

Constructing an Opera: The Ideas Behind an Exhibition

JEAN-JACQUES NATTIEZ

For the majority of music and opera lovers, an opera is essentially a sung theatrical spectacle with stars and divas of both genders whose performances and recordings are ceaselessly compared and whose slightest shortcomings are dissected (opera audiences have long memories). The show is directed by a conductor who may be practically invisible, but it is he who is thought solely responsible for deciding on the tempos and dynamics of the musical interpretation.

People also know that what is seen on stage is the result of the dictates of an unseen director and of the aesthetic choices of the set and the costume designers: It is they who are chiefly responsible for the spectacle. In the Western world, opera is also a social ritual: opera buffs all dream of sitting at least once in their life in La Scala or Covent Garden, the Opéra-Bastille in Paris or the Metropolitan Opera House in New York, and attending the festivals at Bayreuth or Salzburg—even if buying tickets means enduring what amounts to an assault course.

Split into three distinct sections, the purpose of the present exhibit is to show that opera can be something more. First of all, the exhibition wants to underscore the key role played by a publisher in the genesis and dissemination of many operas: Casa Ricordi, the great Milanese music house. Secondly, it has chosen seven works so as to illustrate the progress of constructing an opera from the initial conception of the libretto and score to its stage production. Finally, the exhibition treats in a similar way two modern operas that are not very widely known, but which offer an opportune reminder that it is a living art and cannot be identified solely with the art of 19th-century *bel canto* or *verismo*.

Why has a special part of the exhibition been set aside for an account of the history of the Casa Ricordi? Primarily of

course because the occasion celebrates the bicentenary of its establishment in 1808 by Giovanni Ricordi, who perfected a new system of distributing what is termed an opera's "performance material." If one is able to buy a full orchestral score or a reduction for voice and piano, individual orchestral and choral parts are, on the other hand, not sold but hired out. This eminently profitable system—a veritable publishing revolution that guaranteed income from the hire of the score, so allowing composers to free themselves from impresarios—made it possible for Ricordi to earn its place as one of the most successful music publishers, including in its catalog the "big five" of 19th- and early 20th-century opera: Rossini, Bellini, Donizetti, Verdi, and Puccini. Through a wealth of photographs as well as important letters, the exhibition demonstrates how the four members of the Ricordi dynasty, Giovanni, Tito I, Giulio, and Tito II, were not only publishers, but men capable of helping their artists bring their projects to completion. Thanks to this hire system—later adopted by almost all publishers of symphonic music and opera around the world—the Ricordi house expanded, establishing itself in many major cities (Rome, London, São Paulo, New York, Buenos Aires, Paris, Toronto, etc.), and also, as early as 1808, acquiring and regularly upgrading some extremely sophisticated technical equipment. In 1871, even a "school for



1-64ca

1
4 Vln I
Vln + Vc + CB
4 Vln II
Vln + Vc + CB
2
4 Vln I
Vln + Vc + CB
3
4 Vln II
Vln + Vc + CB

1-64ca ASCOLTA

1-64ca ASCOLTA

Flauto
Ob. piccolo
Cl. B.
Fag.
Cb.

