Book Reviews

Francesca Vella. *Networking Operatic Italy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022. 256 pp. ISBN 9780226815701.

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Francesca Vella's groundbreaking debut monograph *Networking Operatic Italy* will certainly not go unnoticed across a wide spectrum of disciplines such as opera studies, reception, and performance studies. The author's refreshing outlook and compelling prose contribute to making the text a must-read for any serious investigation of nineteenth-century Italian culture.

The question of mobility lies at the core of this book, and in particular the question of how movement came to play a role in articulating national discourses in nineteenth-century Italy within the context of opera. On the one hand, Vella's intervention points to the long-standing culture of approaching Italian opera exclusively through the rigid wide-angle lens of national discourses—an approach that ultimately erased identity pluralism and flattened dynamics of urban exchange and mobility. On the other hand, she touches upon the limitations of the "local" approach that looks at localisms as discrete entities completely disconnected from a broader national framework. In response to these restricting routes, Vella proposes an alternative way that focuses on "how key aspects of an Italian macro-identity were articulated through opera, both Italian and foreign, *in between* distinct locations: liminal spaces that in turn transformed operatic ideas and aesthetics" (4). In other terms, by deflecting both a circular determinism—whereby

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operatic forms and national forces mutually inform each other—and a narrowed focus on cities as "discrete operatic milieus" (2), Vella argues that discourses of identity-making were articulated in the liminal spaces, physical and/or imaginary, that operatic forms generated between locations.

Of note, this newly "liminal space" paradigm, very cogently articulated in the introduction, does not consistently bring the promised results in the body of the text and risks reinforcing the very local-national dualism that it is trying to overcome. For instance, the author argues that operatic relocations between cities are "a type of material interaction that challenges the notion that the peninsula's urban centers altogether resisted the nation's unifying impulses after 1861" (111). Yet, a few pages later she points to the export of "local" products to other cities as battles for cultural supremacy, whose goal was far from any idea of national unity. The relocation of Wagner's *Lohengrin* from Bologna to Florence actually guaranteed a new power position for Bologna, while for Florence "the whole trading operation risked undermining the prestige of a city that had itself once been preeminent in promoting "'modern' music" (114). Perhaps a better way to reconcile the local and national dichotomy might be to rethink how this complex web of power relations informed or resisted nationalist discourses. Furthermore, the presence of non-Italian opera—for instance, Meyerbeer and the Parisian *grand opéra*—significantly complicates the picture. It is important to question what role this presence played for or against the Italian nation-building process, and in what forms was Italian opera resistant to this process.

In the book's introductory lines, the author positions her work within the field both by separating it from a series of methodological frameworks that have crystallized in the study of Italian opera and by setting forth its continuity with the new scholarly trends in opera studies. She then introduces the reader to the themes that will counterpoint the whole text. Unlike traditional introductions, Vella does not unfold the synopsis of each chapter in an orderly and mechanical fashion. Instead, in the introduction, the selected five case studies dialectically interface with the author's narrative, creating an interesting holistic continuum. Furthermore, Vella defines plainly the terms that are key to her study. For instance, in her discourse, she reconfigures "mobility" not only as "vast, fast, and spectacular movements" (3) but as those inconspicuous movements and mechanisms involving both cultural and material artifacts. She clarifies that "media" in her study includes "transportation and communication technologies," as well as "newspapers, wind bands, and the human voice" (6–7). Furthermore,

she posits the terms "Italy" and "Italian" "not as expressions of an existing political reality but as references to shared cultural markers" (5). Ultimately, she situates her work in conversation with a broader framework of studies and against a tendency in Italian studies of considering the Italian case as distinctive and unique.

