

Before and Besides *Werktreue*: (Re)inventing Operatic Staging at the 1930s Maggio Musicale Fiorentino

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Abstract:	<p>This article examines the role played by the Maggio Musicale Fiorentino as a kind of cultural laboratory for experiments in operatic staging in 1930s Italy. Founded in 1933, Florence's opera and arts festival was a key testing ground for 'modern' approaches both to set and costume design and to opera direction, two areas in which northern Europe (especially Germany) is normally held to have led the way, and through which the Maggio helped to reinvent Italian <i>mise-en-scène</i> as an act of independent, artistic creation. Setting the festival's overall project in the context of 1930s aesthetic, philosophical, and cultural debates about theatre, opera, and cinema, and drawing on a rich archive of as-yet-unexplored primary source materials, the article retraces an intellectual and cultural history of Italian staging c.1930 that resonates productively with several present-day critical and scholarly concerns: from changing attitudes to the nineteenth-century operatic canon, to the early stirrings of <i>Regietheater</i>, to the intertwining histories of opera and film.</p>

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Francesca Vella

Fatti entrar bene in testa, prima di tutto, questa differenza: per la regia lirica non la prima, ma anzi l'ultimissima cosa da prendere in considerazione è il 'testo'. (Voglio dire il libretto dell'opera). La regia lirica deve fondarsi *sulla partitura*, questo essendo l'autentico 'testo' corrispondente al copione del teatro di prosa.¹

(First of all, get this difference well into your head: in opera direction the 'text' – by which I mean the libretto – is not the first but the very last thing to be taken into account. Opera direction must be based *on the musical score*, this being the authentic 'text' corresponding to the script in spoken theatre.)

Writing in the theatrical journal *Scenario* in 1943, the Italian director Corrado Pavolini expressed what he saw as the key principle of operatic *regia* (direction). At the time, this art was still in its infancy: staging, at least in Italy, had only recently begun to gain traction as an independent and creative part of opera production, displacing an earlier understanding of *mise-en-scène* as the replication of established, mostly realist models. The idea that a staging could 'reinvent' an opera's visual language and simultaneously help to deliver an integrated audiovisual whole (rather than a

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¹ Corrado Pavolini, 'Lettera sulla regia lirica', *Scenario* 12/7 (1943), 249 (emphasis in original). Translations are my own unless stated otherwise.

sum of independent literary, musical, and visual parts) was nevertheless struggling to take hold in a country that had long held operatic spectacle to be centred on music and especially on voice.² In this context, Pavolini, whose professional experience spanned poetry, theatre, and both literary and film criticism, felt it necessary to emphasize what distinguished opera direction from theatre direction: a deep knowledge of and attention to the music. After his opening pronouncement, he went on to illustrate the process that takes opera from the page to the stage. The director's reading of the libretto follows careful study of the composer, musical period, and musical score in question, as well as discussions with the conductor, chorus director, and choreographer, and precedes only the conception of the scenery, costumes, lighting, and scenic movements. On the whole, a rather downgraded position for the literary text compared to that held by this same text in spoken theatre. Pavolini's words echoed almost literally those voiced a decade earlier by Guido Salvini, another early practitioner and theorizer of Italian *regia* (whom we will encounter again later in this article). Writing in 1933 in the same journal as Pavolini, Salvini had explained that 'it may seem a paradox, but before reading the libretto the director will do well to listen closely and repeatedly to the opera's music. The character of the staging must be suggested by the latter, not by the former'.³

Today, nearly a century later, Salvini's and Pavolini's admonitions may raise few eyebrows among opera practitioners and operagoers. Few of them (or us) would object to the notion that the music must be central to the staging of opera. As Emanuele Senici has pointed out in an article examining present-day debates about operatic staging, particularly the relationship between the musical and the visual dimension, time and again in the discourse of modern directors, critics, and

² For an overview of Italian staging practices from the sixteenth to the twentieth century, see *Opera on Stage*, ed. Lorenzo Bianconi and Giorgio Pestelli (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2002). For a study of opera production and spectatorship that emphasizes the increasingly commodified, reproducible character of late nineteenth-century Italian operas, see Alessandra Campana, *Opera and Modern Spectatorship in Late Nineteenth-Century Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015). Gundula Kreuzer has carried out the most important research, for Germany, on the time period that is the focus of this article. See, for example, her 'Voices from Beyond: *Don Carlos* and the Modern Stage', *Cambridge Opera Journal* 18/2 (2006), which discusses the birth of 'modern', 'interpretative' staging in the context of the 'Verdi Renaissance' in Weimar Germany.

³ 'Potrà sembrare un paradosso, ma prima di leggere il libretto, sarà bene che il regista ascolti attentamente e ripetutamente la musica di un'opera. Il carattere della regia deve esser suggerito da questa, non da quello': Guido Salvini, 'Breviario del regista lirico', *Scenari* 2/8 (1933), 395.

audiences we find a trope: the idea that the *mise-en-scène* must be ‘faithful’ to the music. The score ‘contains’ X – an orgy, a battle, a dawn, whatever – and therefore as a director or audience member I ought to stage or see staged X. The rhetoric that has shaped discussions of Western opera productions in the past few decades is one of *Werktreue*: of fidelity to the ‘work’, where the work is equated with the music and the music is understood as intimately (and permanently) wedded to the stage action. If there *is* an act of interpretation involved, it is the director’s, whose role is to make visible for the inexpert listener what the composer supposedly represented through sound.⁴

The notion that an opera’s staging ought to ‘be based on’ or ‘be suggested by’ the music, as Pavolini and Salvini put it, has not, however, always existed. As Senici explains, this notion emerged and spread mostly during the second half of the twentieth century, largely, if not only, owing to a series of technological shifts – beginning in the years around 1930 and involving electric sound recording, radio, LPs, and CDs – that made opera ever more publicly accessible as sound rather than as an audiovisual object. Hence the rhetoric of directorial fidelity *to the music*, a rhetoric that has persisted up to the present day.⁵ Before the 1930s and even throughout that decade, however, the situation was more complex. If the years c.1930 marked a turning point in the discourse on *mise-en-scène* and in technologies of operatic staging more broadly, they also, and precisely for this reason, constitute a fascinatingly liminal period in the history of staging as an idea: a period when different, often contradictory critical stances towards the relationship between an opera’s music and its visuality coexisted, and when the language and concepts of operatic *mise-en-scène* aligned in compelling ways with those of film discourse.

