

Carlotta SORBA, *Il melodramma della nazione. Politica e sentimenti nell'età del Risorgimento*, [Bari], Laterza 2015 (Storia e società), XX + 266 pp.

The word “*melodramma*” in the title of Carlotta Sorba’s stimulating new book does not mean “opera”, as at least Italian speakers might at first understand it. It does refer instead to “a work (as a movie or play) characterized by extravagant theatricality and by the predominance of plot and physical action over characterization”, and by extension “the genre of dramatic literature constituted by such works” (to quote Merriam-Webster online). Sorba’s foremost theoretical source is Peter Brook’s famous *The melodramatic imagination: Balzac, Henry James, melodrama, and the mode of excess* (first published in 1976 and translated into Italian in 1985), and therefore her argument revolves not so much around theatre or other performative genres, but rather around a kind of melodramatic imagination, or melodramatic mode, that, she argues, was crucial for the Italian Risorgimento. She investigates how such an imagination entered Italian culture in the early nineteenth century, progressively infiltrated political discourse, and profoundly shaped the experience of the “long Forty-Eight”, the three years between 1846 and 1849 that saw the preparation, the deflagration and the aftermath of the so-called *Quarantotto* uprisings in Italy.

Sorba’s journey begins, appropriately, outside Italy, since the rise of the melodramatic mode is connected to the very significant expansion of commercial theatres in late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century Paris and London (discussed in chapter one, *Emozioni per tutti: nuovi luoghi dello spettacolo in Europa*), and to the genre that became the epitome of such theatres, *mélodrame/melodrama* (chapter two, *Un genere teatrale per la società postrivoluzionaria*). The author, however, correctly emphasizes the transnational reach of these developments, and therefore concludes both chapters from an Italian perspective. Chapter three is devoted instead to the development of a Europe-wide melodramatic imagination that went well beyond the theatre (*Tra «mélodrame» e immaginazione melodrammatica*), while the following chapter investigates how this imagination entered Italian culture in the early decades of the nineteenth century, substantially shaping conceptions of Italy’s political situation, which was narrated especially in terms of its past, the Medieval one above all (*Melodrammatico italiano: alla ricerca del pubblico tra fiction e politica*). Chapters five and six form the core of the book, and are therefore the longest, occupying a hundred pages between them. Here Sorba demonstrates how the political

discourse of the *Quarantotto* was conceived in substantially melodramatic terms; how ideas, texts and images referring to present politics were shaped by a melodramatic outlook that relied on extreme emotions, a moral manicheism, a highly spectacular vision, narratives of complete oppression and total victory, and so on. A final, shorter chapter discusses the decline of this outlook immediately after the *Quarantotto*, its return in the discourse of the nation and the retrospective retelling of the Risorgimento in the 1880s (Italian readers need only think of Edmondo De Amicis's *Cuore* to get an idea), and its important legacy to early museums dedicated to the Risorgimento as well as to early films on this theme.

Sorba's volume obviously belongs to the line of Risorgimento historiography inaugurated by Alberto M. Banti's very influential *La nazione del Risorgimento* (2000), but goes well beyond Banti's study in devoting substantial attention to kinds of sources ignored by him. Whereas Banti built his argument mostly on texts belonging to a "high" literary level, Sorba takes into prominent consideration popular literature, journalism of all kinds (by no means only political), theatrical performances, public rituals, and even fashion. Sorba also nuances Banti's analysis by emphasizing how the success of the discourse of Italy was due in significant part to the melodramatic mode through which it was disseminated. Finally, her analysis is more chronologically and geographically specific, and her stronger claims are reserved for a limited and in all sorts of way exceptional period, that of the "long Forty-Eight".

