

I. The other Goldoni

Carlo Goldoni's comedies are three hundred years old, but have remained very much part of our culture. Adaptations, spin-offs, and modern translations are found in abundance. Valued for their unflinching humor and artful design, these texts are also natural conduits of Enlightenment ideologies so in harmony with our own views of society and the individual. The powerful injection of realism Goldoni's life work gave to theatre, clear symptom of a turning point in history, cost him a good deal of strife but secured him an enduring legacy as a theatrical innovator.³ Given his stature as a playwright, it comes as no surprise that Goldoni is less often remembered as something else: not the lawyer his contemporaries knew him as, but a librettist.

Goldoni wrote opera libretti during the entire course of his life. In fact, his first creative writings as a teenager reluctant to study law weren't comedies but texts for music, and when, in the last years of his life and embittered by disappointments, he stopped writing comedies, he continued to create libretti. In his close to 100 texts for music, Goldoni tried his hand at nearly everything: short comic *intermezzi*, *melodrammi seri* in the style of Zeno and Metastasio, *drammi eroicomici*, *divertimenti per musica*, and *drammi comici*, before settling on his genre of choice and writing nearly 50 *drammi giocosi*. During his lifetime and beyond, Goldoni's libretti were set to music by composers of international reputation: Antonio Vivaldi, Baldassarre Galuppi, Niccolò Piccinni, Gaetano Latilla, Giuseppe Scarlatti, Giovanni Paisiello, and outside of Italy Franz Joseph Haydn and Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart to name but a few. Their operas were performed well beyond Italy and

3 From the *canovacci* of the Commedia dell'Arte Goldoni was the first to steer actors and audiences towards developed, realistic, and socially relevant comedy. For a synthesis see Siro Ferrone, *La vita e il teatro di Carlo Goldoni* (Venezia, Marsilio, 2011).

Europe, even reaching Moscow and the young United States before the turn of the 19th century.

Just as he was an innovator in comic theatre, Goldoni applied many of the same principles to his texts for music, drawing his characters from contemporary society. The libretti of Goldoni's mature years in particular, the *drammi giocosi per musica*, occupy an innovative position among theatrical genres. Carlo Goldoni defined this nascent genre as "materia buffa... intrecciata colla seria,"⁴ that is, comic material interwoven with tragic, a new coexistence capable of yielding a broader spectrum of dramatic registers and a more complex representation of social types than ever before achieved in theatre. His *drammi giocosi* reflect a priority for realism in their psychological depth, conversational dialogue, and expanded ensembles, all elements quintessential to later Mozartean opera.

The true nature and entity of our debt to Goldoni the librettist, however, has not yet been disclosed by the numerous studies conducted on his texts. His early *intermezzi* remain the most frequent object of attention, no doubt a consequence of the author's own tendency, in his retrospective *Memoires* as elsewhere, to frame them as the early seeds from which his great comedies grew.⁵ Most notably, with the exception of Ted Emery's *Goldoni as Librettist*,⁶ no study has yet been produced on the *dramma giocoso* as a distinct operatic genre, though the majority of Goldoni's libretti, especially those written during the "reform" years, as a mature author with very clear ideas for the future of comedy, are of this kind. To better understand the purpose of the following chapters, it can be useful to know something of what previous research has offered on the topic.

4 Carlo Goldoni, *La Scuola Moderna*, "All'amico lettore."

5 "Les traits comiques que j'employais dans les intermèdes, étaient comme de la graine que je semais dans mon champ, pour y récolter un jour des fruits mûrs et agréables," *Memoires de Goldoni, pour servir à l'histoire de sa vie et a celle de son théâtre*, Paris, Ponthieu, 1822; 152.

6 Ted Emery, *Goldoni as Librettist, Theatrical Reform and the Drammi Giocosi per Musica*, Peter Lang Press, 1991.

i. “State of the art”