In order to extricate some of these factors, in this article I examine the debates that surrounded the early Maggio Musicale Fiorentino: the second (chronologically) of Fascist Italy’s two most important music festivals – the first being Venice’s Festival Internazionale di Musica

⁴ See Emanuele Senici, “‘In the Score’: Music and Media in the Discourse of Operatic *Mise-en-scène*”, *Opera Quarterly* 35/3 (2019). On the emergence of staging as a locus of interpretation, albeit one that often treats opera’s multiple constitutive ‘systems’ as tautological, see also David Levin, *Unsettling Opera: Staging Mozart, Verdi, Wagner, and Zemlinsky* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 1–35.

⁵ Senici, “‘In the Score’”, 212–14.

Contemporanea – and the most advanced laboratory on the peninsula for experiments in scenography and theatre direction. Established in 1933, the Maggio built on the experience of Vittorio Gui's Orchestra Stabile Fiorentina, which since 1928 had sought to educate Florentine audiences to a repertoire of classical, romantic, and contemporary symphonic music with which they would have been hardly familiar.⁶ The Maggio, which took place during the spring, initially on a biennial and then on an annual basis, expanded that cultural ambition by spearheading productions of both little-known and altogether new operas and theatre works, with a balance between old and contemporary repertoire that varied over the years. Summarizing the tension between tradition and innovation that characterized Fascist culture as a whole, the festival positioned itself at equal distance from the twentieth-century, non-theatrical focus of Venice's Festival di Musica Contemporanea, an offshoot of the Art Biennale, and the past-oriented, Mozart-centric approach of the Salzburger Festspiele, the Maggio's chief competitor as well as model abroad. It strove for a middle ground between those 'two absolutely opposite poles' of European music festival culture, as the composer, critic, and government functionary Mario Labroca, artistic director of the Maggio between 1936 and 1944, called them.⁷ Particularly at the beginning, its programmes centred on nineteenth-century Italian operas that had fallen out of the repertoire: the first, 1933 festival was inaugurated with Verdi's *Nabucco* in the recently renovated Politeama Vittorio Emanuele II (subsequently renamed Teatro Comunale), and comprised five other operas spanning the eighty-five or so years that separated Spontini's *La vestale* from Verdi's *Falstaff*, in addition to concerts and open-air performances of two spoken plays.⁸ Even later in the 1930s, when its programmes became more geared towards works by Respighi, Casella, Malipiero, and

⁶ See Valentina Zappacenero, 'Vittorio Gui direttore d'orchestra e operatore di cultura musicale (1907–1936)' (PhD diss., University of Florence, 2019), 70–96; and Johannes U. Müller, 'Alberto Passigli, la Stabile Orchestrale e la nascita del Maggio Musicale Fiorentino', in *1933–2003: Le ragioni di un festival. Nascita e ambiente culturale del Maggio Musicale Fiorentino*, ed. Moreno Bucci and Giovanni Vitali, *Antologia Vieusseux* 10/28 (2004).

⁷ 'due poli assolutamente opposti': Mario Labroca, 'L'inaugurazione del Maggio Musicale Fiorentino', *Il lavoro fascista*, 25 April 1933, 3.

⁸ The other operas were *La cenerentola*, *I puritani*, and *Lucrezia Borgia*. The spoken plays were *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (performed in Italian) and the sixteenth-century mystery play *La rappresentazione di Santa Uliva*.

other living composers, the Maggio's signature productions remained bel canto operas 'rethought', as we shall see, for modern times.⁹

In strictly musical and theatrical terms, then, the Maggio's goal was to reawaken Italy's 'dying' operatic tradition, by forging a distinctive solution to the contemporary, post-Puccinian operatic 'crisis' (particularly the lack of new compositions entering the canon).¹⁰ In contrast with other major opera houses and festivals subsidized by the Fascist regime, whose core repertoire consisted of popular works by Verdi, Puccini, and the *giovane scuola* (alongside living Italian composers), the Maggio focused on exhuming forgotten operas from the nation's 'glorious musical past' as well as premiering new ones.¹¹ At the same time, the festival set itself a broader politico-cultural aim within a city, Florence, that was perceived to be in decline. The Maggio co-founder and the local leader of the National Fascist Party, Alessandro Pavolini (Corrado's brother), argued that Florence's twentieth-century mission revolved around the joint promotion of its cultural, tourist, and artisanal capital.¹² In that mission the Maggio played a key role, for it stimulated fresh intellectual debate through cultural events that accompanied its concerts and productions, particularly talks given by distinguished foreign musicologists and theatre directors, and (during the war) an exhibition of theatre craft professions. What is more, the festival's organizers invested

⁹ On the early history of the Maggio, see Leonardo Pinzauti's classic *Storia del Maggio. Dalla nascita della 'Stabile Orchestrale Fiorentina' (1928) al festival del 1933* (Lucca: LIM, 1994), which incorporates material from an earlier, 1967 book; various chapters published by Fiamma Nicolodi, such as 'Guido M. Gatti e il Maggio Musicale Fiorentino', in *Lo 'sguardo lieto' di Guido M. Gatti sul Novecento musicale*, ed. Alberto Mammarella and Giancarlo Rostirolla (Naples: Loffredo, 2007); and Bucci and Vitali, eds, *1933–2003: Le ragioni di un festival*. Ben Earle briefly discusses the Maggio's connections with Fascist musical and cultural politics in his *Luigi Dallapiccola and Musical Modernism in Fascist Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), esp. 70–73, where he emphasizes the Maggio's and musical Florence's modernist and cosmopolitan attitudes. For a recent study of staging early opera at the Maggio, see Anna Tedesco, 'Monteverdi in the Garden: *L'incoronazione di Poppea* in Fascist Florence', in *Claudio Monteverdi's Venetian Operas: Sources, Performance, Interpretation*, ed. Ellen Rosand and Stefano La Via (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2022).

