

Milan, *Simon Boccanegra* and the Late-Nineteenth-Century Operatic Museum*

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Nelle gallerie dei giardini pubblici non può star tutto, perciò Milano tutta quanta sarà un'Esposizione. Apriremo i musei, le gallerie pubbliche e private, invaderemo anche le chiese per andarvi a sentire i nostri organi migliori; quanto alla musica teatrale, che non può trovare il suo posto nelle gallerie del lavoro, la sua splendida galleria ce l'abbiamo; si chiama la *Scala*, ed è una galleria di lavoro che farà sbalordire. Faremo sentire agli stranieri che oltre il sommo Verdi che essi ammirano quanto noi, abbiamo dei maestri che non fanno da burla—metteremo loro innanzi alcune delle opere meglio riuscite degli ultimi tempi, di quelle che richiedano il concorso di tutte le forze peregrine della *Scala*, cioè dei cori impareggiabili, dell'orchestra insuperata. Sarà l'Esposizione del *teatro musicale italiano*.¹

(Not everything will fit into the *Giardini pubblici* galleries, so the whole of Milan will be an Exhibition. We will open the museums, the public and private galleries, we will also invade the churches and listen to our best organs; as for operatic music, which cannot be accommodated within the work galleries, we already have a wonderful gallery; it is called *La Scala*, and it is a work gallery that will astound. We will make foreigners realise that besides the great Verdi, whom they admire as much as we do, we have masters that are anything but a joke; we will present them with some of the best operas written in recent times, those that require the coming together of all the exceptional masses of *La Scala*, which is to say its incomparable choruses, its unequalled orchestra. It will be the Exhibition of *Italian music theatre*.)

Thus did an anonymous critic of Ricordi's house journal, the *Gazzetta musicale di Milano*, fantasise about what he deemed the most appropriate op-

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¹ *Gazzetta musicale di Milano*, 36/44, 18 September 1881, 337. Translations are my own, and nineteenth-century journal articles are anonymous, unless stated otherwise.

form the politics ignited by the most fleeting and individual of human experiences, I would subscribe to the toned-down promises of cross-historical immediacy that national(ist) projects of this kind are likely to offer.

Summary

This article explores critical discourses about Verdi's revised *Simon Boccanegra* and a number of opera revivals in Milan in 1881, in connection with that year's National Industrial Exhibition. Accounts of all these events constantly negotiated an attraction to the new with burgeoning interest in the cultural past. If the Exhibition was often depicted in museum-like fashion, opera reviews encouraged peculiar strolls back in time. This heightened historical awareness paved the way to a style of criticism in which works and performances became increasingly separated. At the same time, performance events came to be investigated as 'texts' in their own right. The historiographical notion of the Operatic Museum, traditionally understood as a warehouse of imaginary musical works, could thus be redrafted on the basis of a more nuanced understanding of the late-nineteenth-century relationship between works and performances.

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