Early studies of Goldoni’s opera texts appeared to immediately sense a synergic relationship between comedies and libretti. Patrick Smith, for example, believed that “Goldoni’s librettistic work is everywhere a reflection of his work for the theatre,”⁷ an opinion shared in varying degrees by Luigi Falchi, who considered the libretti “sostrato del pensiero dello scrittore,”⁸ by Manilo Dazzi, and by Edmondo Rho, who argued that between libretti and plays “le linee di sviluppo psicologico ed artistico sono le medesime.”⁹ A radically different approach began with Giuseppe Ortolani, a founding figure of Goldoni studies in Italy, who considered the opera texts starkly inferior to the author’s works for spoken theatre, dismissing them as undeserving of any real scrutiny. For him, in the *drammi giocosi*, “Il commediografo veneziano non riuscì a creare nessun capolavoro, nulla di letterariamente vitale,” concluding that “invero queste vecchie farse per musica non reggono all’analisi critica, non appartengono alla storia letteraria.”¹⁰ This approach, applied by later scholars as well, likely contributed to the general absence of studies on Goldoni as an opera source until recent times. Nicola Mangini also sought to distinguish Goldoni’s libretti from his plays. For Mangini, these works were separate from the plays in the mind of the author, and therefore should only be understood in relation to the preceding opera tradition, and not to his other works. He writes: “Si tratta...di adottare una metodologia di approccio che non insista (come si è sempre fatto) nel confronto e nella relazione col suo [di Goldoni] teatro comico, ma che invece prenda in esame questi drammi per sé

7 *La Missione teatrale di Carlo Goldoni* (Bari: Laterza, 1936).

8 *Intendimenti sociali di Carlo Goldoni* (Roma: Società ed. Dante Alighieri, 1907). Substratus of the author’s thought.

9 See *La Missione teatrale di Carlo Goldoni* (Bari: Laterza, 1936), and *Intendimenti sociali di Carlo Goldoni* (Roma: Società ed. Dante Alighieri, 1907). The paths of psychological and artistic development are one and the same.

10 *Opere di Carlo Goldoni*, edited by Giuseppe Ortolani (Verona: Mondadori, 1973) Vol. 10; 1257. The Venetian comic playwright did not succeed in creating any masterpiece, anything vital to literature. These old farces for music cannot hold up to critical analysis, and are not part of literary history.

stessi nell'ambito specifico del loro genere, avendo come eventuale termine di riferimento la librettistica precedente o coeva."¹¹

A first attempt to reconcile these disparate approaches is Ted Emery's *Goldoni as Librettist*. In his survey of Goldoni's texts for music, Emery identifies both structural (due to the rules of theatrical convention) and ideological differences with respect to the spoken plays, adopting Franco Fido's notion of reform and 'counter-reform.' In synthesis, Fido and Emery see an initial affinity between spoken theatre and libretti, followed by the progressive abandonment of the ideological agenda of the plays in the works for music, more readily employed for less realistic, more superficial, and at times fantastical content.¹² Emery's conclusion is that "On the whole, the operas are, as Fido suggests, the artistic and ideological opposite of the *commedie*: less realistic than the plays, they often have fantastic or fanciful plots and a playful, punning style; lacking the reform's didactic intentions, they seek to entertain more than to instruct; rejecting middle-class morality, they give freer rein to disorder and incorporate a more negative vision of the world."¹³ While Emery's work offers valuable information on the varied nature of Goldoni's production, despite his title the author does

11 Nicola Mangini, "Itinerari e approdi di Goldoni librettista" in *Rassegna di cultura e di vita scolastica*, 83 (1985); 4. We must adopt an approach that does not insist (as has always been done) on the comparison to his comic theatre, but which instead examines these works in their own right, and with respect to their own field, possibly with reference to the preceding or coeval production of libretti.

12 In Fido's own words, "quello che la parola infeudata alla musica perdeva sul versante del referente- cioè in termini di capacità di evocare con efficacia mimetica e critica il mondo reale: mercanti, donne di casa, servitori, ecc.- essa guadagnava dalla parte del significante- scherzi e giochi di parole, paradossi e calembours, onomatopoeie e iperboli, equivoci e cacofonie plurilingui."

Franco Fido, "Riforma e controriforma del teatro. I libretti per musica di Goldoni fra il 1748 e il 1753," in *Studi Goldoniani*, vol. 7 (1985); 63. In his libretti what the text enslaved to music lost on the side of the referent- that is in terms of the capacity to evoke the real world with imitative and critical efficacy: merchants, housewives, servants, etc.- it gained on the side of the signifier- jokes and word games, paradoxes and puns, onomatopoeia and hyperbole, misunderstandings and multi-lingual cacophonies.