¹⁰ On this perceived sense of Italian operatic 'crisis' c.1900, and on Puccini's complicated relationship to it, see Alexandra Wilson, *The Puccini Problem: Opera, Nationalism, and Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

¹¹ 'glorioso passato musicale': Guido M. Gatti to G. Ricordi & C., 6 August 1932, Archivio Storico del Maggio Musicale Fiorentino (henceforth I-Fammf), 43/53. For a detailed discussion of opera and music repertoire trends in Fascist Italy, see Fiamma Nicolodi, *Musica e musicisti nel ventennio fascista* (Fiesole: Discanto, 1984).

¹² See Marco Palla, *Firenze nel regime fascista (1929–1934)* (Florence: Olschki, 1978), 231–92.

significantly in foreign publicity, and they occasionally imported as well as exported opera productions from and to top European theatres.¹³

The Maggio's commitment to cosmopolitan and modernist values of the kind that (as we will see) were displayed in its 'experimental' productions might seem at odds with the image of a country that, Futurist élan aside, has hardly occupied the historiographical headlines as a cradle of artistic, cultural, or technological innovations. Particularly in theatrical and scenic matters, early twentieth-century Italy has often been depicted as lagging behind northern European nations.¹⁴ The Maggio's role as testing ground for new approaches both to set and costume design and to theatre direction, two areas in which northern Europe (especially Germany) was supposedly leading the way, directly challenges this view. Already in the 1950s, the festival's cutting-edge reputation was well established: in a review of a half-century of scenographic innovations, the art critic Vincenzo Costantini reflected that Florence's Maggio had been 'the liveliest and most advanced centre for modern stagings' on the entire peninsula.¹⁵ In Costantini's as in earlier, 1930s accounts, the expression 'modern stagings' nevertheless has far from straightforward meanings. We can take it to denote the festival's repeated attempts to 'brush up' operas whose old literary, musical, and visual languages might have estranged them from twentieth-century audiences by means of scenic 'updatings' that could make them communicate anew to people. As painter Cipriano Efisio Oppo put it, 'it was a matter of making twentieth-century artists interpret operas of the purest nineteenth century'.¹⁶ Yet what did such 'brush-ups' or 'updatings' (both terms found in reviews from the period) exactly involve on a practical and conceptual level? And what cultural values were at stake

¹³ In 1935 and 1937, for example, the productions of Rameau's *Castor et Pollux* and Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande* were brought in from Paris's Opéra, while the Maggio's 1935 *Norma* in turn toured to Paris and Antwerp.

¹⁴ In his German-focused account of operatic staging between 1900 and 1945, Evan Baker, for example, argues that 'Italian and French opera houses showed little progress in scenic styles': Baker, *From the Score to the Stage: An Illustrated History of Continental Opera Production and Staging* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 308.

¹⁵ 'il centro più vivo e progredito nei moderni allestimenti': Vincenzo Costantini, 'La scenografia e la scenotecnica nei teatri lirici', in *Cinquanta anni di opera e balletto in Italia*, ed. Guido M. Gatti (Rome: Bestetti, 1954), 65.

¹⁶ 'Si trattava di far interpretare da artisti del Novecento, opere del più puro ottocento': Cipriano Efisio Oppo, 'Le scene del "Maggio Fiorentino"', *Scenario* 2/6 (1933), 281.

when operas of the purest bel canto tradition were presented in unseen and unforeseen visual guises?

In what follows, I am less interested in offering an extended analysis of individual productions at the Maggio than in examining the festival's overall project in the context of 1930s aesthetic, philosophical, and cultural debates on theatre, opera, and cinema. Drawing on a rich archive of as-yet-unexplored primary source materials – public addresses, essays, critical reviews, and letters connected to the first editions of the festival – I recover an intellectual and cultural history of Italian staging in a precise location (albeit one with numerous international links) and at a precise moment in time. My primary focus, therefore, is on discourse, even though the views of selected theatre and opera practitioners and cultural administrators occasionally help to illuminate aspects of the theory and practice of *mise-en-scène* that could not emerge fully from press criticism alone. As we shall see, contemporary accounts of the Maggio's first productions already point to an incipient primary role of the music in shaping a staging. But the categories used to describe what we might call opera's 'audiovisual complex' – a complex that was also, and crucially, central to film – were still wildly heterogeneous, witness the intricate patchwork quilt of contemporary critical terminology. Ultimately, I argue that the questions raised by the 1930s Florentine debates resonate productively with a number of present-day critical and scholarly concerns: from changing attitudes to the nineteenth-century operatic canon, to the reciprocal influences between opera and film, to the merits and demerits of so-called *Regietheater* – 'radical' stagings, normally of well-known works, that reject visual authenticity and seek to create boldly up-to-date connections with contemporary political or social issues.

Reframing the Nineteenth Century

Let us, then, start with some background. Much of the Maggio's early artistic and cultural mission can be gleaned from a letter that the musicologist and critic Guido Gatti, a central organizer of the first, 1933 festival, sent to the German opera director Carl Ebert (a promoter of the 'Verdi

Renaissance' in Weimar Germany) at the start of their Florentine collaboration. Shortly after inviting Ebert to direct *Nabucco* and *La vestale* at the Maggio, Gatti introduced him to the aims of the festival:

per la prima volta noi tentiamo una messa in scena di gusto moderno di opere dell'800 in un grandissimo teatro e dinanzi a un pubblico normale. La Sua valida collaborazione ci porterebbe certamente un prezioso contributo per la realizzazione di questo nostro disegno di rinnovamento della messinscena dell'opera lirica in Italia.¹⁷

(for the first time we attempt a modern-taste *mise-en-scène* of nineteenth-century operas in a huge theatre and before a normal audience. Your worthy collaboration would certainly make a valuable contribution to the realization of our plan of renovating operatic *mise-en-scène* in Italy.)

