating and sleeping) I am he.*][24]

[23] DON CHECCO / OPERA BUFFA IN DUE ATTI / La poesia è di Almerindo Spadetta / LA MUSICA È DEL MAESTRO / NICCOLA DE GIOSA / RAPPRESENTATA LA SERA 11 LUGLIO 1851 / NEL TEATRO NUOVO DI NAPOLI / NAPOLI / Tipografia Francesco Saverio Crisciulo / Presso Giuseppe d'Ambra strada Portacaresse / Montecalvario n. 1/1852, p. 19.
[24] De Giosa/Spadetta, *Don Checco*, 22–4.

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Don Checco is fed and housed for free, and at the end of the opera his debts are forgiven. It is certainly an understandable desire to achieve a life without labor. But in reality, people are not taken care of for free and debts are not forgiven. The end of this opera can be interpreted on the one hand as a kind of fantasy for the audience of the Teatro Nuovo, who were mostly in the middling ranks of society and notoriously penurious, and on the other as a relatively literal representation (if also an exaggeration) of the notion, often seen as characteristically Neapolitan, that a certain brazenness is necessary to getting by in life.[25] An investigation of the operas including Pulcinella, the last of the *commedia dell'arte* characters to have much currency in the nineteenth century, can further clarify the ways these Neapolitan characters served as a kind of mirror of Neapolitan life.

## Pulcinella and the comedy of the fool

Neapolitan opera buffa is – to a much greater extent than North Italian comic opera, and in complete contrast to French opéra comique-primarily a comedy of the fool, whose clumsiness and stupidity produce the comic situations. 'Only onto the fool at whom we laugh do we project our fears (of being inadequate, of not controlling the situation, of being clumsy or improvident)' notes cultural anthropologist Domenico Scafoglio, 'distancing those things from ourselves, so that we can laugh at that which in the other would be a source of anguish in ourselves.'[26]

The comedy of Pulcinella can be explained through a multiplicity of connections to the spectator. Many commentators have pointed out the complexity of this character, who, for Benedetto Croce, for example, represented not one but a whole host of characters.[27] But the innumerable forms of Pulcinella have a few things in common: the stratagem of being taken for an idiot in order more easily to deceive his interlocutor, and the readiness to do something outrageous whenever he was promised a plate of macaroni being two of the most prominent. For Anton Giulio Bragaglia Pulcinella thus represents the 'everyday Neapolitan'.[28] This reading, however, seems rather over-literal. If the connection of the described behavior to daily life in Naples is not to be dismissed completely, it has to be understood in a more nuanced way, as Scafoglio emphasizes: 'Compared to the lifestyle and thought-patterns of common life, the stage character had more freedom: he belongs less to the world of the norm than to that of the transgression, reflecting not so much the daily life of the common man but rather the other, his dream life.'[29] Pulcinella appears more as a kind of reflective screen on to which the spectator projects not only his fears but also his desires, both the realizable and (in real life) the unrealizable. Often these may not be fully conscious, or not admitted to, since they are outside social and moral norms. For Freud, comedy makes possible the

[25] Thanks to Philip Gossett for this suggestion.
[26] Domenico Scafoglio and Luigi M. Lombardi Satriani, *Pulcinella. Il mito e la storia* (Milan, 1992), 124.
[27] Benedetto Croce, 'Pulcinella e le relazioni della commedia dell'arte con la commedia poplare romana,' in *Saggi sulla letteratura italiana del seicento* (Bari, 1911), 197.
[28] Anton Giulio Bragaglia, *Pulcinella* (Florence, 1982), 111ff.
[29] Scafoglio and Lombardi Satriani, *Pulcinella* (see n. 26), 85.

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satisfaction of a basic drive. 'From the beginning its object is to remove inner inhibitions and thereby render productive those pleasure-sources which have become inaccessible . . .'[30] The fool is exactly suited to enable the spectator to discharge wishes that in reality are unfulfillable. In most cultures, he is permitted to break norms, and he enjoys, so to speak, the 'fool's license': 'Pulcinella is incapable of not being a fool, because only to a fool is it permitted to violate taboos, to turn everything upside down, to invert linguistic order, to reconfigure habitual categories of thought, to disturb the rules of good manners, and to offend common decency.'[31]

The difference between the Neapolitan love for the fool and a less enthusiastic attitude elsewhere is illustrated by the above-mentioned revision of Fioravanti's *Il ritorno di Pulcinella da Padova*. Here, Cambiaggio removed a few dialogues that were not only not strictly necessary to the plot, but that were also unacceptable to a public outside Naples because they only served to contribute to 'scuffles, arguments, etc., that . . . present a picture of Neapolitan life.' He also cut a scene in which Pulcinella is confronted by the Doctor. Communication with the Doctor (who could discover the cause of the madness of Pulcinella's master Aurelio) is impossible, because Pulcinella confuses 'aberrare' (to deviate) with 'abbeverarsi' (to drink), and so on:

