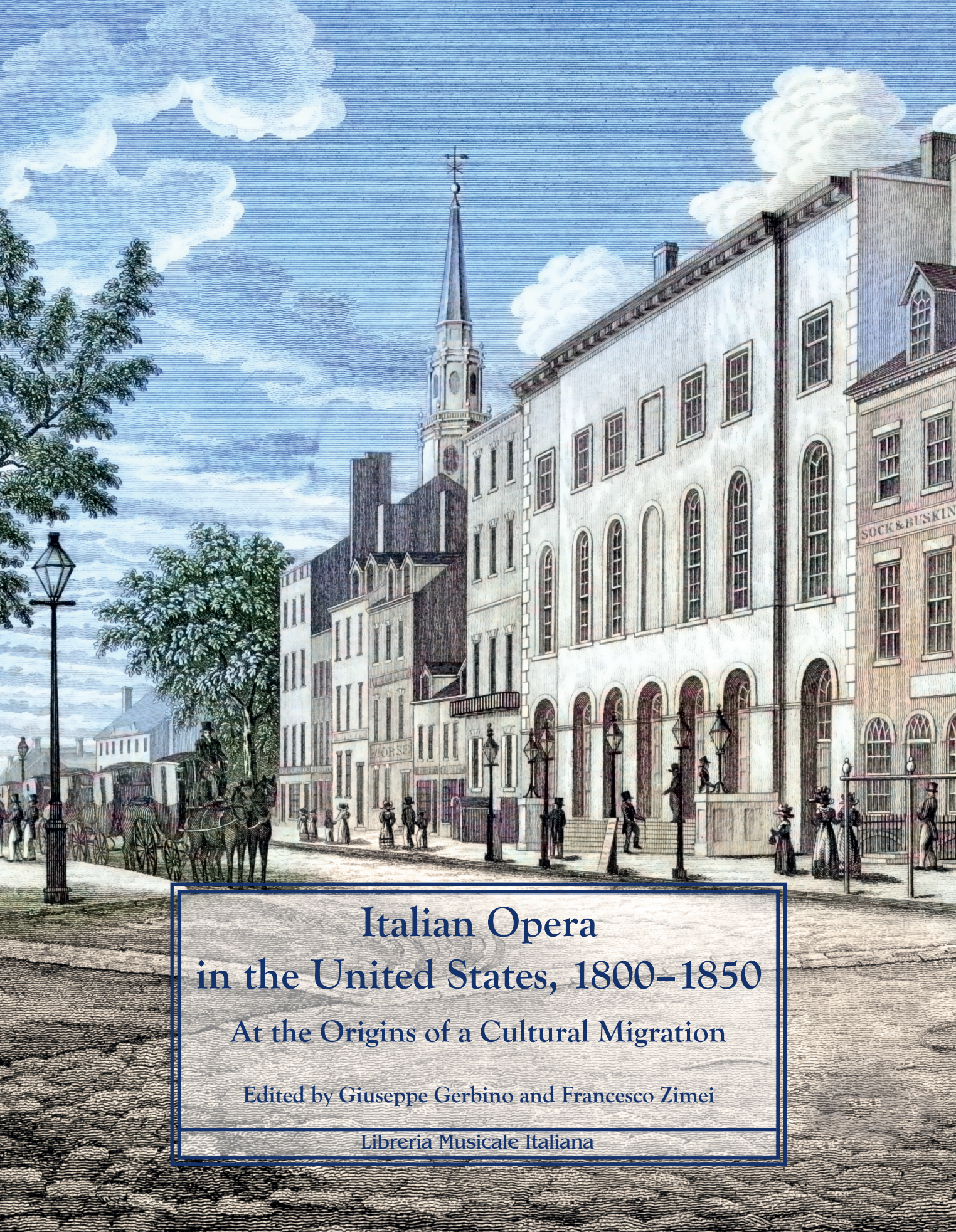




Italian Opera in the United States, 1800–1850

At the Origins of a Cultural Migration

Edited by Giuseppe Gerbino and Francesco Zimei

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Foreword by
Claudio Orazi

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Foreword

As the general manager of an Italian opera house, I have often asked myself what sparked the popularity—still alive and tangible—of Italian opera in America. My thoughts inevitably went to the great wave of emigration that in the aftermath of the Unification of Italy (1861) and until the mid-20th century drove millions of my fellow countrymen and women to leave their home shores to seek their fortunes across the ocean. The consequence was the rapid development of numerous Italian communities, caught between an understandable need to integrate and a desire to preserve and articulate their roots through the use of the same language and other identity markers, including a passion for opera. It was once thought that this passion developed with the triumphs at the Metropolitan Opera of Giacomo Puccini, Arturo Toscanini, and Enrico Caruso, among the greatest media stars of their time (thanks in part to the advent of the gramophone), but also powerful antidotes to the wave of anti-Italian sentiment unleashed by the first Mafia crimes and ending with the unjust conviction of Sacco and Vanzetti.

This book looks at the debut of Italian opera in the United States as the premise for the introduction to the New World of an idea of Italy that had until then been absent—one comprising the first signs of an artistic and literary migration. Obviously, this is a much earlier period, the first half of the 19th century, which is still partially unexplored as concerns the Italian contribution to American culture. However, the eight chapters of this book offers evidence of its impact on opera, bringing to light important novelties in addition to detailed considerations on composers, singers, repertory, producers as well as the social and economic repercussions of a truly pioneering period.

The only exception, in popular opinion as well, has been Lorenzo Da Ponte and his commitment to introducing young New Yorkers to Italian language and literature. A marginal role, by contrast, was assigned to his promotion of opera both as a language-learning tool and as the quintessential expression of an artistic culture that had considerable potential for taking hold in a land that, in his opinion, was ready to free itself of its past as a British colony, even on the level of taste. The manifesto of this set of beliefs was the pastiche *L'ape musicale*—the first Italian opera composed