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OPERA AND ITALIAN IDENTITY: THE LONG VIEW

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SUMMARY. The nineteenth century is generally acknowledged as the period in which modern ideas of nation and nationalism crystallised; it is also seen as the period in which those ideas played a part in the process of Italian unification. The role that opera may have played in that process has been the object of much debate. Here I take a longer view, and begin to explore the more elusive ways in which music and opera may have contributed to the emergence of an Italian identity (an important condition for any thought about political unification) in the *eighteenth* century.
Operatic practice can be seen as an element of social, linguistic and cultural integration across the Italian peninsula. Moreover, when Italian opera predominated throughout Europe, Italy exported an army of people associated with its creation, performance and business. What these Italians did, how others interacted with them, and the widespread association between them and opera — all had an effect on their perceived image, helping to foster the impression that they were indeed a group with shared characteristics. More open and complex ideas of Italian identity may eventually emerge from the exploration of these historical realities.

Keywords: Opera, Eighteenth Century, Italy, National Identity

The nineteenth century is generally acknowledged as the period in which modern ideas of nation and nationalism crystallised; it is also seen as the period in which those ideas played a part in the process of the political unification of Italy.[2] The role that music, and especially opera, may have had in that process has for decades been the object of debate among historians and musicologists.[3] In this paper, I wish to take a longer view, and begin to explore the more elusive ways in which opera (and music in general) may have contributed to the formation of an Italian identity in the *eighteenth* century.

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[2] This article stems from a paper given at a conference that took place in Paris in 2011, and is forthcoming in the proceedings of that conference: *Suona la tromba: La musique en France et en Italie à l’époque du Risorgimento*, ed. Damien Colas and Alessandro Di Profio (Presses Universitaires François-Rabelais, Tours). In preparing the paper, I profited from exchanges with a number of friends and colleagues, whom it is a pleasure to thank here: Carlo Capra, Andrea Gamberini, Axel Körner, Michel Noiray, Luca Serianni, Ruth Smith and Rosanna Sornicola.

In so doing, I will no doubt have to brave two familiar forms of scepticism. In the first case, what is doubted is the possibility of attributing certain meanings, in particular political meanings, to certain operas. But this kind of scepticism – which is most often, and more or less legitimately, exercised in relation to Italian operas of the nineteenth century – should not impinge on my argument, as it really applies to matters of thematisation: what is discussed in these cases is whether or not this or that opera can be seen to present among its themes certain ideas, including possible views of Italy as a nation. As far as this aspect is concerned, the situation is pretty much the same whether what is under scrutiny is the work's supposed intentions or its reception,[4] as in either case the discussion will centre on the meaning of *works*, however this meaning may have been arrived at. And of course Italian operas did not thematise the image of Italy as a unified nation in the eighteenth century. But this first order of objections need not detain us further, given that, as will soon become clear, issues of thematisation are not central to my argument.

The second kind of scepticism, on the other hand, relates to matters of historical scope: if it is true that the modern idea of nation emerges in the nineteenth century, or at the earliest around the time of the French Revolution, then that idea will not be retrospectively applicable to an earlier period. I will dwell upon this second order of questions at greater length, bringing into the discussion scholarly work that has – over the last few decades, and increasingly in very recent years – emphasised the need for a longer-*durée* approach to the study of the emergence of national identities in general, and of Italian identity in particular.[5]

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[3] An introduction to some of the questions, perspectives and scholarly literature is provided in 'Opera, Risorgimento, and Cultural History', the first section of Sorba (2011).

[4] The importance of issues of reception is emphasised in Körner (2007), which in turn is one of several contributions to a debate sparked by an influential study, Banti (2000). Banti examined the emergence in nineteenth-century Italy of what he calls 'the morphology of national discourse', and the role played in its construction by recurring themes found in operatic libretti (as well as in works of literature, drama and the visual arts).

[5] I am of course alluding to the concept of *longue durée* central to the work of the *Annales* school, and explicitly theorised by Fernand Braudel. See Braudel (1958).