DOTTORE (parlando dentro) Vi dico che così voglio, e non si replico. Non si vesta da matto Aurelio, si lasci libero per lo stabilmento, e poi a suo tempo se peggiora gli daremo il bagno di sorpresa. [(from inside): *I tell you that's how I want it, and don't argue. Don't dress Aurelio like a madman, he can move freely within the asylum, and when he gets worse, we'll give him a surprise bath.*]
PULCINELLA Pe disgrazia mia! Tenite sti quatto nennille ccà dinto? [*What a mishap for me! Do you keep the guys inside?*]
DOTTORE Hai sofferto qualche cosa? [*Has something happened to you?*]
PULCINELLA No mmalora de pazzo m'ha dato la scoppetta ncapo, e po D. Luisa . . . [*Some damn madman has hit me on the head with a brush, and then Donna Luisa . . .*]
DOTTORE Come! Elisa è qui venuta? [*What! Elisa is here?*]
PULCINELLA Gnorsì. [*Yes, Mister.*]
DOTTORE (I miei sospetti si vanno verificando. Vorrei da costui scoprire l'origine dell'abberrazione di mente di Aurelio.) [*My suspicions will be confirmed. I will find out the origin of Aurelio's confusion from him.*]
PULCINELLA Ah! chi lo boleva dicere, ca io e lo padrone n'avevamo mpavola fatto perdere cervella a li judece, e mo na femmena ha fatto perdere le cervella a tutte duje. [*Ah! it is said that I and the Master drove the judge in Padova mad, and now a woman has driven both of us mad.*]
DOTTORE Una donna? Ma dimmi, sai tu l'origine di quest'abberrazione del Sig. Aurelio? Dandome un barlume, mi metti nello stato di poter con sicurezza far uso della terapeutica. [*A woman? But tell me, do you know the origin of Aurelio's bewilderment? If you could give me a clue, I might be able to use some therapy.*]
PULCINELLA Si me parlate turco io ve non capisco affatto. [*If you speak Turkish to me, I won't understand anything.*]
DOTTORE Sai perchè Aurelio è abberrato? [*Do you know why Aurelio has gone mad?*]

[30] Freud, *Wit and its Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. A. A. Brill (New York, 1916) 199.
[31] Scafoglio and Lombardi Satriani, *Pulcinella* (see n. 26), 137.

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PULCINELLA Auto che abbeveralo. Chillo a Pavola se scenneva no quartaruso de vino lo juorno. [*Drunk, you must be joking! In Padova he downed a quarter of a cask of wine every day.*]
DOTTORE Non dico questo. Perchè è caduto nella mania. [*That's not what I asked. Why did he go crazy?*]
PULCINELLA E no piezzò che nè io, e nè isso non maniammo manco no callo. [*For quite a long time neither I nor he got anything to eat.*]
DOTTORE Perchè è uscito pazzo? Ne sai tu il principio? [*Why did he go mad? Do you know how it began?*]
PULCINELLA Lo principio? Mo ve lo conto. ' cosa che farria chiagnere pure a li criature nfasciolle. [*How it began? I'll tell you. It's something that makes even babies in diapers cry.*]
DOTTORE Svelami il tutto. [*Tell me everything.*]
PULCINELLA Io e isso partemmo pe Pavola . . . [*I and he left for Padova . . .*]
DOTTORE Un poco dopo. [(*Start*) *a bit after that.*]
PULCINELLA Lo patrone è asciuto pazzo . . . [*The master has gone mad . . .*]
DOTTORE Prima. [*Before that*]
PULCINELLA Quanno arrevajemo a Pavola . . . [*When we arrived in Padova . . .*]
DOTTORE Più avanti. [*Further ahead*]
PULCINELLA Arrevate ccà . . . [*Having arrived there . . .*]
DOTTORE Prima. [*Earlier*]
PULCINELLA Arrevaje là. . . [*I arrived there . . .*]
DOTTORE Dopo. [*Later.*]
PULCINELLA Oh! oh! fuss'acciso io, tu, lo patrone, Paolo, lo tribunale, e quanta tastapuze nce stanno pare tuoje. Primma, avante, doppo . . . e che me vuò fà perdere a me pure la chiancarelle? Io già le tengo mezo perdute, ossoria non capesce niente, e sì me vota la mingria me te piglio a uoglio, e te nzerro dinto a na pazzaria de cheste. [*Oh, oh! May I, you, the master, Paolo, the court, and all the brain plumbers like you go to hell. Earlier, later, afterwards . . . do you want me to go mad, too? I have already lost half of my mind, I don't understand any more, and when I have had enough, I will throw you into an asylum like this one.*]
DOTTORE A me! bifolco indegno. Ho compassione della tua imbellicità, altrimenti . . . Ma, ti accomodo io per le feste. (*parte*) [*Me! Unworthy bastard.* (*It's a good thing*) *I feel sorry for your stupidity, or else . . . But I'll be nice to you for the holidays.* (Exit)]
PULCINELLA Io mo si faceva na pazziata, non aveva ragione? Ma vedimmo de trovà lo patrone, e quanno pò non lo trovasse, ccà nc'ha da stà la cucina, me nce mpizzo dinto, e voglio restà pazzo mente campo. [*If I had done something nuts, would he have been right? But let's see if I can find the master, and if I don't find him, the kitchen is here and I will stay crazy as long as I live.*][32]