In his former role as artistic director of Riccardo Gualino's Teatro di Torino (1925–31), Gatti had already been involved in efforts to renew Italian stage practice in the so-called *teatri d'arte* (art theatres) of the 1920s. He had not been alone in that endeavour: the aforementioned Vittorio Gui and Guido Salvini, a conductor and a director respectively, had collaborated with him in Turin, and like him they brought their experience of Gualino's forward-looking theatre to Florence.¹⁸ In many ways, the Maggio was inspired by the 1920s art theatre productions: although it sought to overcome those productions' elitism by reaching out (at least in theory) to a broader mass audience, it shared with them a near-wholesale rejection of naturalistic stagings – what Gatti's successor, Labroca, later

¹⁷ Guido M. Gatti to Carl Ebert (draft letter), 8 October 1932, I-Fammf, 38/186. The committee structure of the early Maggio was particularly complex, with several overlapping roles. In 1933, Gatti featured as *segretario generale* and was especially responsible for decisions relating to *mise-en-scène*. See Nicolodi, 'Guido M. Gatti e il Maggio Musicale Fiorentino'.

¹⁸ See Stefano Baldi, Nicoletta Betta, and Cristina Trinchero, eds, *Il Teatro di Torino di Riccardo Gualino (1925–1930)*. *Studi e documenti* (Lucca: LIM, 2013).

described as ‘a sense of scenic boldness rather than veristic conservatism’.¹⁹ Realism on stage, particularly on the operatic stage, was still the norm in Italy. Save for a few visually and conceptually cutting-edge productions, most notably La Scala’s 1923 *Tristano e Isotta* (conducted by Arturo Toscanini, with sets and direction by the Swiss theatre reformer Adolphe Appia), Italian theatres – first and foremost La Scala – continued to abide by late nineteenth-century stage traditions. These traditions involved a search for visual splendour, the combined use of (often pre-existent) painted and three-dimensional sets, and above all geographical and historical exactitude: a credible representation of real places in real times.²⁰

The Maggio ushered in new ideas and new practices. To begin with, it launched a pictorial approach to scenography that, while rooted in the history of Italian staging since the Renaissance and complemented in Florence by contributions from architects, took fresh impetus primarily from contemporary painting. As Labroca explained after the 1933 debut of *La vestale*, designed by the magic realist painter Felice Casorati, ‘those who nowadays still enthuse over scenery that has a photographic character (and unfortunately they are the managers of our principal theatres) are at last invited to change their methods and approaches’.²¹ In a festival that sought to position itself at the forefront of European stagecraft and even to compete with the prestige of Salzburg’s Festspiele, there was no longer a place for lifelike stage pictures. The modernist set and costume designs that artists such as Giorgio de Chirico, Mario Sironi, Casorati, Oppo, and others created for Florence’s pre-WWII productions mostly abandoned realistic depiction for freely evocative forms and colours.²² Their sketches and models, which were translated by specialized artisans into flat,

¹⁹ ‘un senso di audacia scenica anziché di conservatorismo veristico’: Mario Labroca to Veniero Colasanti, 18 January 1938, I-Fammf, 145/89.

²⁰ This stagnation in Italian (and French) staging c.1900 is conveyed, and perhaps over-emphasized, in Baker, *From the Score to the Stage*.

²¹ ‘Quelli che si entusiasmano ancora oggi a scene di carattere fotografico (purtroppo si tratta dei dirigenti dei nostri maggiori teatri) sono invitati a cambiare finalmente metodi e sistemi’: Mario Labroca, ‘Il “Maggio Musicale Fiorentino”’. La recita della *Vestale*, *Il lavoro fascista*, 7 May 1933, 3.

²² Some of these set and costume designs have been published in various books and exhibition catalogues about the Maggio, such as Raffaele Monti, ed, *Visualità del ‘Maggio’. Bozzetti, figurini e spettacoli 1933–1979* (Florence: De Luca, 1979), and Moreno Bucci, *I disegni del Teatro del Maggio Musicale Fiorentino. Inventario – I (1933–1943)* (Florence: Olschki, 2010).

painted scenery even more often than three-dimensional structures, followed the path opened by Sergei Diaghilev's Ballets Russes, a company with which de Chirico and some of the Maggio administrators had directly collaborated. In Florence, however, the painters' work was targeted on opera, a genre that posed different challenges to staging compared to dance and that – crucially – had a much firmer place in Italians' sense of cultural identity.

Indeed, from the outset the pictorial experiments conducted at the Maggio sought to 'rejuvenate' forgotten gems of the Italian bel canto tradition: works by Bellini, Donizetti, early Verdi, and so forth.²³ As mentioned earlier, and as observed by musicologist Massimo Mila at the time, what distinguished Florence's festival from other European festivals was its rejection of the 'anti-nineteenth-century polemic' that had co-opted many artists and musicians following World War I, a polemic that had also resurfaced in 1932 after the publication of a 'Manifesto of Italian Musicians for the Tradition of Nineteenth-Century Romantic Art' (a rallying cry against modernist tendencies).²⁴ A celebration of *Ottocento* Italian *melodramma*, the Maggio's 1933 all-historical opera programme was greeted by some with a 'suspicion of anachronism', with a fear, even, that a disinterment of works of yesteryear might have little to offer in modern times.²⁵ The Ricordi publishing firm, always keen to promote rental of works that were still under its copyright protection, was itself far from enthusiastic about the limited space that operas by living composers (Pizzetti, Casella, and Lualdi, for example) were granted in the festival's early programming.²⁶ Yet, Mila contended, the Maggio was thereby proving that critics and musicians alike were finally 'starting to rediscover, from the new vantage point of posterity, the musical nineteenth century' – a

²³ 'ringiovanire': Cipriano Giachetti, 'Battaglia scenografica', *Il lavoro fascista*, 15 June 1933, 3.

²⁴ 'polemica antiottocentesca': Massimo Mila, 'I primi spettacoli del Maggio Musicale Fiorentino. *Nabucco* e *Lucrezia Borgia* al Politeama rinnovato', *L'illustrazione italiana*, 7 May 1933, 703. The 'Manifesto di musicisti italiani per la tradizione dell'arte romantica dell'Ottocento' appeared in *Il popolo d'Italia*, *La stampa* and *Il corriere della sera* on 17 December 1932, and was signed, among others, by opera composers such as Pizzetti, Zandonai, and Respighi.