In a classic book on the subject, based on a series of lectures from the 1940s, the historian Federico Chabod noted that there is indeed something new in the nineteenth-century idea of nation, going on to mention its political drive and 'religious pathos'. But even Chabod's argument was phrased in terms that are relevant to my point: 'The nation, which earlier was simply "felt", will now also be "willed".'[6] It is the earlier sense that interests me here, that of an Italian identity that may have been 'sentita' – felt, or rather experienced or lived. (I say 'lived' in the sense in which the literary theorist Jean Molino claims that, in a specific historical context, there are 'classifications that are lived, practical, before being theorised'.)[7] That some *sense* of nation must pre-exist the more conscious, political *idea* of nation was also suggested in the late 1970s by the historian Giuseppe Galasso (who made explicit reference to Chabod):

> The nation of the nineteenth century presupposes a long process of formation, and cannot be viewed as the sudden result of a specific historical moment, or, more particularly, of the idea of nation and its establishment. […] When modern Europe did not yet have the idea of nation and the type of nation it posits, it nonetheless had the nationalities, the elements of the nations, the drives and realities that would later move in the direction of the nation […].[8]

In Galasso's terms, there is a distinction between the modern 'nazione' – with its specific implications, ethical and political – and the earlier 'nazionalità', age-old complexes of social and anthropological affinities, a 'manifold reality' that emerged in the consciousness of Italians only slowly and gradually.[9] (In that process, incidentally, Italy and Germany were not necessarily as far behind France, England and Spain as is often assumed:

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[6] Chabod (1961), ^{2}1962, 50 ('*pathos* religioso'), 45 ('La nazione, prima semplicemente "sentita", ora sarà anche "voluta"').

[7] Molino (1993), 11 ('classifications vécues, pratiques, avant d'être théorisées').

[8] Galasso (1979), 150 ('La nazione del secolo XIX postula un lungo processo di formazione e non può essere vista come il prodotto estemporaneo di un momento storico preciso, e più in particolare, dell'idea di nazione e del suo affermarsi. […] Quando nell'Europa moderna non c'è ancora l'idea di nazione e la nazione come essa la postula, ci sono però le nazionalità, gli elementi delle nazioni, le forze e le realtà che prenderanno poi la via nazionale […]').

[9] Galasso (1979), 174 ('realtà molteplice').

in each of the latter three cases the gestation of a sense of nation also took place in different ways and at different times within the various social strata and geographical areas of the country.)[10]

It is not necessary to regard Galasso's argument as teleological – as some readers will no doubt be inclined to do: indeed, it is with great cautiousness and theoretical awareness that more recent scholarship has increasingly returned to the idea that a sense of national belonging may develop over a number of centuries. As language historian Paola Gambarota reminds us, '[m]odern theorists of nationalism agree that, in order to be a nation, a group must [first] have an *image* of itself as a nation'.[11]

A major role in the debate about nations has been played in recent decades by various forms of 'constructivism' (or constructionism), the more or less explicit view that nations are largely recent socio-cultural constructs – that they are fundamentally narrative, rhetorical and symbolic formations (hence the success of formulas such as 'invented traditions' or 'imagined communities').[12] Without denying the fundamental 'constructedness' of nations (which after all are not products of nature), we must note that constructivist attitudes can have dangerous side effects. As the influential scholar of nationalism Anthony D. Smith has observed, constructivists often run the risk of simply turning nations into something non-existent; but nations do exist in the 'will and emotion' of individuals and communities.[13] (From another perspective, nations are also historical realities that result from material processes.)[14] Moreover, constructivists often appear to be paralysed by 'their concern to avoid […] "retrospective nationalism"'.[15] The resulting attitude, a refusal to deal with historical periods that precede the nineteenth century, is 'historically shallow', as 'it fails to appreciate the immense cultural networks and resources on which modern nations draw and that make the nation […] tangible and salient'.[16]

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[10] Galasso (1979), 179. More generally, Hobsbawm has claimed that national consciousness 'develops unevenly among the social groupings and *regions* of a country': Hobsbawm (1990), ^{2}1992, 12.

[11] Gambarota (2011), 10.

[12] These formulas owe their success to two influential books, respectively Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) and Anderson (1983).

[13] Smith has returned to (and refined) his theory of nationalism in a great many writings. I will refer to two of them: Smith (2000), here at 59–61: 59, and Smith (2001), ^{2}2010.

[14] The point is made in Musi (2012), 76–77.

[15] Smith (2000), 62.

[16] Smith (2000), 75.