Although in a footnote Vella mentions the resonance of Bruno Latour's work in her approach to material and human actors, perhaps for the economy of this review it is worthwhile to recall here the relevance of actor-network theory (ANT), as a good deal of this book bears such theoretical framework's watermark. In broad terms, ANT challenges the notion of society as a pre-fixed entity wherein non-social actors are embedded and framed. Rather, in the words of Latour society should be decoded as "one of the many connecting elements circulating inside tiny conduits."[1] Thus, material elements as well as nonhumans agents contribute to the assemblage of any given actuality as much as human factors. Following this reasoning, opera is both diluted in and produced by all the ingredients accounted for by Vella's monograph —from Meyerbeer's operas to marching bands, single operatic numbers, replicas, Adelina Patti's voice, technological devices, and railways. Furthermore, from an ANT point of view, an interesting question here is not so much whether opera in nineteenth-century Italy has to be understood locally, nationally, or globally, but how and the extent to which opera mobilized and was moved from one locale to another locale across shifting networks of human and nonhuman factors. By broadening the framework, ANT theory might help us to better understand the politics of nineteenth-century European culture with its local and national rivalries as well as forms of "transnational cosmopolitanism."[2] In addition to this, Vella's book echoes and elaborates the sonic implications of the spatial turn in musicology and sound studies by leaning toward an understanding of sounds as socio-material assemblages "located simultaneously in the materials and practices of production, transmission and reception (hearing and listening).[3]

1 Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 4–5.

2 The reference is to Axel Körner, "From Hindustan to Brabant: Meyerbeer's *L'africana* and Municipal Cosmopolitanism in Post-Unification Italy," *Cambridge Opera Journal* 29, no. 1 (2017): 74–93.

3 George Revill, "Vocalic Space: Socio-Materiality and Sonic Spatiality," in *The Question of Space: Interrogating the Spatial Turn between Disciplines*, ed. Marijn Nieuwenhuis and David Crouch (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 43–62, at 58.

In Chapter 1, Vella explores a wide range of mobilities intersecting with the city of Florence's urban spaces in the 1850s. The Tuscan capital premiered the first Italian stagings of many of Giacomo Meyerbeer's operas. As the author argues, over the course of an opera's mobile life, the mapping of operatic objects (designed for a specific city or theater) onto the locality of a different place exposed tensions and sites of resistance. Far from being passive reconstitutions of the Parisian model, the Florentine replicas of Meyerbeer's operas set in motion a complex set of technological and cultural negotiations. In other words, in the grand opéra-centric system, operatic mobilities gave agency to peripheral Florence, allowing the Tuscan city to constantly reposition itself into the European framework of urban modernity.

For Vella, Meyerbeer's operas contributed to setting in motion a paradigm shift from "an event-oriented operatic culture … to an understanding of operas as permanent works amenable to endless reproduction" (28). In other terms, operas became mobile objects that, in their journey across the globe, negotiate both their presence and their provenance locally. The complex social, political, and cultural imaginary that the object "opera" carried contributed to an incessant remapping of places within the virtual geography of the time. In light of the plurality of mobilities that revolved around opera productions, Vella reconsiders modern interpretations of Meyerbeer's operatic cosmopolitanism, generally attributed to the composer by European critical discourses from the 1830s onwards. In Vella's argument, this was neither the result of the projection of external values onto his works nor the outcome of the composer's struggle to overcome cultural and aesthetic hierarchies. Rather, his cosmopolitanism was one of the many points of convergence for the various and multifaceted discourses that his operas circulated as commodities in a widespread interconnected global web.

Furthermore, from this very first chapter Vella begins to shake the traditional reception theory's tree. In fact, by departing from a constricted traditional view of newspapers as the site of critical responses by contemporary audiences, she argues that they "were central to the articulation of urban identities" (26), for the material assemblage on the page "encapsulated contemporary urban experience" and reflected "the fragmentation of city life" (26–27). Thus, musical criticism and newspapers not only played a crucial role in the cultural and political mediation process but, by placing opera within a broader web of physical and imaginary relationships, they also contributed to the networking of operatic objects across space and time.