FRULLATO
FL.B. *Flauto*
CL.B. *Clarineto*

FRULLATO
FL.B. *Flauto*
CL.B. *Clarineto*

TUBA
GLS

TUBA
GLS

41

Teino

Barbau

41

Teino
Barbau

Vle
Vc
Cb

Vle
Vc
Cb

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music engraving" was created. By the end of the 19th century, Casa Ricordi was printing some 25 million sheets of music a year. Ricordi also acquired the distribution and production rights for works published outside Italy, as well as buying up smaller publishers such as Casa Lucca which represented Wagner in Italy. A small area in the present exhibition illustrates the essential role Ricordi played in gaining acceptance for the German composer in the peninsula, Wagner being an example of what Ricordi did for many other non-Italian composers. The company also benefited from a fine sense for marketing, bringing out magazines such as the *Gazzetta musicale di Milano* (launched in 1842) and *Musica e musicisti*, and printing posters, postcards, and other merchandise, eventually setting up the Atelier delle Officine Grafiche Ricordi in 1896. Ricordi also expanded into musical domains such as Lombard and Neapolitan song, light music (Tenco, Battisti, etc.), operetta (such as *Il tappeto rosa* by Jules Burgmein—the pseudonym of Giulio Ricordi, himself a composer), film music (that of Nino Rota, for example), and now publishes composers of music of the 20th and even 21st centuries (so Boito's *Nerone* has been followed by Luigi Nono's *Prometeo*, and works by Salvatore Sciarrino, Luciano Berio, and Fabio Vacchi). Casa Ricordi also publishes textbooks and teaching manuals such as the *Enciclopedia della musica* that appeared in 1964 and critical editions conforming to modern musicological principles of Italian composers such as Vivaldi, as well as of operas from its catalog, including those of Rossini, as well as scholarly studies of their original productions.

Collecting the documents for this exhibition has only been possible thanks to the fact that Casa Ricordi has collected the most important documents and material since its creation and had acquired other music archives, for instance those of La Scala in 1825. These archives astonish visitors with their enormous holdings, their accurate and painstaking cataloging, and an accessibility policy that should be the envy of many a public institution.

The bulk of the exhibit is devoted to the successive phases in the conception and realization of an opera distributed into five "cubes" which aim to present and describe them:

THE LIBRETTO (*Libretto. Find the right words.*)

THE SCORE (*Partitura. Tell it through the notes.*)

THE PRODUCTION (*Scenografia. Put it on stage.*)

VOICES AND COSTUMES (*Voci e costumi. Feel the emotions.*)

THE PERFORMANCE (*Rappresentazione. Enjoy the show.*)

Each of the five cubes devoted to these phases going from the literary and musical idea for an opera to its performance on stage is illustrated by seven Italian operas that serve as a thread running through the whole exhibition and that reappear from cube to cube:

Giuseppe Verdi (1813–1900):

Aida (1871)

Falstaff (1893)

Puccini (1858–1924):

La bohème (1896)

Tosca (1900)

Madama Butterfly (1904)

And a pair of modern operas:

Prometeo (1984–85) by Luigi Nono (1924–90)

Teneke (2007) by Fabio Vacchi (born 1947).

Each of the seven operas is present in one way or another in each of the five cubes, though the emphasis is placed each time on just one. The libretto section focuses on *La bohème*; the score on the original manuscripts of *Aida* and *Teneke*; production on *Tosca*; voices and costumes on *Madama Butterfly*; and for performance once again on *Aida*.

Today the words "exhibit designer" designate the person, in this case Uwe Brückner, responsible for "staging" the objects and documents presented in an exhibition. The situation here is rather unusual in that it is the opera itself that is staged, with the visitor participating in its gestation.

In the first cube (*Libretto*) that highlights *La bohème*, the visitor is invited, as in acts one and four of the opera, into a student's room. Visitors first head backstage, as it were, before entering a space in which they are able to hear various instruments from the score. For the third (*Scenografia*), they arrive in a painter's studio. For the fourth (*Costumi*), centered on *Madama Butterfly*, they enter a Japanese house with paper walls. For the fifth, they are invited into a theater. Let's retrace the route.

In the first cube, devoted mainly to the libretto of *La bohème*, visitors see first a photograph from 1896 showing Puccini and the opera's two librettists, Giuseppe Giacosa and Luigi Illica. An edition of the Henri Murger's novel reminds us that the opera was inspired by his *Scènes de la vie de bohème*. A few pages from the manuscript of the libretto in which Puccini's handwriting can be recognized show how the composer intervened in the work of his two collaborators. The presentation of certain

In the park of Giuseppe Verdi's villa in Sant'Agata • after 1897

• Seated, left to right: Maria Carrara Verdi, Barberina Strepponi, Giuseppe Verdi, and Giuditta Ricordi. Standing, left to right: Teresa Stolz, Umberto Campanari, Giulio Ricordi, and Leopoldo Metlicovitz



musical sketches shows that the composition of the music for the opera did not necessarily begin once the libretto had been completed, but rather that the two progressed in tandem.