Smith thus invites us to consider 'over long time spans' those 'collective cultural identities' that are the looser antecedents of modern nations. (The members of such groupings should feel a connection to a homeland without necessarily occupying it, and share at least some cultural elements.) Such an approach, in which the 'central components [are] sociocultural and symbolic, rather than demographic or political', should allow us 'to avoid a retrospective nationalism while doing justice to the widespread presence and significance of collective cultural identities in premodern epochs'.[17]

Indeed, political historians of Italy as well as historians of the Italian language and Italian literature have variously observed that the formation of an Italian state has roots that reach deeper than the nineteenth century – that any thought, project or talk about a politically unified Italy must have presupposed some earlier sense of group identity. In a book about Italian identities published in 2012 , we read that the last fifteen years have witnessed a 'strong revival of historiographical interest […] in the theme of the origins of the nation' – in 'the combination of factors that led […] to the maturing of a shared sense of belonging with regard to a supra-regional political community'.[18] In particular, it is a process by which a community such as the Italian – one that 'had never had any juridico-institutional substance' – managed, 'within a few decades, to attain such a degree of emotional density and "truth" that it could be successfully proposed as the basis for a new state'.[19]

Thus, in recent years it has been not unusual for historians to turn upside down the familiar comment on the political unification of 1861, 'We've made Italy, we must now make Italians.'[20] Rather, Italians had begun to perceive themselves, and to be perceived by others, as 'endowed with an identity of their own' long before 1861.[21] They were 'a nation that had for a long time lacked the right combination of circumstances'[22] for

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[17] Smith (2000), 63, 66, 76, and 2001, ^{2}2010, *passim*.

[18] Mannori (2012), 7 ('forte ritorno d'interesse storiografico […] per il tema delle origini della nazione'; 'il complesso di fattori che hanno portato […] alla maturazione di un senso di appartenenza condiviso nei confronti di una comunità politica di carattere sovraregionale'). Carlo Capra had expressed himself similarly a few years earlier: Capra (2008), 126.

[19] Mannori (2012), 8 ('da sempre priva di qualunque sostanza giuridico-istituzionale […] nel giro di pochi decenni, assurse a un grado tale di densità e di 'verità' emotiva da poter essere vittoriosamente proposta come base di un nuovo Stato').

[20] The traditional attribution of this comment to the nineteenth-century statesman Massimo D'Azeglio is incorrect: see Procacci (2003), 191.

[21] Procacci (2003), 191 ('titolari di una propria identità').

[22] Thus the mediaeval historian Gabriella Rossetti in 2000, as quoted in Bruni (2010), 11 ('una nazione cui è mancata a lungo la congiuntura favorevole').

‘making Italy’ – an idea recently elaborated on by the linguist Francesco Bruni, who claims that ‘the society-nation precedes the nation state’:

> The society-nation emerged before and outside the context of politics and state, and is therefore compatible with the many political formations that developed in Italy between the Middle Ages and the Risorgimento. […] The political aspect became integrated into the society-nation in the course of time […]. *A community in search of a state, then, and not a state in search of a community*.[23]

The substratum for such a sense of communal identity, however, was not ethnic (it was far from the primordial *Volk* that can imply an essence or substance based in nature and even presumed to be permanent) but rather cultural.[24] In the eighteenth century, an important aspect of that substratum was the idea of an Italian intellectual community, *letterati* from Ludovico Antonio Muratori to Girolamo Tiraboschi writing of a ‘letteratura italiana’, and of an ideal ‘Repubblica letteraria d’Italia’. Only in a very narrow sense could eighteenth-century Italy be said to have had such a republic in the form of the Accademia dell’Arcadia, in that the focus of the academy was fundamentally literary, whereas the intellectual community of the ‘Repubblica letteraria d’Italia’ was also meant to embrace the arts, the sciences and jurisprudence.[25]

This sense of a cultural community seems to go hand in hand with that of an identity more broadly defined. By the mid-eighteenth century, Muratori uses the word ‘patria’ not only in the older, more local sense (the city or region of one’s birth or upbringing), but also to mean a ‘personified nation’ that covers the entire territory of Italy[26] (though of course not yet to mean a self-determined political association of free citizens).[27] And in the writings of men of culture of the Settecento from Muratori to Tiraboschi, from Apostolo Zeno to

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[23] Bruni (2010), 15 (‘La nazione-società precede lo stato-nazione’) and 11, emphasis mine (‘La nazione-società si è affermata prima e al di fuori della dimensione politica e statale, ed è perciò compatibile con le molte formazioni politiche svoltesi in Italia dal Medioevo al Risorgimento. […] La dimensione politica si è integrata in processo di tempo con la nazione-società […]. *Una comunità in cerca di uno stato, insomma, e non uno stato in cerca di una comunità*’).

[24] Cfr. Bruni (2010), 22, and Gambarota (2011), 228.