One of the high points of the monograph, Chapter 2 focuses on the circu-

lation of a single operatic object—the marcia funebre from Errico Petrella's opera *Jone* (1858). Although this opera has since disappeared from the operatic repertoire, in the second half of the nineteenth century Petrella's funeral march was a truly popular hit. By retracing the circulation of the march, Vella unveils the intricated matrix of meanings and functions that its movements generated. Vella starts her analysis of the march from the original operatic context—*Jone*'s act 4, scene 1. On the stage, a marching band accompanies Glauco to his death. The ensemble begins its performance offstage, thus producing an aural cue that later gets transformed into a visual cue as the band bursts on the stage, manifesting its diegetic presence. Soon, the orchestra joins in and complicates the diegetic/non-diegetic dynamics at work by introducing "a stereophonic effect that momentarily unsettles the diegetic, monaural world woven by the band" (58). These musical movements in and out of both the narrative and the stage make Petrella's march an operatic object already associated to notions of mobility and mourning from its very initial appearance.

Furthermore, Vella emphasizes that the very structure of the piece and its potential for endless repetition facilitated its migration from the opera house to public spaces and contributed to constructing Petrella's march as a portable mechanical device. What makes Vella's discussion even more compelling in this chapter is the linkage with wind bands outside the theatrical realm. The transposition of operatic music to popular forms of diffusion such as transcriptions, piano fantasias based on celebrated arias, barrel organs, and marching bands, guaranteed its capillary distribution within the social tissue of the nation.[4] Originally designed for a marching band on stage, Petrella's march easily made its way into the repertoire and global circuit of wind band performances. Yet, Vella's argument moves further and links civic wind bands to the military march as a technology of power used for disciplining body and generating "muscular bonding" (9).[5] In this vein, she argues that the spaces created by marching band performances of Petrella's marcia funebre functioned as funeral entrainments—i.e., forms of biopolitical technology instilling a specific attitude in both performers and audiences (69):

4 See for example Antonio Carlini, ed., *Fuori dal teatro. Modi e percorsi della divulgazione di Verdi* (Venice: Marsilio, 2015).

5 Vella's reference is to William H. McNeill, *Keeping Together in Time: Dance and Drill in Human History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), chap. 1.

> Weighty tread, minor mode, dotted rhythms, and other funeral march figures are not intended only, or even mainly, to signify particular situations. Their function is not primarily to evoke death and grief, or to depict the inner landscape of a mourning heart. Rather, it is to instill particular moral attitudes in and through the marching body. Funeral marches, which by the mid-nineteenth century no longer had military purposes alone, were in this sense less music to be "listened to" in a modern, attentive, bourgeois fashion, and more music to be "acted upon" through repeated physical behaviors.

The wealth of the second chapter's content does not end here. Vella positions Petrella's march within the broader context of post-Unification Italy and points to a developing death culture that at the time "was thoroughly transformed under the influence of competing political, social, and religious agendas" (47). Petrella's marcia funebre testifies to a transitional moment in the process of reimagining funeral rites within the framework of the new nation. *Jone*'s march got caught in this restructuring mechanism, repurposed and absorbed into a new "expanded landscape of Italian death culture" where "a funeral march such as *Jone*'s could elicit variegated affective responses, and could even become a trademark of 'exotic' Southern rituals" (72).

In this context, I believe that this chapter could have benefited from a conversation with Antonio Gramsci's idea of national-popular culture. The Italian philosopher argued that, unlike other countries, nineteenth-century Italy failed to produce a national-popular culture and that "in Italian popular culture music has to some extent substituted that artistic expression which in other countries is provided by the popular novel."[6] If music, the universal language par excellence, became the expression of national-popular culture in Italy, for Gramsci this spoke of the failure of a class of organic intellectuals to create a true national-popular literature. However, when Vella argues that "*Jone*'s marcia funebre provided an 'emotional arena' in and through which different social groups could imagine themselves as parts of the same national body, even as they articulated independent responses to human mortality" (9), this does provide, to a certain extent, a counterexample to the Gramscian notion of music as an exclusively cosmopolitan phenomenon. As chapter 2 demonstrates, Petrella's march, aside from its wide mass diffusion, created a national-popular space wherein in-

6 Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from Cultural Writings*, ed. David Forgacs and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, trans. William Boelhower (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 378.

dividuals of any class reimagined their place in the newly unified state. In her cogent analysis in this chapter, Vella ultimately shows us that, when well situated, even an old-fashioned march such as Petrella's can become a sophisticated object that reveals the hidden modernity of its time. As Vella puts it, "band performances understood as media for articulating collective grief on an everyday basis were symptoms of a new age" (47).