in America for an American audience—which he staged at the Park Theatre in April 1830, and which I had the pleasure of producing in the philological reconstruction performed on 15 October 2018 at the Low Memorial Library of Columbia University. The performance was preceded by a symposium at the Italian Academy for Advanced Studies in America organized by the editors of this book, to whom I wish to express my personal gratitude.

While that experience had already acted as an encouragement to continue along a path illuminated by a felicitous combination of research and musical reconstruction, reading these pages gives new impetus to this intention. It is crucial to rediscover the stages punctuating the cultural osmosis between Italy and the United States under the wondrous aegis of opera, from Da Ponte's times until the present. All of this has taken on an even more personal meaning for me now that I am working in Genova, for almost two centuries the principal port of embarkation

for ships bound for the Americas. This is thus an ideal place in which to study the memory and dynamics of an emigration that was not just an opportunity for economic and social redemption, but also supplied fertile ground for a dialogue replete with art and history.

Claudio Orazi
General Manager of the Fondazione
Teatro Carlo Felice – Genova

Introduction

This volume draws inspiration and direction from the international symposium “Lorenzo Da Ponte and the Birth of Italian Opera in New York”, held at Columbia University’s Italian Academy for Advanced Studies in America on 15 October 2018. The occasion was the first modern American performance of a newly reconstructed edition of Da Ponte’s operatic pastiche *L’ape musicale*, 188 years after its premiere at New York’s Park Theatre in April 1830. With this one-act *azione teatrale*, dedicated to the citizens of New York and staged by a company almost entirely made up of Italian singers, Da Ponte produced both his last libretto and the first Italian opera conceived in the United States for an American audience. Its revival not only gave new impetus to the study of a topic central to an understanding of the dissemination of Italian culture in America, including Da Ponte’s life and works, but it also allowed scholars to reexamine the early stages of a phenomenon whose meaning and long-term implications for the history of Italian opera in America are still gradually emerging from the scattered fragments of historical evidence. In an attempt to add new pieces to the puzzle, we have sought to emphasize fresh documentary sources as well as new perspectives on known episodes and problems with an eye to patterns of transatlantic artistic migration.