[25] See Bruni (2010), 445 ff. See also Folena (1983), 21.

[26] Gambarota (2011), 97.

[27] On the shift towards later, political senses of ‘patria’ and ‘nation’, see, for instance, Meriggi (1988), 205–207, Lyttelton (1993), esp. at 63–65, and Capra (2008), 132.

Francesco Algarotti, we find innumerable references not only to the ‘nazione italiana’ and ‘lingua italiana’, but also, importantly, to ‘italiani’ (explicitly opposed to ‘stranieri’ or ‘altre nazioni’) as a ‘popolo’ endowed with its own ‘carattere nazionale’ or ‘genio’.

Because of its intrinsic historicity, no such sense of group belonging can ever be an absolute or unmediated phenomenon, and the Italians’ model of identity was bound to be an especially flexible one. Indeed, recent studies have increasingly emphasised the complex, layered nature of that model. While we *can* detect in it the long-standing awareness of what Bruni calls an ‘orizzonte unitario’, such a nationwide perspective does not contradict but rather complements and enriches the other perspectives, both the broader, transnational one – even cosmopolitan, especially in the case of eighteenth-century intellectuals – and the narrower, more local one. And I should emphasise that ‘local’ applies here not only to the various states into which Italy was divided politically, but also to the cities and towns within them – an urban dimension that is crucial to Italian history, and most crucial to opera, primarily an urban business. These layers (the city, the local state, Italy, Europe) are not necessarily incompatible. That these nested or variously overlapping identities could co-exist is signalled, for instance, by Carlo Goldoni’s linguistic practice: he used Venetian dialect for his Venetian ‘nation’, Italian (Tuscan) for his Italian ‘nation’, and French not so much (or not only) for France as for a more universal arena (French being at the time the main language of enlightened cosmopolitism – ‘a language now so widespread that there isn’t in Europe a well-bred man who hasn’t mastered it almost as well as his native one’).[28] It was in French that Goldoni wrote his late *Mémoires*; there, though it is not always possible to be sure of his meaning, the expression ‘patrie’ (especially as ‘ma patrie’) generally seems to refer to Venice (perhaps more the city than the Republic), whereas ‘nation’ refers sometimes to Venice and sometimes to Italy.[29]

This state of affairs is made explicit in a later testimony from a still politically divided Italy: in the early 1830s, the statesman Count Cesare Balbo would write,

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[28] Algarotti, *Saggio* (1755), 26 (‘lingua fatta oramai tanto comune, che non vi è in Europa uomo gentile che non la possegga quasi al pari della propria’).

[29] Goldoni, *Mémoires* (1787), *passim*. My impression is based on a cursory survey of Goldoni’s text. For different observations on the various uses of ‘patria’ and ‘nazione’, see Folena (1983), 21–23, Fido (2001), 207, and Woolf (2005), 299.

> The term ‘patria’ is sometimes synonymous with town or province, sometimes with state, sometimes with nation. If you ask a native of Florence what country he is from, he may answer that he is Florentine, Tuscan or Italian.[30]

Count Balbo went on to show that these various forms of belonging do not contradict each other, functioning rather like Russian dolls:

> ‘Patria’, like ‘family’, is an indefinite word whose meaning can be more or less extended […] someone can have several of them – of different degrees, as it were – each contained inside the next.[31]

It is important to note that, of these various levels, that of the political state was generally treated as culturally less relevant than either the higher level (Italy) or the lower (the urban context). By the first half of the eighteenth century, learned periodicals in France grouped their literary news from south of the Alps under the rubric ‘Italy’; if any further subdivision was required, it would be by city rather than by state.[32] Moreover, the fragmentation of Italy was perceived by a number of eighteenth-century intellectuals as a problem, which is the reason for the emergence of their ‘unitary’ projects. (Needless to say, both the problem and the projects were seen as cultural rather than political.)[33]

But what of opera? It is hard to imagine that some role in the formation of an Italian identity should not have been played by the endless eighteenth-century debates about the relative merits of the music and opera of the Italians and the French: at least as far as such debates were concerned, a politically divided Italy and a unified France were routinely put on the same plane. Of course this could be seen as just a chapter, perhaps even a secondary one, in the history of the cultural unification of Italy – a process that by the eighteenth century was already centuries old, and primarily based on a literary canon and the language associated with it;[34] in other words, there would not be anything particularly special about eighteenth-century music and opera. But a number of considerations are in order.

