

# Introduction

*And today the Italian who asks himself questions, who falls over backwards to discover what constitutes the story of this national reality which makes us feel united, even throughout the immense widening in our differences and despite the conviction that unified Italy is not an absolute value but rather a phase, a transitory historical condition – this Italian who asks himself questions and who wants to identify the nature of his own national consciousness, will discover, God willing, no opaque thickness of flesh and earth, no blind groping of protoplasm and sperm, but rather, everywhere, **the light formed by spirit, the transparency of art, the busy forge of civilization.** "We have made Italy; now we must make the Italians." When Massimo D'Azeglio pronounced his celebrated phrase he wanted to warn us not to deceive ourselves too much as to the concrete results of a legislative measure that declared the new nation officially constituted, and recognized by the other states of Europe. The new national reality still needed to be built up not only by passing laws, but principally in the consciences of men,*

Massimo Mila,  
Verdi

Italian is the *mother tongue* of Opera, since Opera was born in Italy on the foundation of a precise aesthetic project whose fulcrum was, precisely, the language spoken by the inventors of the *genre*. This is explicitly declared by the composer Jacopo Peri in the preface to his *Euridice*, the first opera in history whose complete score has survived, composed by him to the libretto of his friend Ottavio Rinuccini (both of them were members of a *coterie* of artists who met in Florence in the late Renaissance thanks to the munificence of Count Bardi). Peri states that "*the idea was to imitate the spoken word with singing (.....) so that harmony, enhancing that of everyday speech, should arise from melody, from singing, so as to form something between the two.*"

Despite the fact that in theatres throughout all the boot of Italy the people had already for centuries been listening to the common language – Italian – sung by the singers, the poet Ugo Foscolo, at the time of the Unification of Italy, could write that "*...a man from Bologna and a man from Milan cannot understand each other, except by making an enormous effort*". And yet, in the Opera house Italy had already been unified, thanks to the language, and the State of Opera would continue to exist until our times – from 1600 until after the invention of YouTube – moreover, expanding exponentially first

with the invention of the gramophone record and then through internet.

Despite all this, curiously, no manual of Italian operatic diction written by an Italian author and published by an Italian publisher has been issued until now: it seems incredible; this prevents us Italians from complaining about any slovenliness, at home or abroad, that might have been perpetrated so far to the detriment of Italy's most precious and *constituent* national patrimony. This text-book of mine is arriving more than one hundred and fifty years late with respect to Garibaldi's unification and more than twenty with respect to the unification of Europe, which has poured a flood of Erasmus students (added to those hailing from Asia, even greater in number, plus all the others) into Italian universities and conservatories. It comes to fill one of those gaps typical of new organizations – such as Italy is – after having practically written itself during the past ten years of my specialized teaching practice in the subject; and it comes, at the historic moment in which the Italian language is already yielding place to English (which is taking over the role that once belonged to Latin), aiming precisely at repeating that, even when Italy might hypothetically be once more losing her national geographic borders, the State of Opera, on the other hand, stretching along the boot of Italy from Donizetti's Bergamo to Bellini's Catania – can never be lost, and so it is with its language, which is the *matrix* and the *basic material* of the *genre*.

Italian singing, therefore, cannot be reduced to a merely orthoepical matter: we are dealing with an *ontologically musical* affair: singing *is* Italian, Italian *is* singing. There cannot be any vocal technique without a knowledgeable *vowel formation technique* of the Italian language. This implies that the singer's diction must be understood as consisting only in part as merely facilitating the understanding by the audience of the words being sung: the higher this level of intelligibility is, the better it is – it goes without saying – but, significantly, correctness of diction in singing has a great effect, perhaps an even greater effect, on an audience that does not understand the language being sung, as they do not speak it: as if the correct diction contained a magical component of *enchantment*<sup>1</sup> upon audiences, almost

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<sup>1</sup> «The dead are beings who sing though petrified. The Spanish language has preserved this ideal megalithic connection between *canto* and *pietra* ("singing" and "stone") in the word *canto*. *Encantar* must originally have meant not only "to cast a spell", but also "turn to stone by singing".»; Marius Schneider, *Il significato della Musica*, Rusconi, 1979. In Italian as well *canto* ("the act of singing"), *cantiere* ("construction yard") and *canto* ("angle, corner stone") share the same etymon.

apart from the content being transmitted. The *poetic* word is, in fact, by definition *creative*: *poetry* comes from the Greek *poièò*, meaning “*I make, I create, I model*”. If a word does not produce a concrete and *meta-linguistic* reality, it has been badly pronounced and robbed of its *poetry*. Furthermore, most of the great arias in Opera are great soliloquies, which the character sings without being heard by anyone beside himself (if every singer kept this fact in mind, many more indications of *pp*, *ppp* and *pppp* would be respected). The singer’s duty, therefore, rather than making the words clear, should be to create for himself an *interior voice* of the character, giving utterance, though through the medium of words, to his *meta-verbal* soul, using what in this manual we will generally refer to as *interpretative diction*.

