

Introduction

No composer nor librettist in Western music has left to posterity the impression that his works were created in leisure, and without immense effort. Opera had scarcely been born that Monteverdi wrote of his second work, “To mi riducessi quasi alla morte nel scrivere l’Arianna.”¹ Even so, the age of Enlightenment consumed theatre like no other moment in history, as what was once the privilege of few and noble patrons was becoming public domain for the first time. Venice like no other European city desired and cultivated theater of all types, both on the stage and in the presses, which consolidated and exported novelties in entertainment at all levels. It is no coincidence that Europe’s first public theatre was Venetian, and quite ahead of the times. Not to mention, the *Teatro San Cassiano* to which we refer, which opened its doors to ticket-bearing spectators from all walks of society in 1636, was born as an opera house. To put things in perspective, Paris in the 18th century, while reputed of the most cultured cities in Europe, housed three principal theatres: the Opéra Comique, the famous Comédie Française (*La maison de Molière*, as it was known), and the Comédie Italienne, of which Goldoni would later take charge. Venice, during the same years, housed no less than thirteen, all in competition for the newest exclusive texts and largest crowds. It is an understatement to say new works were desired and sought by *impresari* and by popular and refined audiences alike. They were a necessity.

If today, after Verdi, Puccini, and Wagner, we are well accustomed to supposing a text created only for- and according to- the specific requirements of a single musical rendition, returning to the early 1700s and to Goldoni, we encounter a radically different practice. Goldoni’s texts belong to a period in history, and a concept of opera theatre, that neither required nor sought shared work on a text

1 Cited in Enrico Fubini, *Musica e Pubblico dal Rinascimento al Barocco* (Torino: Einaudi, 1984); 97. I reduced myself to near death in writing *Arianna*.

and a score. The real requirements were versatility and quickness of preparation to meet overwhelming demand. This is not to say that Goldoni never made adjustments, and most importantly, in keeping with his realist inclinations, he fashioned his characters according to the strengths of his performers, when he knew them. It is important to understand, however, that the mode of work and the intention behind his texts for music was altogether different from what later tradition has dictated.

To this we must add Goldoni, who was not a man to refuse any challenge. Still today scholars wonder at the famous, or better infamous, “anno delle sedici commedie” (year of the sixteen comedies), that is the 1750–51 season in which he surpassed all conceivable expectations. The *Teatro Sant’Angelo* habitually put on eight new works from late summer to *Carnevale*, but in the face of raging competition, Goldoni struck a wager with its impresario Girolamo Medebach (who was renting it from a society of aristocratic proprietors, and could more willingly make room for Goldoni’s experimental new comedies), to supply exactly twice as many—a bet that paid off with his employer and his audiences. The comedies Goldoni wrote during that ambitious season turned out to be some of his most enduring works, and he still managed to create more than one *dramma giocoso* on the side.

Musical scores that use Goldoni’s texts are so many as to still be uncounted, dispersed in libraries all over the world. This *corpus* is simply too vast, too varied, and too subjective to receive just treatment within a single book. Far more important, a text-based approach is mandated by the inherent nature of Goldoni’s work and times. For these reasons, this volume is not intended to supply full analysis of musical scores (which have, however, been reviewed and on occasion transcribed). In this historical period it is text alone that supplies form, subdivision, meter, content, and all of those elements that music relies on to shape its rhythms, harmonic discourse, and color. Moreover, text alone assures continuity amidst the changeability of musical permutations. It is the foundation for all that follows, and the most direct conduit for innovation. The composers who set Goldoni’s texts to music, will, however, be key to understanding the dissemination of the *dramma giocoso* and its canonization across Europe. Among them we find Franz Joseph Haydn

and even the young W. A. Mozart, whose very first opera was drawn from Goldoni's *La finta semplice* (1764).²

We can now venture to revisit Goldoni's Venice and cast a light on his texts for music, in relation to the musical tradition that preceded and followed, as well as to his controversial techniques a playwright. Instead of separating libretti and comedies as has most often been done, it is most fruitful, and philologically reasonable, to consider them in close comparison. Plays and libretti, after all, came from the same mind, were written contemporaneously, and not rarely for the same audience. Some even share plots, characters, and verses. Their close connection can uncover the influence- vast and enduring- of one man's pen.

2 In a version revised by Marco Coltellini (1724–1777), successor to Pietro Metastasio as Imperial poet at the Viennese court.