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[30] Balbo, ‘Della patria’ (1857), 72 (‘Il nome di patria è talor sinonimo di città o provincia, talora di Stato, talora di nazione. Se tu domandi a uno nativo di Firenze di che paese egli è, ei ti può rispondere: Fiorentino, Toscano o Italiano’).

[31] Balbo, ‘Della patria’ (1857), 75 (‘La patria è, come la famiglia, un nome indeterminato che può estendersi più o meno […] taluno ne può avere diverse, per così dire, di diverso grado, comprese l’una nell’altra’).

[32] Waquet (1989), 22–23, n. 73. As any musicologist working on eighteenth-century Italy will know, the situation is hardly different in the world of opera.

[33] See Waquet (1989), esp. 369–388.

First, if it is true that an Italian identity is historically inseparable from its specifically linguistic component, it is no less true that in the eighteenth century the idea of the Italian language appears inseparable from that of Italian music. In a letter of 1777, commenting on the appearance on German stages of operas in an Italian style but with librettos in German, Pietro Metastasio expressed strong doubts that Italianate music could show its beauties in association with languages other than Italian.[35] But if the music of the Italians was thought to profit from its association with their language, then the benefits were mutual: in Algarotti's words, the Italian language 'has some currency north of the Alps mainly thanks to Metastasio, opera buffa, and our music'.[36] And when the Italian language was praised for its 'musicalità' (meant in a general sense, as its intrinsic harmoniousness), this was often associated with its 'musicabilità' (its suitability to being set to music), of which the international success of Italian opera was considered an obvious proof.[37]

Secondly, the world of opera should be seen as an element of integration across the Italian peninsula. Historian Carlotta Sorba has noted that, through opera, Italy developed a unified cultural system long before it attained any political unity. The Italian operatic public, however diversified within itself, shared a culture of production and consumption, with its social practices, its artistic conventions and its vocabulary:

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[34] Linguistic considerations are often used to weaken the case for Italianness in the eighteenth century, in that Italy was still fragmented linguistically at that time into dialectal areas (especially so when it came to the lower classes), while 'high' Italian was rather a Europe-wide phenomenon. Interestingly, the linguistic fragmentation of Spain and the cosmopolitan diffusion of French do not seem to similarly undermine the perception of a unified cultural identity for those countries.

[35] Letter to Mattia Verazi (Vienna, 29 March 1777), in Metastasio, *Opere postume* (1795), vol. 3, 239–241. According to Bonomi (1998), 230, this is Metastasio's only explicit statement about Italian as a language for music.

[36] Algarotti, 'Pensieri diversi' (1775), 180 ('ha qualche corso di là dall'Alpi, mercè principalmente il Metastasio, delle Opere Buffe, e della nostra musica').

[37] See Bonomi (1998), 219 and *passim*.

> Nothing like this linguistic homogeneity emerged [in other fields of activity] on a national scale within the fragmentary and divided culture of pre-Unification Italy. The national operatic system was an exception in this respect; a unified theatrical Italy preceded a unified political one.[38]

Although Sorba largely refers to nineteenth-century Italy, much of this shared culture was already in place in the eighteenth century, when successful operas circulated from state to state – as did singers and impresarios. Historians write of the emergence in eighteenth-century Italy of a 'public-nation' corresponding to a 'vast audience of secular readers of books and periodicals',[39] and the vast audience of opera-goers should be seen as a comparable phenomenon. Though a politically unified Italy was not a theme in the operatic imagination, the operatic public could begin to constitute something of an imagined cross-state community – to the extent allowed by its relatively limited social reach.[40] (One might add that opera promoted integration in Italy not only across political boundaries, but also across social ranks: if it is true that the Risorgimento was set in motion by members of that social grey area in which the aristocracy and middle classes mixed, it was arguably the opera house that had, since the eighteenth century, provided that mixed group with its main opportunity for social exchange.)

More specifically, we should consider that opera may have worked as a factor of linguistic unification. Successful librettos *in Italian* travelled across the political borders of Italian states (on their own, or on the backs of successful musical settings), and indeed Metastasio was viewed by some *letterati* as the genius through whom Italian could establish itself as a living language of general use in the peninsula.[41] In recent years, historians of the Italian language have increasingly acknowledged that varieties of supra-regional Italian must have been at least understandable to a higher number of people than was traditionally assumed.[42] Among the 'extra-literary factors that […] favoured the circulation of Italian' were travel, commerce and – importantly – the Church; through sermons, for instance, some kind of median, colloquial Italian reached vast numbers of people across different social strata.[43] The theatre, spoken and sung, has also been recognised as a vehicle for the diffusion of a common language in Italy, and opera libretti as a medium for experimentation with a median form of Italian.[44]

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[38] Sorba (2006), 606.