²⁵ This 'sospetto di anacronismo' was forcefully put to rest by the anonymous author of 'Bilancio del "Maggio Musicale"', *Illustrazione toscana e dell'Etruria*, July 1933.

²⁶ See the 1932 correspondence between the Ricordi firm (represented by Carlo Clausetti and Renzo Valcarengi) and Gatti, in I-Fammf, 43/52–4.

process that in Florence involved devising innovative approaches both to opera direction and to set and costume design.²⁷

Notwithstanding support in many critical quarters, the process of delivering change proved far from straightforward. In upholding the cause of ‘modern’, ‘up-to-date’ stagings – stagings that looked different from the ‘rancid scenographies’ of tradition²⁸ – the Maggio’s organizers were subverting aesthetic values at the same time that they were unsettling delicate balances in the operatic industry and economy. The set and costume designs created by the festival’s early painters (and, to a lesser extent, by architects such as Pietro Aschieri) were so unconventional that they went down poorly with the firms that were in charge of realizing them. When asked to deliver Sironi’s costumes for *Lucrezia Borgia* (1933), Milan’s Casa del Teatro Chiappa complained that it was not possible to hand-paint them one by one, treating them as works of art – what these costumes were – rather than works of costume-making – what they should have been. The production had necessarily to involve ‘industrial’ and not ‘artistic’ means, but this more economically minded, serial approach to costume-making seemed highly inappropriate to the artistic and artisanal values promoted by the Maggio.²⁹ For similar reasons, Primo Conti’s eccentric costume designs for Verdi’s *Un ballo in maschera* (1935) were rejected by the internationally renowned costume firm Casa d’Arte Caramba (founded by Luigi Sapelli in Milan in 1909) on the grounds that ‘due to the special character of the sketches . . . the costumes themselves would be difficult for us to use . . . [and] without possibilities of future exploitation’.³⁰ Staging, at least as far as costumes go (and indeed well beyond that), was evidently still understood as an act of near-mechanical repetition. The nineteenth-century notion that an opera’s *mise-en-scène* could or even should be reproducible still

²⁷ ‘cominciano a riscoprire, dal punto di vista nuovo della posterità, l’Ottocento musicale’: Mila, ‘I primi spettacoli’, 703.

²⁸ ‘rancidume scenografico’: Guido Gatti, cited in Nicolodi, ‘Guido M. Gatti e il Maggio Musicale Fiorentino’, 71.

²⁹ Casa del Teatro Chiappa to Guido Gatti, 22 March 1933, I-Fammf, 38/72.

³⁰ ‘dato il carattere speciale dei figurini . . . i costumi stessi sarebbero di difficile utilizzazione per noi . . . senza possibilità di sfruttamento per l’avvenire’: Casa d’Arte Caramba to Ente Autonomo del Teatro Comunale, 14 March 1935, I-Fammf, 94/54.

permeated theatrical ideals, even if the gradual disappearance of staging manuals from the 1920s or 1930s, the time when revisionary approaches to staging started to emerge, suggests that the ‘operatic culture of reiteration as repetition’ that (at least in major theatres) these documents had helped to sustain was beginning to dissolve.³¹ Staging as a ‘reading’ or ‘interpretation’ of a well-known opera now became a possibility in both theory and practice, in the wake of a new, director-driven conception of *mise-en-scène* as ‘an art in its own right’.³²

By marking a decisive shift away from established stage practices, the Maggio helped to invent *mise-en-scène* as an act of independent creation. The festival inaugurated a new age in the history of Italian scenography and theatre direction, triggering long-term developments similar to those that had been unfolding in other countries – especially Germany, where the interwar ‘Verdi-Renaissance’ did much to blow the dust off little-known Verdi operas by presenting them under new, modernist scenic guises.³³ In Florence, although such works as Bellini’s *I puritani* or Donizetti’s *Lucrezia Borgia* would have easily befitted what Oppo called ‘il modulo ottocentesco veristico’ – the nineteenth-century realist approach to staging – the fact that they had long been absent from Italian stages meant that they could be rebranded according to new visual styles.³⁴ In Labroca’s view,

³¹ Levin, *Unsettling Opera*, 166. On the emergence of opera direction roughly at the same time that staging manuals declined, see Emilio Sala, ‘Dalla *mise en scène* ottocentesca alla regia moderna: problemi di drammaturgia musicale’, *Musica/Realtà* 28/85 (2008), 50. Giovacchino Forzano’s *disposizioni sceniche* for Puccini’s *Il tabarro* and *Suor Angelica* were published by Ricordi in the early 1920s, while in France Albert Carré’s manuscript *livret de mise en scène* for Henry Février’s *La Femme nue* was produced as late as 1932. On the complex textual status of nineteenth-century staging manuals, see in particular Roger Parker, *Leonora’s Last Act: Essays in Verdian Discourse* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 126–48. Scholars have long debated the extent to which these manuals should be understood as prescriptive or descriptive. Sophie Horrocks has recently nuanced the view that the French *livrets* were always intended to encourage preservationist attitudes to staging. She has suggested that the earliest, late-1820s *livrets* allowed and even encouraged flexibility and variation. See Horrocks, ‘Performing for the Provinces: Touring Theatre Troupes and the French Political Imaginary, 1824–64’ (PhD diss., Durham University, 2024). For some thoughts on the problem of reviving ‘original’ stagings, see James Hepokoski, ‘Staging Verdi’s Operas: The Single, “Correct” Performance’, in *Verdi in Performance*, ed. Alison Latham and Roger Parker (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

³² Carolyn Abbate and Roger Parker, *A History of Opera: The Last 400 Years* (London: Penguin, 2015), 33.

³³ See Kreuzer, ‘Voices from Beyond’.