The period covered does not present itself as a self-contained and easily definable unit—historical processes rarely do. If anything, in the annals of Italian opera in the United States, these were erratic and uncertain years, but we might also say dynamic and transformative. They approximately coincided at one end with the arrival of Lorenzo Da Ponte in America in 1805, and at the other with the brief but eventful life of the Astor Place Opera House between 1847 and 1852. The presence and legacy of Da Ponte loomed large as attempts to make Italian opera a staple of New York’s society and economy became increasingly inventive, but also costly and ultimately unsuccessful. Before Da Ponte, Filippo Trajetta, the son of the opera composer Tommaso Trajetta, and a political refugee in the wake of the fall of the Neapolitan Republic in July 1799, played an early and multifaceted role in the dissemination of Italian music as a composer, instrumentalist, singer, teacher, and occasional impresario. However, the logistics of opera production required a concerted effort involving multiple stakeholders with sufficient financial and cultural interests to sustain a large-scale transatlantic import. In the 1820s, New York, a city with a growing population and economic capital as well as a flourishing entertainment business, presented the right conditions. It was largely thanks to the efforts of the wine merchant and music enthusiast Dominick Lynch that the famous tenor Manuel García and his opera company (which included his entire family) crossed the Atlantic with a season engagement at the Park Theatre in November 1825.

The first season of Italian opera in New York became the catalyst for change, innovation, and controversy. Questions surrounding America's self-perception of its own cultural identity took center stage together with the beguiling sound of music that went against the grain of the conventions of English musical theater with its strangely natural display of foreign language and vocal virtuosity. Underlying the debate on Italian opera—which newspapers helped to thrust into public discussion—and the claim that musical taste could reveal the essence of a nation were pressing financial considerations. Deprived of the mixed economy of the European patronage system, opera had to find a way to survive in a new business-driven system of theater production. By the time the García troupe left for Mexico in October 1826, the question of squaring ticket sales with the financial support of the affluent stretched beyond the ledgers of the Park's managers. One of the legacies of the García experiment was to accelerate reflection on what role, if any, Italian opera should play in American society in relation or in contrast to the European experience, and especially London, which was still regarded as the arbiter of theatrical taste. Different but interlocking goals merged into a complex design. For singers migrating from Europe, New York offered new economic opportunities. Their motivation was not so different from that of the stars of the English stage who crossed the Atlantic with the promise of more lucrative engagements and the prospect of a less competitive theatrical scene. Italians living in the United States such as Da Ponte, or the food entrepreneur and opera impresario Ferdinando Palmo, saw themselves as patriotic, and perhaps nostalgic, importers of the musical goods of their native land. On the other hand, for the supporters of Italian opera in New York, the ability to establish and sustain a permanent opera house came to represent a test of character in the arena of national musical identity. Perhaps not surprisingly, the historical afterlife of this phenomenon was a tendency to invest strategies of opera production with civic and moral values.

Da Ponte was directly involved in recruiting the second Italian opera company to reach New York, in October 1832, exactly six years after the García troupe bid farewell to the city with their last performance of Gioachino Rossini's *Il barbiere di Siviglia*. Leading the new enterprise was the tenor and impresario Giacomo Montresor, to whom Da Ponte wrote:

I have the daring to tell you with the greatest frankness in the world that a good and well-organized company of Italian singers would make a fortune in America. I have said a good company, but I should have said a very good, magnificent, excellent company, so that it could compete with and possibly win over that of Garzia [*sic*].¹

The reality turned out to be trickier. The following decades saw a relatively steady succession of investments and failures. No company became profitable enough to last more than a few seasons. The Montresor company folded after a year and just under sixty performances between New York and Philadelphia. Vincenzo Rivafinoli's company lasted about a year before it went bankrupt in 1834.