[39] Mannori (2012), 10 ('nazione-pubblico', 'vasta platea di lettori laici di libri e giornali').

[40] That theatre more generally could have a unifying role in Italy was expressly stated in 1784 by the polygraph Matteo Borsa: 'Because we are so divided in different governments and provinces, so restricted in the mutual exchange of books and ideas […] I cannot see any connections that may unite us other than the actors. In their hands a few plays travel through Italy […]'. Borsa, *Del gusto presente* (1784), 79 ('Così divisi, come siamo, in governi, e in provincie diverse; così interrotti nel commercio vicendevol di libri, e d'idee […] io non veggo altri vincoli, che riunire ci possano fuori dei Commedianti. Pochi pezzi in man loro viaggian l'Italia […]').

[41] Thus, for instance, Bettinelli (who was at least initially a supporter of Metastasio) and Baretti. See Bettinelli, *Dell'entusiasmo delle belle arti* (1769), 337; Baretti is discussed in Bonomi (1998), 191, 197.

A third set of considerations has to do with the pan-European success of opera, and its strong association with Italianness. Opera was seen by the Grand Tourists as 'one of the major attractions of the peninsula, and the leading glory of modern, as opposed to ancient, Italy'.[45] And of course there is the extraordinary diffusion of Italian opera abroad,[46] where – however cosmopolitan a phenomenon – it was always regarded as a specifically Italian export. That diffusion reached its peak in the eighteenth century: Italian opera was 'by about 1700–1720 […] the regular and foremost entertainment of the upper classes in much of Western and central Europe (but for France)'.[47] In other words, if a language is, as is often quipped, simply a dialect with an army and a navy, then we could say that in the eighteenth century, while French and English maintained their status as languages by having armies and navies (but also cultural-administrative capitals), Italian attained much of that status through its powerfully cosmopolitan operatic life. Long before European capitals had embassies that they could call 'Italian', they hosted and maintained substantial groups (and networks) of people explicitly acknowledged as 'Italians' – much of the phenomenon being more or less directly related to opera. By considering the question of Italian identity in relation to that of the diffusion of Italian opera, we begin to move from a predominantly linguistic-literary sphere to a more anthropological one – that of a living community, its practices, and the way it perceived itself and was perceived by others.

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[42] See, for instance, Matarrese (1993), esp. 11, 97–105, 113; Serianni (2002); Serianni (2007), 11–13.

[43] Matarrese (1993), 97–100; Serianni (2007), 11–12 ('agenti extra-letterari che […] hanno favorito la circolazione dell'italiano').

[44] Matarrese (1993), 100–105. Another linguistic historian, Vittorio Coletti, has suggested that it was through the opera houses that literary Italian began to reach beyond the elite of erudites and men of letters: Coletti (1993), 198–199.

[45] Black (2003), 175.

[46] On the general question of the dissemination of Italian music and musicians in eighteenth-century Europe, see Strohm (2001).

[47] Rosselli (1999), 161. On the varying degrees of 'authority' enjoyed by Italian opera in different European contexts, see Weber (2011).

Indeed, throughout a period in which Italian opera predominated in Europe, Italy exported not only a musico-literary genre and a production system, but also an army of breathing people. The emigration of actors, singers and artists from Italy, already noticeable in the seventeenth century, reached new proportions in the eighteenth (much of it concomitant with the explosion of Italian opera as an international phenomenon), when there are 'numerous instances of clear subcultures of Italians at European courts and cities'.[48] Because of its theatrical life, for example, eighteenth-century Vienna imported not only Italian librettists and composers, but also a host of Italian artists, actors, singers, architects, artisans and decorators (stuccoists), theatre engineers, carpenters, choreographers and dancers (it has been estimated that in Maria Theresa's Vienna 90 per cent of ballet dancers were Italian).[49]

What Italians did as a numerous community abroad, how others interacted with them, had distinct effects on their perceived image, effects both positive and negative – a process in which a major role must have been played by opera, with which they were widely associated. Thus, what interests me here is not so much ideas of national identity as they may take shape in the writings of historians and political theorists, or in association with a linguistic-literary tradition. I am rather interested in looking for traces of a deeper and longer-term phenomenon – that of a sense of identity that may have emerged through everyday practices, and may have been, at least initially, not entirely conscious: in the formation of any group identity, practices are historical agents no less than ideas. (Notice how far we have come from the Germanic 'metaphysics' of national identity.)

