

Aníbal E. CETRANGOLO, *Ópera, barcos y banderas. El melodrama y la migración en Argentina (1880-1920)*, Madrid, Biblioteca nueva, 2015, 334 pp.

This book discusses the influence of Italian migration on Argentinian identity constructions and, more specifically, the role of opera in Argentinian national imaginaries between 1880 and 1920. The argument is focused on two main processes: the reception of Italian opera in Argentina, and the influence of different Italian protagonists on the creation of a national opera language in that country at the turn of the century.

Cetrangolo splits his topic into three historical periods. First, he analyses the intellectual debates of Argentinian liberals, who admired unified Italy and propose this new country as a model of a modern and civilised nation, in opposition to their own Iberian heritage. In this first period – characterised by the belief in progress and the symbolic appropriation of European cultures and values by the urban Argentinian elite – the concern emerged of establishing Buenos Aires as part of the international operatic circuit. According to Cetrangolo the second period was defined by a massive influx of Italian economic migrants. Opera, which until then had constituted a cultural reference point for the social elites, became a national emblem for this new class of Italian workers; at the same time, several initiatives arose to create an Argentinian national operatic language. The author analyses the creative process of three of these pioneering “national operas” created by composers (and librettists) with Italian origins: *Juan Moreira* (1890) by Enrico Bernardi, *Aurora* (1908) by Héctor Panizza, and *Huemac* (1916) by Pasquale de Rogatis. The third part of the book is devoted to the analysis of progressive hostility towards all kinds of Italian musical manifestations in the elite circles of Buenos Aires. This xenophobic behaviour occurred within a conservative political movement nostalgic of Hispanic colonial times, and in response to the immigrant’s rhetoric of a “greater Italy” around the celebrations of the centenary of independence in 1910. In his analysis of *La angelical Manuelita* (1917), composed by Eduardo García-Mansilla and written in Spanish, Cetrangolo points out the paradox that this work was an epitome of the patriotic movement while its dramaturgy was strongly indebted to the influence of *Aida*.

Even if this book is not focused on Giuseppe Verdi, it offers a valuable contribution to Verdi scholarship, because it provides a lot of information about the reception and impact of Verdi’s music in Argentina. The author states that productions of Verdi’s operas travelled rapidly to

Latin America thanks to young musicians who had taken part in the world premieres of the late operas *Aida*, *Otello* and *Falstaff*, and were then involved in transatlantic tours. In Appendix 1 there is a useful list of the singers who visited Argentina (319-324). Although Verdi never travelled there, some conductors who worked with him were decisive for the diffusion of his music. In addition, certain entrepreneurs contrived double opera seasons between Italy and Argentina. In order to portray the activities of such entrepreneurs and conductors, Cetrangolo provides a study of two early productions of *Aida* in Buenos Aires: the first one in 1873, commissioned by a certain Ferrari and performed by a group of young musicians who had taken part in the world premiere of this opera; and the second one in 1912, conducted by Toscanini. According to the author, the publishing house Ricordi also played an important role in the diffusion of Verdi's most popular operas (like *Rigoletto*, *Il trovatore*, and *La traviata*) in Latin America, where it controlled not only the scores, but even the wardrobe for the productions. Furthermore, Ricordi America was created in Buenos Aires in 1922 as a branch of the Milanese headquarters. To exemplify the power of the editor and the competition between the singers, Cetrangolo reconstructs the two premieres of *Otello* in Buenos Aires: one performed by Tamagno with the authorised score of Ricordi on 6 July 1888, and another one on 12 June 1888, performed by Roberto Stagno and based on a pirate version of the score.

The associations and trade unions of Italian migrants were also crucial for the popularisation of Verdi's music. The author draws a correlation between Italian migration, the emergence of labour movements, and the creation of the Verdi myth in Argentina. Cetrangolo proposes a highly interesting and eloquent case study related to this topic, in which he analyses the musical activities of two worker associations in Buenos Aires: the *Giuseppe Verdi*, situated in the Italian worker neighbourhood of La Boca, and the *Società Unione Operai Italiani*.

Despite the fact that *Ópera, barcos y banderas* is a very readable book, it is complicated to follow Cetrangolo's line of argument. The lack of an index of names makes it difficult to locate information. Furthermore, taking into account that this book is devoted to the issue of opera and migration, there are few updated references to the cultural history of opera or the international dimension of Verdi's music. A more precise and thematic bibliography could have helped to nuance the inaccurate assertions about the uniqueness of Italian language opera in Argentina's theatres and to interpret the Argentinian phenomenon within a broader

spectrum. Cetrangolo's intensive research in the various archives unquestionably brings to light unknown materials which prove highly useful for the analysis of opera productions in Argentina. However, the quoted primary sources seem scarce and, in some cases, Cetrangolo makes broad interpretations based on fragmentary data. Nonetheless, the author manages to create some very powerful literary images, for example when he evokes the idea of progress by associating in an imaginary yet historically accurate juxtaposition, the performance of *La traviata* for the inauguration of the old Colón Theatre and the murmur of the first locomotive machines of Argentina in 1857.

Cetrangolo assumes that national identities and traditions are cultural constructions, but his narrative remains largely essentialist since he uses fixed national categories neglecting the hybrid nature of national labels proposed by the post-national approach.<sup>1</sup> In addition, the anxiety of belatedness associated with Eurocentric historiography, based upon an idea of teleological music progress, burdens the interpretative framework of this book.<sup>2</sup> Opera is of course an immanently urban spectacle, however this work, which aspires to a national scope, devotes remarkably little attention to anything that happened beyond Buenos Aires and the Colón Theatre. The author outlines some brilliant examples related to the reception of opera outside opera houses, but sadly does not develop this research path. The strong point of this book is its attempt to include neglected practices and repertoires developed in Argentina into the scholarly discussion of opera. However, Cetrangolo fails to accurately define and address his potential target readers: thus the book constantly wavers between the style of an informative essay and that of an academic historical work about opera and Italian migration in Argentina.

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<sup>1</sup> See Ignacio CORONA and Alejandro L. MADRID, "Introduction: The Postnational Turn in Music Scholarship and Music Marketing", in *Postnational Musical Identities: Cultural Production Distribution and Consumption in a Globalized Scenario*, ed. Ignacio CORONA and Alejandro L. MADRID (Lanham, Md: Lexington Books 2008), 3-22.

<sup>2</sup> For an alternative framework see Malena KUSS, "Prologue", in *Music in Latin America and the Caribbean: An Encyclopedic History*, vol. I (*Performing Beliefs: Indigenous Peoples from South America, Central America, and Mexico*), ed. Malena KUSS (Austin: University of Texas Press 2004), ix-xxvi.