³⁴ Oppo, ‘Le scene del “Maggio Fiorentino”’, 282. *Lucrezia Borgia* and *I puritani* had fallen out of fashion by the late nineteenth century and since after WWI respectively. See Roger Parker and Rosie Ward, critical edition of *Lucrezia Borgia* (Milan: Ricordi, 2019), lxxvii; and Fabrizio Della Seta, critical edition of *I puritani*, 3 vols. (Milan: Ricordi, 2013), I, xxxi.

adopting ‘a scenic frame of our day’ rather than realistic scenery constituted ‘a way of looking critically at the past’, a means of ‘indicating the possible relationships between the operas of yesterday and the sensibility of today’.³⁵ Other observers reckoned that it was the historical distance itself that required stagings that bridged the gap with the present, an idea that again resonated with recent German endeavours to reconnect audiences to opera through experimental *Regie*.³⁶ For example, in a comprehensive review of the joint significance of the Maggio and the first Mostra Nazionale di Scenografia, also held in Florence in 1933, the art critic Mario Tinti summarized the festival’s pilot project as an attempt to create ‘a scenic background of up-to-date, if not most current, taste that almost worked as a junction between the style of those [nineteenth-century] operas and the contemporary aesthetic sensibility’.³⁷ The modern set designer and the director, two figures who were becoming more and more prominent in opera production and who increasingly collaborated with each other, served as mediators between different ages. They made old works speak again to present audiences.

Interpreting staging, staging interpretation

I will return to the role played by directors and their complex relationship with other opera professionals later, but for now suffice it to say that their presence in Italy was brand new in the 1930s, and that their incipient recognition in the opera production chain was the result of assimilation of foreign practices. How to explain, we might ask, those insistent critical and

³⁵ ‘una cornice scenica che è dei nostri giorni e che rappresenta già di per sé una maniera di guardare criticamente il passato’; ‘indicare i rapporti possibili tra l’opera di ieri e la sensibilità di oggi’: Mario Labroca, ‘La prima del *Nabucco* al Politeama’, *Il lavoro fascista*, 25 April 1933, 3; and Labroca, ‘Il programma dei festeggiamenti’, *Il lavoro fascista*, 26 April 1935, 3.

³⁶ See Gundula Kreuzer, ‘Zurück zu Verdi: The “Verdi Renaissance” and Musical Culture in the Weimar Republic’, *Studi verdiani* 13 (1998), 148.

³⁷ ‘uno sfondo scenico di un gusto aggiornato, se non attualissimo, che servisse quasi di giunzione fra lo stile di quelle opere musicali e la sensibilità estetica contemporanea’: Mario Tinti, ‘La nuova scenografia a Firenze’, *Illustrazione toscana e dell’Etruria*, July 1933, 7. Another critic similarly commented that recent developments in set design meant that operas could now be presented ‘with a scenic fiction matching today’s sensibility, with a visual apparatus that is artistic and proper to our time’ (‘con una finzione scenica intonata alla sensibilità d’oggi, con un apparato artistico visivo e proprio del tempo’): Il Capo-ronda, ‘Conclusioni sul “Maggio”’, *Il Bargello*, 30 June 1935, 3.

managerial claims about the virtues of what Gatti had described to Ebert as ‘modern-taste’ stagings? And what did such stagings exactly involve and imply aside from a departure from realistic costumes and scenery?

If we consider the matter from a Maggio administrator’s perspective, some of the reasons for the ‘presentist’ rhetoric will immediately become clear. Whenever Labroca warned his painters and architects that every single opera at the Maggio must have a ‘special scenic preparation’, or that the festival is one in which ‘scenography is in the vanguard’, or that ‘rapid scene changes are an absolute necessity for our performances’, he was simultaneously elevating Florence and its Teatro Comunale above all other Italian cities and theatres, where naturalistic scenery still reigned supreme, and putting them into dialogue with the more advanced northern European stages of not only opera but also theatre.³⁸ For spoken-theatre developments could drive change in opera as well, at a time when operatic staging values seemed stagnant and staging practices unable to renew themselves – an aspect of the art form’s broader perceived ‘crisis’. The ‘bursts of innovation’ of spoken theatre manifested themselves at the aforementioned Prima Mostra Nazionale di Scenografia, an event curated by the leading theorist and theatre practitioner Anton Giulio Bragaglia and held near-simultaneously with the first Maggio.³⁹ Aside from rekindling historical debates about the pros and cons of two- and three-dimensional scenery (unlike the Maggio’s painters, the Mostra’s exhibitors favoured Appia- or Craig-influenced set design), the exhibition exposed opera’s scenographic lagging-behind-ness compared to spoken theatre, while also drawing attention to modern theatre technologies that could boost precisely the new, ‘creative’ approaches to opera direction pursued by the Maggio.⁴⁰

³⁸ ‘una speciale preparazione scenica’: Mario Labroca to Giovanni Muzio, 5 October 1937, I-Fammf, 145/139. ‘la scenografia è all’avanguardia’: Labroca to Marcello Piacentini, 20 September 1937, I-Fammf, 145/162. ‘quei solleciti cambiamenti di scena che costituiscono una necessità assoluta per le nostre esecuzioni’: Labroca to Veniero Colasanti, 18 January 1938, I-Fammf, 145/89.

³⁹ ‘conati innovatori’: damis, ‘Esperienze e orizzonti della scenografia moderna’, *La nazione*, 27 April 1938, 6.

⁴⁰ See Tinti, ‘La nuova scenografia’, and Bragaglia, ‘Scenografia moderna’, *Comoedia* 15/6 (1933). As Moreno Bucci has noted, none of the artists who took part in the Mostra participated in the Maggio, at least during the first decade of the festival’s existence, except for Bragaglia, who directed Rossini’s *Il signor Bruschino* in