Identifying those traces will require sifting through a variety of sources (letters, diaries, theatrical contracts, but also printed materials). I will mention only a few examples, and will begin with the clues that we can derive from one particular repertoire (one admittedly unlikely to yield the most interesting results), that of references to opera in texts that hand down stereotypical images of Italians. In the eighteenth century, Italy and Italians generally enjoyed a very mixed reception among foreigners: whereas the country could be valued for its climate and the beauty of its landscape, or for its association with antiquity and the Renaissance, living Italians were likelier to arise suspicion, irony or scorn. The phenomenon was palpable, for instance, in London, where Italians were often suspected either politically (as Catholics they were all perceived as possible agents of the Pope, whatever their state of provenance) or morally (they were regarded as promiscuous hedonists – a reputation that applied to the castrati as well).[50]

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[48] West (1999), 10. See also Herr (2008).

[49] See Ricaldone (1987), *passim*.

Whereas the Italian language was generally described as singing, sonorous and expressive (as against French, the rational language most suited to science and philosophy),[51] Italian opera was often seen as a noisy, irrational, frivolous and sensual form of entertainment.[52] But so were Italians – noisy, irrational, frivolous, sensual: in other words, a human category of their own (much as is suggested by the list of characters printed at the beginning of Samuel Richardson's novel *Sir Charles Grandison*, which is divided into three categories – 'Men', 'Women' and 'Italians').[53] The negative image of Italians in association with opera is documented very early in the century: in 1706, the English critic John Dennis published in London a tract significantly entitled *An essay on the opera's* [sic] *after the Italian manner, which are about to be establish'd on the English stage: with some reflections on the damage which they may bring to the publick*. Having made reference to Italian singers and French dancers, Dennis claimed that

> an Englishman is deservedly scorned by Englishmen, when he descends so far beneath himself, as to Sing or to Dance in publick, because by doing so he practises Arts which Nature has bestow'd upon effeminate Nations, but denied to him, as below the Dignity of his Country, and the Majesty of the British Genius.[54]

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[50] Ruth Smith, for instance, writes of the recurring 'suspicion that opera personnel, being Italian, might be spies for the Pope', and that in eighteenth-century London '[e]veryone connected with Italian music is suspect'; as for the castrati, 'women became infatuated with them', while it was alleged that they 'damagingly encouraged effeminacy among their British male admirers': see Smith (1995), 206, 207 and 72.

[51] A good sample of eighteenth-century assessments of the relative merits of Italian and French is offered and discussed in Bonomi (1998), *passim*.

[52] Examples of this attitude are legion, the most quoted probably being Dr Johnson's 'the Italian opera, an exotick and irrational entertainment': Johnson, *The Lives of the Most Eminent English Poets* (1783), vol. 3, 39.

[53] Richardson, *Grandison* (1753–1754), viii.

[54] Dennis (1706), 13. On the English perception of Italian opera as 'effeminating', see Redford (1996), 22–24; Redford quotes from John Dennis's later *Essay upon Publick Spirit* (1711): 'Men are enervated and emasculated by the Softness of the *Italian* Musick.'

Stereotypical images such as this were of course myriad, whether positive or negative; either way, they must have helped to foster the impression that there was indeed a group of people out there named 'Italians', one whose members shared a number of characteristics.

Italian actors and artists living abroad reinforced the perception that they constituted a community by frequently marrying among themselves, or importing relatives from Italy.[55] What is more important is that whereas a musician or an artisan living in Venice or Naples may have felt no particular need to define himself as Italian, that same person was likelier to take on such a label – and certainly to have it applied to him by foreigners – once living and working abroad. (One has only to think of the cases in which the Mozarts, father and son, or Lorenzo Da Ponte, refer to 'the Italians' as a group – or even as a network.)

Noting that the diaspora of the Italian arts increases in the second half of the eighteenth century, historian Franco Venturi writes,

> The frame of mind of the Italians scattered throughout mid-eighteenth-century Europe was extraordinarily varied, ranging from pride in a great artistic tradition to a determination to achieve success through everyday skills, from an awareness of what they represented in the world of the arts to the inescapable, wretched and cruel afflictions of exile.[56]

Indeed, for many Italians any sense of identity at this stage centred less on an ideal future (the 'national destiny' of later ideologies) than on the present and its practicalities – who Italians were, their capabilities, their success – or on the past, especially in the case of intellectuals.