The second cube, dedicated to the score, provides a golden opportunity to show the exceptional richness of the Ricordi archives. First in view come facsimiles of scores of Paganini's *Capricci* (since Ricordi also published a great deal of instrumental music), of *La gazza ladra* by Rossini, *La sonnambula* by Bellini, *Don Pasquale* by Donizetti, *Otello* and *Falstaff* by Verdi, and Puccini's *Tosca*, as well as a few astonishing sheets from Nono's *Prometeo*. Then visitors enter what is a genuine "Aladdin's cave" where they are invited in total silence to admire the autograph score of *Aida* and some pages from Fabio Vacchi's *Teneke*, as well as from Boito's *Mefistofele*, Zandonai's *Francesca da Rimini*, and two operettas written under a pseudonym (Jules Burgmeier) by Giulio Ricordi, *Il tappeto rosa* and *La secchia rapita*. But the experience does not stop there: in a third section, visitors listen to music from *Aida* (the triumphal march), *Falstaff* (the fugato), *La bohème* (the death of Mimi), *Tosca* (the death of Scarpia), and *Madama Butterfly* (the first-act duet) while virtually "flicking" through pages of the corresponding scores delivered electronically and interactively.

The third cube is devoted to staging and production—*Scenografia*. Mainly for *Tosca*, but also for *La bohème*, *Madama Butterfly*, *Aida*, and *Falstaff*, photographs dating from the premières of these operas present the real landscapes or monuments incorporated into the original sets dreamt up by Attilio Comelli, Adolf Hohenstein, Girolamo Magnani, Angelo Parravicini, and Vittorio Rota, as well as some admirable original designs in oils. As a contrast to the style of 19th- and early 20th-century stage design, the props and spaces conceived by the architect Renzo Piano for Luigi Nono's *Prometeo*, as well as sketches and sets by the sculptor Arnaldo Pomodoro for Fabio Vacchi's *Teneke*, testify to the close links in our own time between cutting-edge visual art and contemporary opera. To allow us to experience visually the emotion of listening to the performers of an opera, the fourth cube, which highlights *Madama Butterfly*, though without neglecting the other operas selected, combines some superb historical photographs of the interpreters at the first performances with an extraordinary collection (in terms of quality and of quantity) of costume designs in oil painted by Attilio Comelli, Adolf Hohenstein, Girolamo Magnani, and Giuseppe Palanti. But opera is of course first and foremost musical theater, and so the fifth cube, *Rappresentazione*, features juxtaposed screenings of various production designs for these operas as they evolved over time, and principally of *Aida*.

The exhibition possesses one final distinguishing characteristic: it sets aside considerable space to two modern operas, Luigi Nono's *Prometeo* and Fabio Vacchi's *Teneke*, two composers who illustrate two different trends in opera and its musical language since the end of the Second World War.

Prometeo. Tragedia dell'ascolto, by Luigi Nono (1981–85)

Luigi Nono was what is called an atonal composer, that is one who does not base his music on the major or minor keys familiar for us, but on a series drawn entirely or in part from all twelve notes of the chromatic scale, C-C#-D-D#-E-F-F#, etc., each note separated from its neighbor by the narrow interval of a semitone. This system, invented at the beginning of the 20th century by Arnold Schönberg—Nono's father-in-law, coincidentally—eschews the sequence of tensions and resolutions to which we are accustomed in Western tonal music. Before the Second World War, this process had already spawned two operatic masterpieces that remain in the repertory: *Wozzeck* and *Lulu*, both by Alban Berg.

Nono's *Prometeo* (Prometheus) is thus typical of the "modernistic" current dominant in music after World War II, the most spectacular embodiment of which was the foundation of the "International Ferienkurse für Neue Musik" (summer courses in new music) at Darmstadt in southwest Germany in 1946. The music of Berio, Boulez, Cage, Nono, Pousseur, and Stockhausen (to mention just the best known) was performed there, including many world premières, while the composers provided courses and gave lectures to young students from all over the world. Nono played a central role in these courses and occupied a major position in what came to be known as the "Darmstadt School." The driving force behind these modernists was their determination to turn their backs on tradition and promote an aesthetic based on what was, at the time, regarded as progress. In the majority of cases, this musical "progressivism" went hand-in-hand with left-leaning politics and Nono himself was long a member of the Italian Communist Party, though this did not mean that a work such as *Prometeo* had to be staged as a proletarian opera—be it by conviction or imperative—as would have been the case for a Soviet composer.