A Freudian reading of this and innumerable other such scenes would argue that they express the almost proverbial Neapolitan rejection of authority; comedy's function in this instance being to deal with mistrust and aggressiveness towards the authorities, thus relieving the audience of the need to discharge these tensions in real life.

[32] IL RITORNO / DI / PULCINELLA / DA PADOVA / OSSIA IL PAZZO PER AMORE / COMMEDIA IN DUE ATTI / MUSICA [recte: POESIA] / DEL SIG. ANDREA PASSARO / NAPOLI / DALLA TIPOGRAFIA CRISCUOLO. / [. . .] 1852, 13.

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## Buffonismo and musical comedy

The question remains to what degree the above-mentioned characteristics of Neapolitan opera buffa are reflected in its musical style. Above all the central role of the fool affected the musical setting: typically sung by basses, these roles tend toward patter singing with the orchestra carrying the musical thread. Since these characters take up a large amount of space, it is not surprising that the music is dominated by their patter.

A further characteristic of dialect opera is the generally plentiful use of intertextual, or rather inter-operatic, parody. This is indeed also found occasionally in comic operas from northern Italy;[33] in the Neapolitan context, however, where opera was broadly and multifariously received even by the lower classes, parody was more central, because opera itself was a so much more 'everyday' part of life. The Teatro San Carlino and other venues of Neapolitan spoken drama showed innumerable parodies of operas simultaneously playing in the Teatro San Carlo, the leading opera house of the city. One example of this is Pasquale Altavilla's *Na famiglia ntusiasmata pe la bella musica de lo Trovatore,* 1860.[34] Scafoglio explains this by noting, 'parody became the practice through which the culture of the semi-popular theaters tried to assimilate into its own cultural horizons and into its own scenic discourse elements of intellectual culture.'[35]

One example of this assimilation is Francesco Terraciano's *I Corsari-Damigelle* (1846, Libretto by Carlo Zanobi Caffarecci), which parodies the famous love duet from the end of Act I of Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor*. Here the Freudian (and unfailingly funny) *comic distance* arises from the integration of recognizable elements of 'high culture' into a context considered popular. The magnificence of Lucia's and Edgardo's deeply felt emotions – which the spectator would associate with the famous scene – are set in a striking contrast by the comic character of Pulcinella, who expresses his profane fondness for the pastry *zeppole*. The comedy of the moment is heightened by having the melody sung by a bass rather than by the soprano and tenor of Donizetti's opera:

PULCINELLA Verranno a te sull'aure
I miei vapori ardenti
Udrai sul mar che fricceca
L'eco dei miei spaventi, ,
Penzanno che le zeppole
Me sò piaciute ognor. .
Spargi n'asciutta lagrema
Su cheste èmpigna allor.

[33] See Marco Emanuele, *Teatro nel teatro e riscrittura del passato nell'epoca comica italiana di metà ottocento: 'Don Bucefalo' (1847) di Antonio Cagnoni e 'Tutti in maschera' (1856) di Carlo Pedrotti* (Godiasco/Salice Terme, 1996).

[34] For an excellent discussion of this see Annamaria Sapienza, *La parodia dell'opera lirica a Napoli nell'Ottocento* (Naples, 1998).

[35] Scafoglio and Lombardi Satriani, *Pulcinella* (see n. 26), 797.