However, significant trends started to emerge. Two complementary forces drove the cultural and monetary economy of Italian opera: the desire to build a permanent opera house and establish

1. DA PONTE/CERIANI 2008, p. 150.

a resident company as a precondition for the “naturalization” of Italian opera in America,² and the increasing circulation of travelling companies expanding and enriching musical and linguistic networks. Against this backdrop of mobility and permanence, a narrative of musical progress also started to solidify around an embryonic historiography of opera in the United States. Over time, it contributed to the formation of new plot structures inextricably bound up with the question of musical dependence on Europe. Typical of this mindset is the opening gambit in an account of the recent past and uncertain future of American orchestras that a “Man about Town” sent to the readers of the “New-York Mirror” in 1835:

The progression and improvement of the delightful art of music within the last ten years are so remarkable and the diffusion of musical knowledge so general, that we feel ourselves called upon, from time to time, to turn our attention to its details. In the past numbers of the Mirror will be found various articles on this subject from the days of Garcia—our musical Columbus—until the present. We have previously pointed out the striking march of musical intelligence, which first received impetus from his exertions.³

The rhetoric of the civilizing effect of Italian music—the foundational myth of 1825, setting in motion a “striking march of musical intelligence”—complicated shifting attitudes towards an operatic tradition that could be variously construed as an exclusionary pastime for aristocratic audiences—and therefore a foreign infringement on republican values—or the manifestation of a superior refinement of the natural musical language of emotion. In this fluid configuration, there was also room for the following report from a traveler from abroad, printed on the next page of the same issue of the “New-York Mirror”:

My remarks on the Italians will be differently considered by my readers. Travellers, as well as doctors, disagree. Distinguished writers have pronounced Florence clean and the Italian climate healthy. My sudden transition from my own country, from her cheerful and beautiful cities, her broad bays and lordly rivers, her liberal laws, her free and intelligent people, her eloquent orators, the justice of her courts, the prosperity of her commerce, from education, literature and general affluence and industry, from good morals and a rational religion, from the whole sublime fabric of her government and the thunder of an unshackled press; my sudden transition from these into the dungeon-towns, the depraved society, the paralyzed energies, the splendor and misery, the despotism and abasement of Italy, has placed my subject in all the prominence of close contrast, and led me to sketch, perhaps, broad, dark outlines, and to neglect those minuter colourings which soften and redeem the picture.⁴

About thirty years later, the history of Italian opera in the United States could be recast as a temporary chapter in a new grand narrative with a different, German ending, here in the words of Matilda Pratt Despard, sister of the artist Eliza Pratt Greatorex:

2. Beyond the specific case of New York, the sociopolitical history and geography of opera houses is the subject of ASPDEN 2019.

3. *Original Essays on Music, The Orchestras: New-York—Boston—Philadelphia—Baltimore, by a Man about Town*, “New-York Mirror”, xii/27, 3 January 1835, p. 211.

4. *Original Sketches of Italian Society. The Minute-Book: A Series of Familiar Letters from Abroad. Florence*, “New-York Mirror”, xii/27, 3 January 1835, p. 212.

Somewhat in this order did star after star arise and shine upon us, bringing New York audiences, step by step, through quaint old English operettas, English versions of Italian and German operas, pure Italian and German compositions of Rossini, Bellini, Verdi, Spohr, Weber, and Mendelssohn, up to the present high development of taste for and appreciation of Meyerbeer, Gounod, Schumann, and colossal Richard Wagner, at last—giant destroyer of ancient opera traditions, ruthless iconoclast of the feeble, worn-out types of love-lorn tenor and sighing soprano, impossible parent and heterogeneous chorus.⁵