In a book published in 1752 in London, where he was then living, the Tuscan Vincenzo Martinelli pointed out that France was the only nation that could challenge Italy's musical primacy:

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[55] Bruni (2010), 457.

[56] Venturi (1973), 1035 ('Lo stato d'animo degli italiani sparsi per l'Europa della metà del Settecento fu straordinariamente vario, passando dall'orgoglio di una grande tradizione artistica all'abilità spicciola, tutta intesa al successo, dalla coscienza di quel che essi effettivamente rappresentavano nel mondo dell'arte alle inevitabili meschine e crudeli amarezze dell'esilio').

> All other European nations have taken our side, which must surely be a necessary effect of the truth of the matter […]. Italian operas are staged all over Germany, in England, in Spain, in Denmark, in Russia, whereas in none of these regions are national operas performed.[57]

Having rehearsed some well-worn arguments (the linguistic roots of the musical pre-eminence of Italians, the significance of Metastasio), Martinelli expanded on rather more practical matters:

> This profession of music – which, especially in the vocal realm, is an art monopolised by Italians (vis-à-vis the entire rest of Europe) – brings to Italy possibly as much benefit (in the monetary sense) as in past centuries did sculpture, painting and architecture together, rendering our tributaries all other parts of Europe, which pay an excellent (and sometimes a mediocre) musician better than a lieutenant, or even a general […].[58]

The association between Italy and opera remains strong, even when it surfaces in passages that lament the decadence of the nation. The Marchese Domenico Caracciolo, Neapolitan ambassador to Paris, writes to Padre Martini in 1777, 'I pray you turn your eyes to wretched Italy, stripped naked by the foreigners, who now also want to take from her this only rag that is left to her, theatrical music.'[59] Five years later, the great *illuminista*

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[57] Martinelli, *Istoria critica* (1752), 83–84 ('Tutte le altre Nazioni Europèe hanno preso il nostro partito, il quale bisogna che sia veramente un effetto necessario della verità […]. Si rappresentano Opere Musicali Italiane in tutta la Germania, in Inghilterra, in Ispagna, in Danimarca, in Moscovia, e in niuna di queste regioni se ne rappresentano in Musica delle Nazionali').

[58] Ibid., 87 ('Questa professione della Musica, che spezialmente per la vocale, è un'arte privativa (rispetto a tutta l'Europa insieme) degli Italiani, porta all'Italia forse tanto utile (parlando del denaro) quanto ve ne portavano ne i secoli passati la Scultura, la Pittura, e l'Architettura insieme, avendoci rese tributarie tutte le altre regioni Europèe, le quali pagano più uno eccellente, e talvolta mediocre Professore di Musica, che un Tenente, e anche Capitano Generale').

[59] Quoted in Vatielli (1914), 651 ('La prego rivolgere uno sguardo alla povera Italia spogliata nuda dagli oltramontani, i quali ora vogliono anche toglierle d'indosso questo solo cencio rimastole della musica teatrale').

Pietro Verri would write of Italy to his brother Alessandro, 'a nation that once dominated and inspired is now humiliated, and has no reputation save for blessings, castrati, and a few paintings even when produced by some foreigner'.[60]

Historians have repeatedly warned us that earlier ideas of Italianness are emphatically different from those of nineteenth-century nationalism. Once we agree on that, we should not feel exempted from looking at the question in eighteenth-century terms: while avoiding old teleological models (such as the retrospective view that took for granted the inexorable march towards a national destiny), we should equally avoid the risks implicit in more recent, anti-teleological approaches – most notably, the risk of erasing the history of the nation (as opposed to the history of the unified nation-state). We should not, in other words, feel exempted from observing the historical *realities* of Italianness in the eighteenth century (including those of music and opera); and perhaps only in the second analysis will we be able to assess the extent to which these realities may have created the conditions for nineteenth-century phenomena. The two historical phases may eventually appear less disjointed than they are in current descriptions. At the same time, we may gain a sense of Italian identity that is both more complex and more open.

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[60] Letter of 11 May 1782, quoted in Capra (2008), 132 ('una nazione, che è stata la padrona e la maestra, ora avvilita non ha più nome che per le benedizioni, i castrati, e qualche quadro composto anche da un forestiere').

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