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[On the air will reach you/My ardent vapors/You will hear in the moving of the sea/The echo of my fear/Having thought that the *zeppole*/Have always pleased me/Shed a dry tear/On this pledge.][36]

Another funny parody is the 'mad scene' from Fioravanti's *Il ritorno di Columella dagli studi di Padova*.[37] This aria, for Pulcinella with choir, belongs to the masterpieces of Neapolitan opera buffa of the nineteenth century. Pulcinella finds himself in a lunatic asylum, and meets inmates who imagine themselves to be musicians: '*Io son maestro di cappella*,' '*Son cantante d'alta sfera*,' '*Sò suonare il clarinetto*.' After a short introduction they take up a well-known opera. The libretto reads, 'Here the lunatics begin to play an overture, each one imitating with his mouth the instrument that he holds in his hands, and Pulcinella accompanies them on the bell.' '*Oh, che bella sinfonia, gran Rossini in verità*,' they observe, singing a tune from the overture to Rossini's *Semiramide* on 'la' and 'zum' (see Ex. 1).
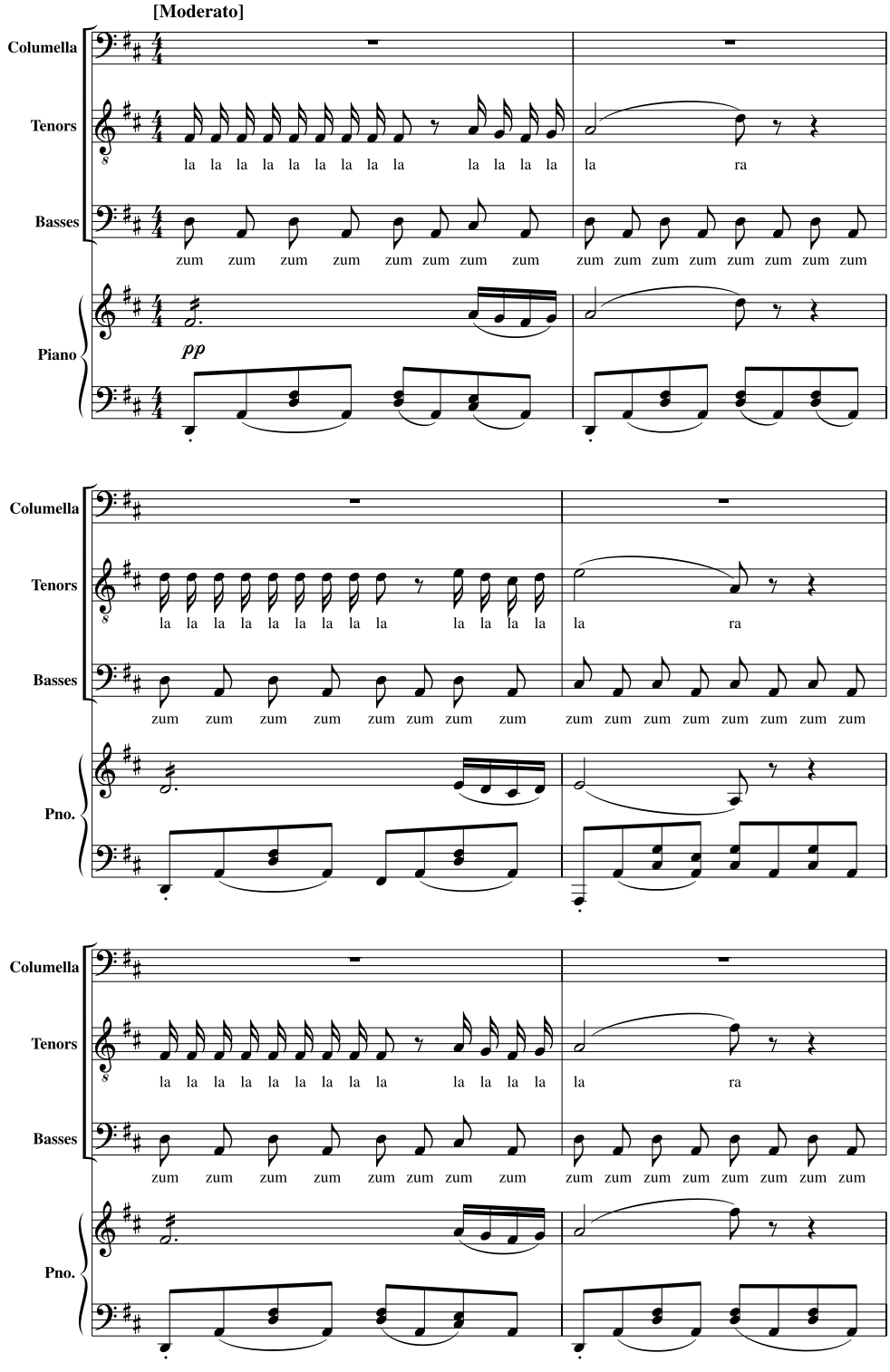
Over the past few years scholarship has increasingly shown the traditional division between text and context to be untenable. Neapolitan opera buffa of the nineteenth century is a case where this is particularly relevant. Although we may still find these works appealing and even funny, we cannot fully understand them until we comprehend the many connections between stage and life, performers and spectators which emphasize the 'Neapolitan elements' as central to their aesthetic effect.