In the teleological scheme of Wagnerian historiography, operatic traditions that had coexisted in the first half of the century form a linear trajectory progressing from the naïve to the titanic. The former is represented by what at the beginning of the century many regarded as the authentic national tradition of the English-language repertory, whose popularity continued to rival that of Italian and French opera in the 1830s and 1840s. We then move to opera in translation, and finally to opera in its original language (the “aurora of operatic music”, to quote Pratt Despard again), especially Rossini, on whose popularity both García and Montresor relied for their revenues. Gaetano Donizetti is conspicuously absent from this reconstruction, despite his increasing presence in American theaters from the late 1830s to the 1840s. Verdi had his North American debut with *I Lombardi alla prima crociata* at Palmo’s Opera House in 1847. But in the 1870s, the “destroyer of ancient opera traditions” was called to redefine the role of Italian opera as a means to an end in the progress of American musical taste.

Looking at the other side of the Atlantic, a distinctive pattern can be glimpsed in the experience of this early Italian migration, fueling the slow but steady favor that the genre gained in the first half of the nineteenth century. This was not yet the mass exodus that between 1876 and 1913, following the social and economic difficulties that accompanied the Unification of Italy (1861), would force more than three million Italians to relocate and seek their fortune in the United States. The numbers are radically smaller, movements are often difficult to trace, and the chronological arc in part precedes and in part coincides with the migration flow that, according to one estimate, saw 4,561 inhabitants of the Peninsula cross the ocean between 1820 and 1850.⁶

As far as the historical evidence allows us to see, we are dealing with a small group of individuals with a professional background in artistic, intellectual, and sometimes entrepreneurial fields. Their reasons for emigrating varied significantly. There were political refugees such as Piero Maroncelli, Eleuterio Felice Foresti, a fellow prisoner in the castle of Spielberg who succeeded Da Ponte to the chair of Italian language and literature at Columbia College, and the painter Michele Felice Cornè, who like Trajetta had escaped the uprisings of the Neapolitan revolution. Others were musicians past their artistic prime. They were lured by the idea of new professional prospects, and included García himself, or the basses Paolo Rosich and Felice Angrisani, who joined the Spanish tenor in his venture overseas. But among them were also young and promising performers, members of travelling companies who ended up settling in North America. Some of them exerted a long-lasting influence as teachers and founders of important artistic schools, such as the tenor Felice Dorigo in Philadelphia, or the renowned composer and voice teacher Antonio Bagioli, who

5. “Harper’s New Monthly Magazine”, 1 June 1878, p. 115. See also LEVINE 1988, p. 102.

6. MARRARO 1945, p. 279, provides the following figures: 438 people between 1820 and 1830; 2,253 between 1831 and 1840; and 1,870 between 1841 and 1850.

arrived in New York in 1832 as “maestro di cembalo” with Giacomo Montresor’s Italian Opera Company. Others yet left Italy for reasons that are still unknown, such as the virtuoso trombonist Filippo Cioffi, or Ferdinando Palmo.

Figures such as Trajetta and Da Ponte, who found themselves in a new country not by choice but by necessity, seem to have played the role of isolated actors moving within a “foreign” cultural environment in which the preservation of their cultural identity and the simultaneous commodification of this identity for new audiences gave rise to a constantly evolving set of social strategies and modes of cooperation. Overall, the impression is that a sense of commonality and shared experience gradually transformed an artistic know-how into an agent of social aggregation, turning individual initiatives into a larger, loosely collective, project of cultural conservation and promotion. Sustaining such a project soon required attracting new talent from Italy, often with the promise that there was a fortune to be made. A parallel and complementary interest in establishing Italian opera on an institutional level on the part of the New York elites enhanced the capacity of both parties to implement the different values to which they were committed, creating shifting patterns of social and cultural interaction, a subject to the study of which this volume is largely devoted.