Nono's modernism is manifest in his desire to forge a new kind of opera. It was not Nono's objective to construct a traditional narrative: *Prometeo* makes no effort to "tell a story"



and its libretto is the result of a collage of texts compiled by Massimo Cacciari and borrowed from texts ranging from Aeschylus to Goethe, Hölderlin, and Nietzsche up to Walter Benjamin, in Ancient Greek, Italian, and German. Neither is the opera divided into acts and scenes but, conceived as a kind of archipelago, into ten sections baptized *stasimon* (the chant of the chorus in Greek tragedy) or “islands.” In travelling from island to island—five in number—Prometheus embodies the situation of Man as conceived by the avant-garde intelligentsia of the period. As Nono wrote: “Man and the law, Man and his continual quest for the unknown, Man and the framing of new laws and their transgression. Prometheus is Man with his eternal thirst for uncharted lands and new frontiers. It voices the revolt against the repressive powers that thwart the birth of a new era.”

Such a position can be given a political twist, but it can also be seen as a description of the search of a modernist composer at odds with tradition and craving new sound horizons. As was the case with other works of the period (one thinks of *Opera* and *Sinfonia* by Berio), *Prometeo* is an invitation to reflect on the phenomenon of music itself. Its subtitle is a “tragedy of listening,” and indeed some of its passages, practically inaudible, are marked *pianississimi*, if I can use such a term, a dynamic noted on the score as eight *pianos*: *pppppppp*. Striving to overcome the “sclerosis of habit” Nono desired “the inaudible to be made finally listenable.” The drama of *Prometeo* is not that recounted on stage, but, as Jurg Stenzl, a Nono specialist, has observed, it unfolds in between the music and the listener. *Prometeo* is also modernist from the point of view of the musical resources employed: No longer are there on the one side an orchestra in its pit and on the other the singers and chorus on stage. The work is written for two groups of soloists (seven instrumentalists and five singers), a small chorus, four orchestral groups ranging from 12 to 14 musicians, each with its own conductor, all coordinated by one further conductor. Moreover, Nono calls for electronic equipment that alters the instrumental music in real time, so that the audience simultaneously hears the natural, original sound and the electronically morphed one. The sound of the instrumentalists is relayed “live” into the auditorium using an apparatus named after its inventor, the Halaphone. Albeit with modern materials, Nono here rejoins the venerable tradition of Giovanni Gabrieli, who composed his works for the enormous edifice that is St. Mark’s Cathedral in Venice.

It is readily understandable that a work so remote from traditional ideas about opera calls for a theatrical realization adapted to its peculiar forces that breaks with classical production concepts. With this intention in mind, Luigi Nono called on the services of the famous architect Renzo Piano. For *Prometeo*, the designer of the Pompidou Center in Paris and the airport at Osaka came up with a kind of wooden hull measuring some 9,000 cubic meters able to contain not only the protagonists in the opera but also the audience around which the actors move. This in turn could be placed in an even vaster space—as was the case in the church of San Lorenzo in Venice for the first performance on 22 September 1984, under the baton of Claudio Abbado.



Götterdämmerung, Richard Wagner • Ricordi edition (1889)
• seen here in an exemplar printed in the early 20th century

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Teneke by Fabio Vacchi (2007)

Very different are the aesthetics behind Fabio Vacchi's opera *Teneke*, on a libretto by Franco Marcoaldi, premièred with great success at La Scala in Milan on 22 September 2007, conducted by Roberto Abbado, directed by Ermanno Olmi, and with sets and costumes by Arnaldo Pomodoro. This work can be regarded as representative of what is today dubbed postmodernism, or sometimes "post-avant-garde," and as such it no longer seeks to challenge listeners with recourse to an exploded musical lan-

guage, nor stymie them by undermining traditional dramatic structures, though this does not mean that it is divorced from the preoccupations of its time.