My only reservation concerns the rather broad, perhaps too broad, remit that the author grants the melodramatic sphere in the latter portion of the book, especially parts of chapter six. Whereas in previous chapters there is never any doubt that the discourses discussed by Sorba are substantially indebted to the melodramatic imagination, in this chapter what often emerges is rather a more generalized theatricality, a performative attitude to the public manifestations of the political sphere (tellingly, the adjective "melodrammatico" is used rather rarely here).

There is relatively little about opera and Verdi in *Il melodramma della nazione*, and musicological literature is less than prominent among Sorba's secondary sources – occasionally to the detriment of her argument: she would have found much of interest about the spread of *mélodrame* to Italy in Arnold Jacobshagen's *Opera semiseria: Gattungskonvergenz und Kulturtransfer im Musiktheater* (2005), for example. This does not mean that the book is of little interest to opera historians and Verdians, though: quite the contrary. For one thing, it might help usefully to distinguish Verdi's operas

of the 1840s that are strongly indebted to a melodramatic aesthetic from those that seem to owe relatively little to it: not by chance, for example, does Sorba repeatedly mention *I masnadieri*, whereas she has little to say about another Verdi opera from the same year, 1847, *Macbeth*; the same could be said about *Ernani* (melodramatic) and *Nabucodonosor* (not so much). For another, I found myself wondering about the potential connections between Sorba's melodramatic *Quarantotto* and *Luisa Miller*, a work which, as I have argued in the past, owes much to the dramaturgy and worldview of *mélodrame*, even while turning *mélodrame's* ethics and ideology upside down, and which was composed precisely in 1848-1849.

In conclusion, *Il melodramma della nazione* offers a rich and nuanced perspective on an aspect of Italian culture clearly crucial for a deeper understanding of Risorgimento discourse up to and prominently including the "long Forty-Eight". What is more, it can offer the opera historian a new and useful viewpoint from which to consider the much debated and yet still imperfectly understood relationship between theatre, including opera, and the wider cultural, social and especially political discourse in Italy during the central decades of the nineteenth century.

Emanuele Senici

*Staging Verdi and Wagner* [Proceedings of the Conference «The Staging of Verdi & Wagner Operas», Pistoia, 13–15 September 2013], edited by Naomi MATSUMOTO (Mise-en-scène, 2), Turnhout, Brepols, 2015, XIX + 384 p.

Yaël HÊCHE, «Die genaue Übereinstimmung der scenischen Vorgänge mit dem Orchester». *Un aspect de l'esthétique musicale et dramatique de Richard Wagner* (3) – Olga JESURUM, «Bella figlia dell'amore, schiavo son dei vezzi tuoi»: *scena e musica nel «Rigoletto»* (19) – Elsa MARTINELLI, *Il sangue dell'onore: il duello nelle opere di Verdi tra letteratura e messinscena* (33) – Naomi MATSUMOTO, *Charles Marshall's «dioramic» scenery: staging Verdi in Victorian London* (53) – Jürgen MAEHDER, *Form, text-setting, timbre, aura: structural aspects of Wagner's «Parsifal» score* (81) – Jürgen MAEHDER, *L'utopia del dramma musicale wagneriano: dal mito attraverso la scenotecnica verso il sogno di un teatro invisibile* (117) – Mathias AUCLAIR, *Le décor wagnérien à l'Opéra de Paris 1861–1914* (145) – Karine BOULANGER, *Janvier 1914: «Parsifal» à Paris* (161) – Claire PAOLACCI, *Les œuvres de Giuseppe Verdi et Richard Wagner à l'Opéra de Paris pendant la direction de Jacques Rouche (1915–1945)* (181) – José Ignacio SUÁREZ GARCÍA, *La puesta en escena de los estrenos wagnerianos en Madrid* (203) – Georgia KONDYLI, *Les opéras de Verdi à Smyrne (1880–1900)* (233) – Manolis SEIRAGAKIS, *Mediterraneanising the composer of the North: Richard Wagner, Constantinos Christomanos and the early modern Greek theatre* (245) – Bruno FORMENT, *Staging Verdi in the*