As we saw, Da Ponte himself, who notoriously had no talent for business, was fully aware that the “naturalization” of Italian opera in the United States had the potential to create a new and thriving market, and so he became an energetic importer of Italian singers and musicians, always subtly poised between his inner sense of cultural mission and his perception of the commercial opportunities of the New World. Operatic mobility as a vehicle for the dissemination of Italian language and culture and the American dream of economic independence formed a potent narrative of self-realization—one, however, that also reflected tension and uncertainty.⁷ This conflict is encapsulated in a letter that Da Ponte sent to his brother Agostino, a municipal employee in Venice with a gambling problem, in September 1827, as the latter was preparing to accompany his daughter Giulia, a promising soprano, to New York. Even Da Ponte encouraged his brother to invest in more tangible commodities:

Vi ho già informato altre volte della disposizione in cui sono ora gli americani di piantar nel lor paese le viti, i gelsi, e gli olivi, e di fare la seta. Vi sono già delle piccole piantagioni, e riescono. Se mai però Dio vuole che vogliate e possiate venir in America, portate una gran quantità di radici di viti, condizionate in bel modo da conservarsi, molta semenza di morari, e di olivi, di bigatti, o sia vermi da seta, e quanti libri moderni potete, relativi a queste piantagioni, e manifatture, e particolarmente del modo di far i vini, e di conservarsi. Io ho già delle opere di Dandolo, di Re, di Vettori, e di Sodarini [*sic*]. Ve ne son forse de migliori, non tralasciate di portarli con voi.

E sappiate ch’io possedo, per un bizzarro accidente diversi tratti di terra ne’ quali tutto ciò si potrebbe fare con successo, e tanto le radici, che la semenza vendersi a immenso profitto! V’è un altro oggetto che vorrei consigliarvi di portar con voi se potete. Vino di Firenze in bottiglie, al-kermes, e maraschino d’eccellente qualità, *piccolit*, castagne, noci, frutta secche e come vi scrissi, olio, salami, maccheroni, e cacio parmigiano. S’io avessi impiegati i piccioli miei capitali in questi

7. Viewed in this perspective, the eight essays assembled in this volume also make a contribution to the debate on the question of opera and Italianità recently analyzed in KÖRNER – KÜHL 2022.

oggetti avrei fatto molto danaro. Il mio amore per la lingua me lo fece impiegar in libri, ed ora non ho se non libri, beffe ed ingratitudine. Così va il mondo.⁸

I have already informed you in the past about the willingness that Americans now have to plant vines, mulberry trees, and olive trees in their country, as well to produce silk. There are already small cultivations, and they are successful. If by God's grace, you can and want to come to America, bring a great quantity of vine roots, treated so that they can survive, mulberry and olive seeds, worms, that is, silkworms, and as many modern books as you can, relating to these crops and manufactures, and particularly on how to make and keep wines. I already have the works of Dandolo, Re, Vettori, and Soderini. There are perhaps better ones; do not neglect to take them with you.

You should know that by a curious circumstance I own several pieces of land where all this could be done successfully, and both roots and seeds could be sold at immense profit! There is one more thing I would like to recommend that you bring with you, if you can. Florentine wine [Chianti] in bottles, *alkermes* and maraschino of excellent quality, Picolit wine, chestnuts, walnuts, dried fruit, and, as I wrote to you, oil, *salami*, *maccheroni*, and *parmigiano*. If I had invested my small capital in these items, I would have made a lot of money. My love for language made me use it all on books, and now I have nothing but books, scorn, and ingratitude. So goes the world.

For various reasons, Agostino and his daughter did not follow this advice. They eventually returned to Italy. However, many artists did settle in the United States. Their descendants did not necessarily become musicians or singers, but the memory of this early migration seems to have left an imprint on the role that opera continued to play in their sense of cultural identity.

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New York and Roma, 29 November 2022

Giuseppe Gerbino and Francesco Zimei

8. DA PONTE/ZAGONEL 2020, pp. 248–51 (excerpt).

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