One of these technologies was the revolving stage. Known in Italy as *palcoscenico girevole*, it had been introduced in the Western world in Germany in the 1890s, subsequently reaching Italian theatres in the mid-1920s.⁴¹ Ebert, who as a Nazi exile from 1933 became a leading director figure not only in Florence but also on the international scene (among other things, he was a founding member of Britain's Glyndebourne Festival in 1934), was a staunch supporter of it. At the 1937 Maggio, he did all that he could to obtain a revolving stage for *Luisa Miller*. In one of the few detailed accounts we have of a contemporary director's views on the function and challenges of Italian operatic *regia*, Ebert explained to his assistant Emil Rameau that act two of Verdi's opera, which involves three sets, is the 'stumbling block' from a staging point of view, and that it would benefit from an instantaneous or very rapid set transformation between scenes five and six in particular. In an act that lacks the dramatic continuity or concision of those that precede it and follow it, 'direction and set design', Ebert declared, 'must cover the weaknesses of the drama and the music'.⁴² After considering unifying the two scenes through a single set and after discussing a series of potential musical cuts with Vittorio Gui, Ebert came to the conclusion that an opera's dramatic weaknesses cannot be eliminated: they must be faced head-on and turned into a strength through the *mise-en-scène*, in this case by using a revolving stage (or, failing that, three big trollies) to expedite a crucial set change and thus enhance the musical-dramatic thrust of the entire act.⁴³

Ebert was dealing in a pragmatic manner with what he perceived to be the shortcomings of a particular work, in an account that furthermore reveals how a technical innovation arose (or, at least, was brought into place in this particular theatrical context) for a specific aesthetic purpose.

1937. See Bucci, 'I pittori da cavalletto—scenografi al Maggio Musicale Fiorentino (1933–1943). Figure, aspetti e problemi della scenografia lirica' (Laurea diss., University of Florence, 1978–79), 80–1.

⁴¹ According to Guido Salvini, it was first, tentatively, used at Milan's Piccola Canobbiana in 1924; see Salvini, 'Il palcoscenico girevole', *Comoedia* 13/10 (1931). By the early 1930s, several larger Italian theatres had installed it and used it also for opera, although it continued to be viewed with suspicion by some critics because it limited panoramic views and the space available for action; see, for example, Giachetti, 'Battaglia scenografica', and Gianandrea Gavazzeni, 'Cronache musicali. Il Maggio Musicale Fiorentino', *Emporium* 78/463 (1933).

⁴² 'Hier muss also durch Regie und Bühnenbild die dramatische und musikalische Schwäche verdeckt werden': Carl Ebert to Emil Rameau, 27 February 1937, I-Fammf, 116/98.

⁴³ See the Italian translation of Ebert's letter (presumably to Mario Labroca) of 18 March 1937, I-Fammf, 116/514.

Yet his remarks about the ‘compensatory’ powers of direction applied to opera more generally. Opera itself – one argument went – was no longer of the time, was no longer speaking to or believable to modern audiences. Direction seemed to offer a remedy to one of the inherent weaknesses of this ‘outdated’ art form: the fact that the aging process affects the different components of a work differently. In 1938, Guido Salvini, who had served as *direttore dell’allestimento scenico* at the first Maggio and had also curated a few productions of his own, gave a speech on modern opera direction, a subject which now (five years after his pronouncement cited at the start of this article) he examined precisely through the lens of this widening double divide: between opera and its audiences on the one hand, and between libretto, music, and visuals on the other. Whereas the libretto was once enough to engross listeners and persuade them of the truthfulness of what they saw and heard on stage, now, Salvini opined, the task of reconciling them to a work’s dramatic veracity fell entirely on the music – or, more precisely, on the *staging* of it. Among the duties of the modern operatic *regista*, a term coined in Italy only in 1932, was to approach old works with such a ‘purely musical spirit’ that they would become dramatically convincing again in an altogether new age.⁴⁴ Hence the need for suitable, music-informed direction plans that would allow linguistically distant masterpieces to strike a chord with what Labroca, Tinti, and other opera administrators and critics of the time called modern ‘sensitivity’.

Ebert and Salvini, then, directly addressed the problem of what an (Italian) operatic staging should ‘do’. All of this said, it is important to note that, with the partial exception of Ebert, who in his correspondence proffered numerous instructions on how to coordinate musical and scenic effects, neither Salvini nor other directors or commentators revolving around the early Maggio were clear as to how, in practice, they thought music should inform a director’s stage vision. Their vagueness about the mechanics of opera’s audiovisual complex bolsters Senici’s point that it was

⁴⁴ ‘spirito puramente musicale’: Guido Salvini, ‘La regia moderna del melodramma’, in *Atti del terzo congresso internazionale di musica, Firenze, 30 aprile–4 maggio 1938* (Florence: Le Monnier, 1940), 115. The term ‘regia’ was coined by Enrico Rocca in 1931, and was then popularized, together with the related term ‘regista’, by Bruno Migliorini’s article ‘Varo di due vocaboli’, *Scenario* 1/1 (1932).

only as the twentieth century progressed, and indeed largely in its second half, that so-called fidelity to the score became central to the discourse of *mise-en-scène*. Yet it is precisely here – here in these 1930s repeated assertions that an opera’s visual apparatus *must* move with the times to respond to changed aesthetic and cultural circumstances – that we can spot the earliest signs of an emerging new rhetoric and aesthetics, and here, too, that the complexity of retrospectively unpacking the Maggio’s operation lies.

For from our twenty-first-century perspective we may be tempted to read Labroca’s, Tinti’s, or Salvini’s words (to mention just three voices in the chorus of 1930s reformers) all too easily through the lens of latter-day discourse about *Regietheater*. This type of ‘strong’, revisionary productions, which seek to make old works newly relevant through radical plot and scenic revisions, typically targets operatic classics, although their ideological and aesthetic premises can also be applied to rediscoveries of little-known works. Early nineteenth-century Italian number operas are often sidelined in favour of works driven by a greater musical and dramatic realism.⁴⁵ Furthermore, *Regietheater* (or more precisely *Regieoper*) can indicate a way of ‘reinterpreting opera generally’, a broader, more neutral understanding of the term that harks back to ‘creative’ notions of staging born, under the influence of modernist painting, during the interwar period.⁴⁶ The discourse around the Maggio’s first *misés-en-scène* resonates with some of these concerns but not others. First, there was that widespread perception, best captured by Salvini, that it was Italian opera as an art form even more than particular works (works that, moreover, were initially primarily number operas) that needed regeneration, needed rescuing from its out-dated-ness through ‘modern’, ‘up-to-date’ stagings. The ‘rejuvenation’ had a crucial political and cultural significance, justified on the grounds that *melodramma* itself risked losing touch with the times. Furthermore, during a period when the musical score had not yet become quite as fetishized in staging discourse

⁴⁵ See Mary Ann Smart, ‘Resisting Rossini, or Marlon Brando Plays Figaro’, *Opera Quarterly* 27/2–3 (2011), and Clemens Risi, ‘Opera in Performance: “Regietheater” and the Performative Turn’, *Opera Quarterly* 35/1–2 (2019).