(Translated by Mary Hunter)

[36] Quoted in Paologiovanni Maione, 'L'opera buffa con Pulcinella in età borbonica', in: *Pulcinella. Una maschera tra gli specchi*, ed. Franco Carmelo Greco (Naples, 1990), 408.
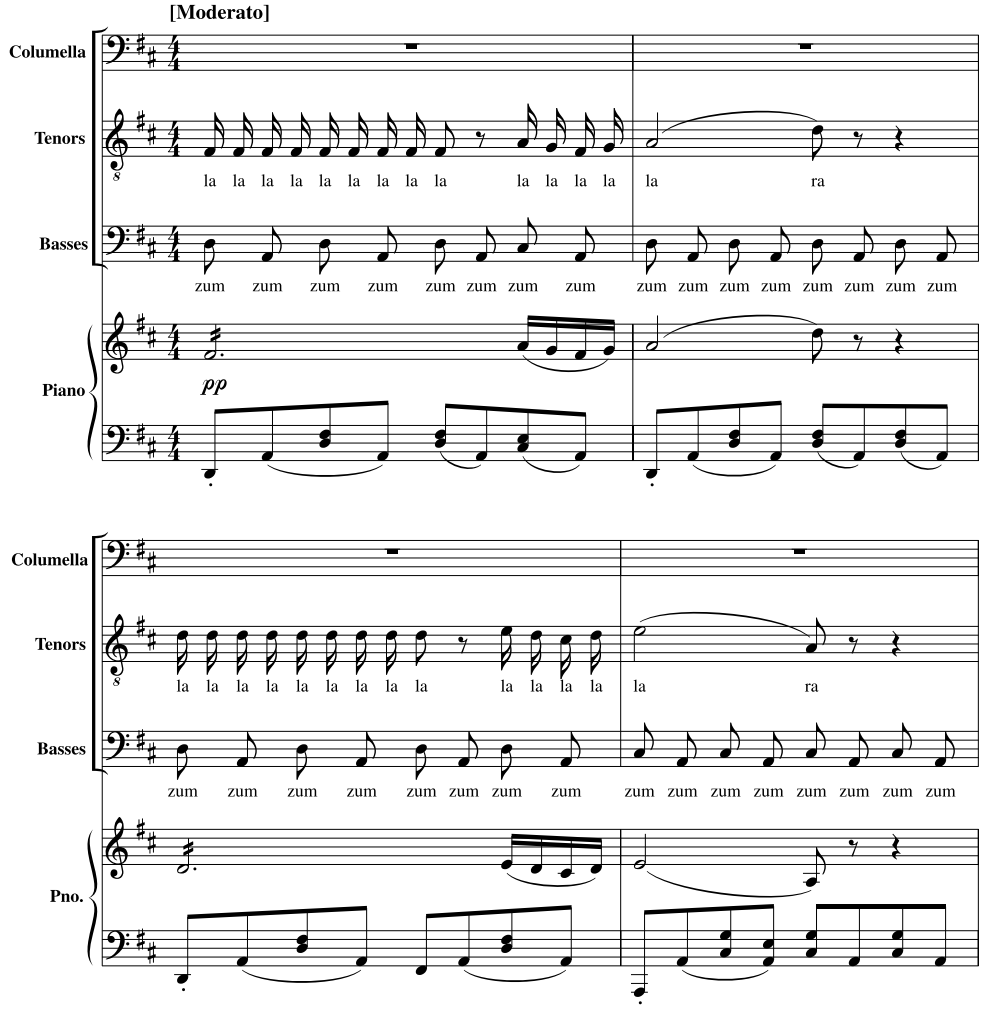
[37] This is a heavily revised version of Fioravanti's 1837 opera, *Il ritorno di Pulcinella da Padova*, whose vocal score is published in facsimile as vol. 7 of *Italian Opera 1810–1840*, ed. with introductions by Philip Gossett (New York, 1989), but this number is the same in both versions.

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Ex. 1: Vincenzo Fioravanti, *Il ritorno di Columella dagli studi di Padova*, Coro de' pazzi mm. 224–234.

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Ex. 1: *continued.*

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