Chapter 3 investigates the figure of opera soprano Adelina Patti. Born in Spain to Italian parents, Patti grew up in the United States where she debuted in 1859 before embarking on an international career as a global ambassador of bel canto. In this chapter, Vella shows that, because of the singer's polyglot skills, Adelina Patti's voice participated in multiple national communities and mobilized various political and national discourses—indeed, her voice could be localized both anywhere and nowhere. Furthermore, Vella argues that "Patti's vocal organs were imagined as a proto-recording device" (9) that could absorb and impeccably reproduce different languages. The global mobility of such a multilingual speaking and singing machine—and, in general, the broader circulation of voices in the nineteenth century—contributed to raising concerns related to diction and pronunciation as makers and markers of the so-called *italianità*.[7] Like the other chapters concerned with the mobility of operatic objects and the way they both shaped and were shaped locally during their mobile trajectory, this section describes Patti's voice as yet another object. Yet we should not forget that Patti was a subject whose voice was deeply attached to a body. An overly narrow focus on how different critics and listeners perceived Patti's voice and articulated different national discourses, positions Patti exclusively as a singing machine, and from my viewpoint denies her acoustical agency. For example, looking at how she shaped discourses about herself and her transnational background through her multilingual talents might be further investigated.

As briefly addressed at the beginning of this review, in chapter 4 Vella recounts the unprecedented mobilization of Wagner's *Lohengrin* from the

7 Recent opera studies scholarship has scrutinized the notion of *italianità* (Italianness) under transnational and global lenses, revealing how nineteenth-century material culture and technological discourses, as well as transnational consumption and circulation of opera, endlessly reconfigured notions of operatic *italianità* both on the peninsula and abroad. From this new understanding, operatic *italianità* challenges nationally-bound interpretations of opera and becomes an analytical tool for a critical interrogation of opera's fluid transformations across time and space. See Axel Körner and Paulo M. Kühl, *Italian Opera in Global and Transnational Perspective* (Cambridge University Press, 2022).

city of Bologna to Florence. Drawing on Axel Körner's work on the cultural politics of post-Unification nationalism in Italy,[8] the author points out that such extraordinary operatic transfer from the progressive center of Bologna to the Tuscan city exposed a complex network of power relations between Italian localities. This meant that cultural and political tensions were continuously negotiated and remapped. Furthermore, Vella points to a new conceptualization of opera whereby railways not only guaranteed the mobility of operatic productions but were incorporated into "opera's basic infrastructure" (126). In other words, she argues that operatic discourse expanded to include external technologies. Interestingly, she follows this thread up to the introduction of the Fascist thespian cars, where the mobilization of the spectacle was separated from the operatic performance and became in itself a spectacle that pointed to the modernity and efficiency of the regime. In the last section of this fourth chapter, the author briefly returns to the theme of death culture and public rituals. First, she points out that operatic translocations expose "the paradox that an act aimed at preserving and transplanting authenticity ultimately required 'deadness': a disassembling and recombining of the opera production's various component parts" (129). Second, similar to her analysis of operatic discourse, she emphasizes the late nineteenth-century incorporation of railway stations into the performance of public rituals, including the movement of mortal remains from one city to another. In other words, the author alludes to a clear tension at work in these railway spaces between mobility and immobility—between life and death—that intersects with the mechanized technologies transporting body remains or disassembled operatic objects to be staged either in opera productions or in funerary rituals.

The concluding chapter is arguably the coup de théâtre of the entire monograph. In this section, Vella measures her analysis of operatic objects against the yardstick of one of Giuseppe Verdi's most studied operas: *Aida* (1871). In these pages, the author lays out a groundbreaking methodological framework that is worth emphasizing in this review. Vella opens the final chapter with an analysis of the famous "Guerra! Guerra!" moment in *Aida*'s act 1, scene 5. The author reads this operatic micro-segment as a telegraphic communication event wherein "the repetitions of 'Guerra!' and 'Radamès!' by the chorus in *Aida* are configured as relays, with the two words transmitted like electric signals" (141–42). This wireless telegraphic diffusion of

8 Axel Körner, *Politics of Culture in Liberal Italy: From Unification to Fascism* (New York: Routledge, 2009).

sounds on stage is also linked to the creation of a community—that of the Egyptians sharing their fear about the imminent Ethiopian invasion.