This manual does not exist, therefore, to tell the reader if a vowel is open or closed, except occasionally and only with the intention of pointing out to him some other more structural concept; this is *not* what we mean, here, by *diction*! Furthermore, this kind of everyday information is available today at a mere click<sup>2</sup> and, whenever needed, more rapidly put to use than by reading this book. The object of this little treatise will, if anything, be the emotion that opens or closes a vowel, or that a vowel means to disclose to the human soul according to the musical and dramaturgical intentions of the composer in demanding *that* particular word from the librettist in *that* particular position; it will be the history behind a lemma; sometimes it will be free associations on its root word; it will be the genetic content of its *DNA*; and much more besides.

The great English stage director Peter Brook, in an interview<sup>3</sup>, compared Opera as it is understood by today’s market to a crumbling building whose pipes, which once carried water, had progressively rusted and deteriorated to the point in which people had forgotten their original function, transforming the building itself into a museum whose very *walls* (i.e. the essential matter) were torn down with the incomprehensible aim of admiring the empty tubes in ecstasy.<sup>4</sup> The aim of this text is to praise the ancient

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<sup>2</sup> The reader is recommended to consult the *Treccani* dictionary, available online and always reporting the etymon and the orthoepy – the correct diction – of words.

<sup>3</sup> Discussion with Charlie Rose, 2003.

<sup>4</sup> Peter Brook, *Op. Cit.*: “You come to Mozart and find a perfect marriage between the artificial and something that is fully alive – here’s an example: the rigid pipe and the water flowing through it. But

beauty and the functionality of those tubes, but in the hope that pure water may once more run through them and that this water may bring back a thirst for so long unjustly frustrated that it has dried up in audiences.

Riccardo Muti has recently<sup>5</sup> and perhaps rather provocatively claimed that no opera staging can be better than the one that each member of the audience has in his own mind, when his imagination is stimulated exclusively by the *audible instruments* of music and words. One might agree or not, but, in fact, when we listen to an opera over the radio or on a recording, we have no choice but this: to create for ourselves a vision starting from the poetic sound. Furthermore, we know very well how far historical memory and the cult of the art form even today lean upon certain legendary disc recordings of the past (of most of which no corresponding video material exists): just *listening* to them, they have forged our taste and nurtured our *visual imagery* for decades. It is therefore essential that students make a profound and accurate study of the libretto, making the text so malleable as to furnish the singer and the listener with the necessary instruments for creating their *own* production of the opera: this preliminary study, necessary and sometimes enough to guarantee the success of a production, may be considered one of the few new frontiers possible to the *avant-garde* of stage production, given the rigid structure of Opera's market. When such a study of *interpretative diction* exists and when it is well constructed, it will cast the *spell* and work the magic; never mind the rest – whatever that may be<sup>6</sup>.

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gradually the attention begins to go more and more to the artificial until suddenly you're into sclerosis. Suddenly that pipe is taking all the attention and less and less water is trickling through it. Finally you get a fundamentally unwell and crazy society in which people forget that pipes were put into buildings for the purpose of letting the water through, and they now consider them to be works of art. People knock the walls down and admire the piping and totally forget its original purpose and function. This is what happened in many art forms, and Opera is the clearest example."

<sup>5</sup> In an interview on the occasion of the opening ceremonies of the XXVIII edition of the Ravenna Festival, 2017.

<sup>6</sup> The quotation by Federico Fellini that we opened this book with is taken from his *Block-notes di un regista* ("A director's notebook"), published by Longanesi in 1988. A whole chapter of the book is dedicated to Opera, and it was written by Fellini with the sole purpose of explaining the reasons why he never, ever agreed to direct an operatic production, in spite of the incredibly generous offers made to him at the time by the administrators of the most important Opera houses in the world (the then administrator of the Metropolitan Opera House, New York offered the director a whole trip across the United States in order to convince him: Fellini accepted the trip, but eventually turned down the commission).