Inspired by an eponymous novel by Yasar Kemal (translated as *The Drumming-Out*) and classically divided into three acts and twenty-one scenes, *Teneke*, set in Turkish Anatolia in the 1950s, deals with the tensions between political power—embodied by the honest, well-meaning but inexperienced district governor, Irmaklı—and the economic clout of the local rice producers. Hell-bent on planting new and apparently more profitable paddy-fields, the latter seek seasonal concessions which, unlike traditional farming, wreak havoc on the local population and public health, flooding a village and turning it into a malarial death-trap. The opera features Irmaklı's surrender to the demands of the landowners, the flooding of the village, the peasants' revolt, the revoking of the permits, the landowners' wrath, the corruption of a number of individuals, various attempts by the women of the village to save it, all ending with the victory of the bigwigs and landowners. The poverty of the rural world and the conflict with the landowners are placed in a wider international context through the character of Nermin, the fiancée of one of the characters who challenges the extortion. She embodies the desire to unite traditional Turkey so that it can progress in step with the West, thereby bringing ideals of justice and equal rights, etc., to the country. The conclusion? Law has no value, brute force rules the world and injustice prevails; but we can only hope that this will not be forever, since defeat today can be turned into victory tomorrow and the outcome of the battle between good and evil is not a foregone conclusion. This is brought out in the score by the derisory rattle of tin drums—*teneke*—that accompanies Irmaklı as he leaves followed by all those who, with him, set off to continue the struggle for a better world elsewhere and with renewed vigor.

This dramatic story takes place in a large and complex theatrical machine of great starkness and power that splendidly conveys the deep attachment of the peasants to their sickening and infertile scrap of the earth's crust. It was designed by Arnaldo Pomodoro, a sculptor of international repute as well as a set designer for opera and the theater, known for the huge ball that stands in front of the United Nations building in New York. A remarkable collection of his works can be admired in his foundation's museum in Milan. As an example of his staging, Scene VII of Act Two presents the peasants and their animals bogged down in mud—a predicament from which the men try to escape through their revolt. Yet their struggle is to no avail, an inevitable outcome that is embodied by the whole set gradually being engulfed in water.

▲ *Ars et labor*, 1907, vol. II • Ricordi magazine founded in 1906
• Cover designed by Marcello Dudovich

► "A Vucchella," Francesco Paolo Tosti (music)/Gabriele D'Annunzio (lyrics)
• Neapolitan song published by Ricordi, 1907

Esemplare corretto per la stampa I.

A Peppino Sicignano

A Vicchetto

(Canzone Napoletana)

Gabriele D'Annunzio

Paolo Tosti

Allegretto moderato

~~3/4~~
~~3/4~~

Handwritten musical notation for the first system. It consists of a treble staff and a bass staff. The treble staff contains a melodic line with eighth and sixteenth notes, accented with a '1' above the first note. The bass staff contains a simple accompaniment of quarter notes. The time signature is 3/4. The key signature has one flat (B-flat). The dynamic marking is *mf*.

Handwritten musical notation for the second system, continuing the melodic and accompaniment lines from the first system. It features a treble staff with a melodic line and a bass staff with accompaniment. The time signature is 3/4.

TUTTI DIRITTI DI ESECUZIONE
RIPRODUZIONE, TRADUZIONE E
TRASCRIZIONE SONO RISERVATI

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Fabio Vacchi's music is a far cry from the asceticism of the dodecaphonic music of the years 1945-80. Though he has abandoned the incantatory, demonstrative illusions of the modernistic period, Vacchi has not forgotten how to exploit their positive aspects, as shown in his subtle and detailed musical idiom. Moreover, he has inherited from Mahler, Ravel, and Berg, it would seem, a fine sense of orchestration. In the light of such enduring expressivity and sensitivity, it scarcely matters that this might be seen as a step backwards. Like his other works, *Teneke* is a *beautiful* piece, eloquently dramatic, often dark and tormented,

but never routine. For Vacchi, a piece of music is not simply a set of abstract structures, but rather—without forfeiting rigor or construction—the manner in which a composer keen to engage with the problems of his own time interacts with his audience at the most profound level. Unlike the preceding generation, he wants to build bridges between the emotions of his listeners (and viewers) and the feelings of his characters: frustration, revolt, or hope, even love. In this, Vacchi, if in quite a different language, is simply returning to the dramatic tradition that underpins the works of the “big five” of Italian opera.