Discussing *Aida* today means coming to grips with Edward Said's famous essay from his seminal book *Culture and Imperialism*,[9] which has indelibly marked the reception of Verdi's opera by orienting its analysis towards imperialist and Orientalist frameworks. To complement this reading, instead of interpreting *Aida* as a "proto-recording device that stored and reproduced its Orientalist 'origin'" (143), in her analysis, Vella situates Verdi's opera "as both a work and an event, against a backdrop of Italian and international experiences of long-distance communication and temporality prompted by contemporary media" (143). In other terms, despite being aware that her interpretative gesture might momentarily divert the object *Aida* from the imperialist/Orientalist logic, the author tries to make space for a repositioning, at the level of both composition and meaning, of Verdi's opera within the technological context of the time.

And here, on the one hand, Vella distances herself from what she terms the "deterministic shadow," (143)—that is, the tendency to revert to technological determinism as the matrix through which artistic developments are understood; on the other hand, she acknowledges a certain degree of historical accuracy to such a technology-driven approach. Thus, she is trying to reconcile these two strains into one methodological outlook/framework. To put it differently, the author is not asserting that *Aida* is determined by the new nineteenth-century technologies, but that the work itself came into being as an object profoundly shaped by discourses that mobilized ideas across a wide range of fields.

For Vella, electric communication in the nineteenth century existed "at the midpoint between an idea and a technology" (144). While in the previous chapters she has focused on the articulation of Italianness in the space produced by movement in between distinct locations, here once again it is in the liminal space between ideas and technology that works of art are articulated and come into being. To the author, this middle space is where scientific and cultural images proliferate, intersect with each other, and finally coalesce into various formats. This space works in such a holistic fashion that it would be "almost inappropriate for the historian to disentangle different domains of contemporary experience, given that the analogical mindset was what defined the age" (144). Although her analysis

9 Edward W. Said, "The Empire at Work: Verdi's *Aida*," in *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage, 1994), 111–31.

is restricted to a very short fragment of *Aida*, Vella constructs a compelling methodological scaffolding for investigating musical objects. In her specific case study, she overcomes the traditional view that looks at the object *Aida* exclusively as a reflection of the politics of its time and thinks of *Aida* as a device that responded to the nineteenth-century technological mindset and, when performed, echoed telegraphic communications on and off the stage. Finally, the author brings us back to the idea that technology not only affected how opera circulated and was performed on a global scale but also how this technology was incorporated into the very nature of operatic compositions. As trains and notions around mobility occupied the space of operatic thinking, in this final chapter Vella links Verdi's search for simultaneity to a novel understanding of time in the opera production system, which ultimately led to a "newly networked sense of Italian operatic experience" (166).

To conclude this review, I want to circle back to the book's Introduction, where the author offers a critique of reception studies that provides the broader methodological framework for the five case studies discussed in the text. As Vella recounts, the advent of the telegraph ushered in a new model of communication, whereby the transfer of meaning became independent of physical transportation. Such a schism between producer and receiver reverberates in the way reception theory analyzes opera, that is by separating the text from its context and understanding these two as independent entities. This tendency, coupled with an inherent ineffability of the musical text, has contributed to placing the object "opera" in the background in favor of an emphasis on the receivers—for example, contemporaneous press materials or the personal accounts of people who attended the opera. The author's critical operation for this book is twofold: first, to bring the musical text back to the center of historical investigation and, second, to complicate the notion of media understood as "message-bearing institutions."[10] Thus, reception theory is only one of the tools in the arsenal of a wider methodological system that, by looking at "how opera (was) networked across space and time," (13) opens up a whole range of new perspectives for (re)studying operatic cultures.

10 John Durham Peters, *The Marvelous Clouds: Toward a Philosophy of Elemental Media* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), 2.

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