13 Ted Emery, *Goldoni As Librettist: Theatrical Reform and the Drammi Giocosi per Musica* (New York: Peter Lang Press, 1991); 77.

not assess the *dramma giocoso* as an operatic type distinct from Goldoni's *intermezzi*. There is no investigation of the differences between *buffo* and *serio* characters, and no mention of the all-important *mezzi caratteri*, a novelty unique to the *dramma giocoso* and an integral part of fully formed Classical opera.

Furthermore, Emery's interpretation is conditioned by his definition of Goldoni's reform as almost exclusively the exaltation of the industrious merchant class. Consequently, he suggests that the author abandons his own ideals in those works that appear – but it is only appearance- more fantastical in nature (*Il Mondo della Luna*), or that ridicule exponents of the *borghesia* and not the aristocracy (including in the spoken theatre, with masterpieces such as *Sior Todero Brontolon*). Emery concludes, “when the *commedie* and comic operas are considered together as inseparable parts of an organic whole, the tension between reform and ‘counter-reform’ underscores a surprising sense of ideological fragility in an author who has traditionally been regarded as a bard of the bourgeoisie.”¹⁴ If, in Goldoni's more mature works, the “middle-class morality” of his characters is no longer idealized but critiqued in its own right, far from “ideological fragility” this denotes ideological fiber of a certain tenacity. The limit of Emery's interpretation is that his narrow concept of reform excludes from consideration a number of works that instead have much to reveal with regards to Goldoni's strategies for modern theatre.

Goldoni's theatrical “reform,” a term chosen by the author himself- retrospectively- to describe his overhaul of the theatrical common practice, has been reevaluated as a much broader undertaking, and unmistakably shaped his texts for music as well as his comedies. The idealization of the hard-working middle class often ascribed to Goldoni, given it is a signature of many works, is a clear symptom of Goldoni's historical circumstances. Predominant as it may be, it is not an exclusive goal, but rather a product of his criticism of the aristocracy, the target of the largest number of his works, and more than anything, a product of his desire for original characters. Merit, industry, and ingenuity are the virtues of Goldoni's present, in contrast to bloodline and

14 *ibid.*; 75.

inheritance. These inevitably come to the forefront as the influence of the aristocracy, in economic crisis, begins to fade. Most importantly, Goldoni's critical eye never targets one social status or another, but seeks realism above all, the principal source of his theatrical innovation as of his social criticism. In fact, Goldoni's revision of comic theatre did not initiate from revolutionary choices in subject matter, but rather from technical changes that, in an effort to more realistically reflect contemporary life, gradually transitioned from the repertoire of the *Commedia dell'Arte* to a more pristine representation of modern society and its human archetypes. The moral hue of Goldoni's works hinges uniquely upon the realism of the parts that convey it. By transposing his contemporary world onto the stage, Goldoni was able to return theatre to its Horatian potential in a very modern way. In his words, his works were meant to "(...) far vedere sul Teatro i difetti de' particolari, per guarire i difetti del pubblico, e di correggere le persone col timore di essere posto in ridicolo."¹⁵ These concepts are most often applied to Goldoni's spoken comedies, but are a necessary foundation for understanding his musical texts as well.

The contributions of Mangini, Fido, and Emery have been followed by numerous more recent publications, including articles by Barbara Gizzi and Ilaria Crotti,¹⁶ recent conference proceedings,¹⁷ and a summary of current research by Siro Ferrone.¹⁸ These recent studies shed new light on the economic and managerial mechanisms of theatre, on specific biographical circumstances, and on the more successful artists who premiered his works, among other areas of interest, all in support of a more comprehensive approach to understanding the author's work. Again, however, little is said of the *dramma giocoso*, which we can now endeavor to discover.

15 Carlo Goldoni, *La dama prudente*, Forward. (...)to show the flaws of particular characters, so as to redress the flaws of the general public, and correct people through fear of exposure to ridicule.

16 Ilaria Crotti, "Il Carattere e il Baule" in *Libro, Mondo, e Teatro: Saggi Goldoniani* (Venezia: Marsilio, 2000).

17 *Parola, Musica, Teatro, Scena. Percorsi nel teatro di Carlo Goldoni e Carlo Gozzi*, a cura di Giulietta Bazoli e Maria Ghelfi (Venezia: Marsilio, 2009).

18 Siro Ferrone, *La vita e il teatro di Carlo Goldoni* (Venezia: Marsilio, 2011).