⁴⁶ Abbate and Parker, *A History of Opera*, 524.

as it would be in the later twentieth century, how could the Maggio's directors defend their scenic 'updatings'? As the subtlest scholarly writers on *Regietheater* have remarked, although 'strong' *mises-en-scène* supposedly offer an aesthetics of aggressive change, they leave the foundations of modern theories of musical interpretation unimpaired. *Regietheater* works under a 'double standard': fidelity to the composer's score and intentions, and freedom to alter, purportedly out of respect for these, the opera's visual text.⁴⁷ In 1930s Florence, the aesthetic principles that ought to govern opera's audiovisual complex on stage were nevertheless far from agreed upon, and it is precisely the surplus of positions and values that allows us to glimpse a new discourse on staging in the making, as well as to understand its intersections (on which more shortly) with the discourses of other arts.

To get to the heart of the matter: contemporary 'interpretations' of operas both forgotten and canonic (on the few occasions when the latter were staged) were widely and deeply examined, yet the nature of that concept, *interpretazione*, remains elusive. The term appears time and again in 1930s accounts both by critics and by those involved in the Maggio's productions: it often serves to validate the new, 'creative' approach to staging. Broadly speaking, 'interpretation' stands in opposition to repetition, which is what the old-type, naturalistic *mises-en-scène* supposedly offered. The newly emergent director was, by the same token, an 'interpreter' for those who wanted his status to be recognized alongside the conductor's.⁴⁸ Occasionally, 'interpretation' referred to the work of intellectual 'penetration' that preceded an opera's material realization: it was synonymous with the conceptual plan, produced by the director, that allowed the work to acquire meaningful stage life.⁴⁹ But it could also signify the opposite: the set designer's more practical task of

⁴⁷ Richard Taruskin, 'Setting Limits', in *The Danger of Music and Other Anti-Utopian Essays* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 459–60.

⁴⁸ See [Guido] G[atti], 'Scene e musica dell'opera', *La Rassegna musicale* 6/5–6 (1933).

⁴⁹ Salvini, 'La regia moderna del melodramma', 115. In another essay, focused specifically on the role of the modern spoken-theatre director, Salvini argues that 'direction means interpretation and realization of the performance understood in its wider meaning' ('regia vuol dire interpretazione e realizzazione dello spettacolo inteso nel suo piu vasto significato'). Salvini, 'Vecchia e nuova regia: Come Reinhardt vede Pirandello', *Comoedia* 16/6 (1934), 11.

deciphering the director's ideas before translating them into visible scenery and stage effects.⁵⁰

Needless to say, this primarily mental or cognitive work, however attributed or understood, could lead both to 'free state-of-the-art interpretation[s]', to scenes that had an 'absolutely original look', and to outright 'errors': misjudgements of the literary and musical text, with a consequent failure to capture the work's true spirit.⁵¹ What is worth emphasizing here is that, in the discourse of the time, 'interpretation' pertained primarily to the visual domain – or, better still, to that fraught grey area that was (and still is) the contact zone between music and staging.

Language matters

The most revealing passages in contemporary reviews of the Maggio's productions are indeed those that entail comments also on the music. If in the nineteenth century, as Mercedes Viale Ferrero has observed, scenery, costumes, and lighting were typically discussed separately from musical matters, in a critical split (we might add) that reflected a prevailing perception of Italian operatic spectacle as constituted by separate components rather than as a unified audiovisual whole, by the 1930s music had started to come to the fore as a central and guiding factor in both conceiving and evaluating a *mise-en-scène*.⁵² Already in 1921, Appia had declared that 'the musical score is the sole interpreter for the director', a principle that he put into practice in a handful of operatic performances which he directed, but that would enter the rhetoric of staging stably only after World War II.⁵³ Throughout the 1930s, some foreign directors active at the Maggio adopted similar positions. In a 1933 speech on 'Moderne Opernregie', Ebert asserted that the director must always find 'the appropriate scenic

⁵⁰ See Virgilio Marchi, 'Introduzione alla scenotecnica', *Scenario* 1/5 (1932), 39; and, published in the postwar period but reflecting the author's unchanged views, Anton Giulio Bragaglia, 'Scenografia del Novecento', in *Tempi e aspetti della scenografia* (Turin: ERI, 1954), 225.

⁵¹ 'una libera, modernissima interpretazione', 'un aspetto assolutamente originale': [Unsigned], 'Il lieto inizio del "Maggio Musicale Fiorentino" all'augusta presenza della Principessa del Piemonte. Una eccezionale edizione del *Nabucco*: la realizzazione scenografica; l'esecuzione dell'opera', *La tribuna*, 25 April 1933, 7. 'errori essenziali di interpretazione': A[niceto] Del Massa, 'Il Maggio Musicale. La prima rappresentazione de *Il Vascello fantasma*', *La nazione*, 26 May 1939, 6.

⁵² See Mercedes Viale Ferrero, 'Stage and Set', in *Opera on Stage*, 32.

⁵³ Adolphe Appia, cited in Senici, "'In the Score'", 216.

rhythm for the curve of the action outlined in the score'.⁵⁴ Lecturing on the same subject five years later, the superintendent of Munich's Bayerisches Staatstheater, Oskar Walleck, an ardent Nazi who directed four opera productions in Florence in the lead-up to and during the war, fundamentally agreed with Ebert. He claimed that 'from the score alone, if he knows how to read it as a revelation for the scenic design, the director will receive ideas, groupings, and many nuances'.⁵⁵ Ebert's and Walleck's pronouncements, which recall (in a more detailed form) the admonitions of Salvini's and Pavolini's cited at the start of this article, like them prefigure the *Werktreue* rhetoric that was going to become increasingly widespread in the second half of the century, once the ideologies of opera as sound and director as listener-interpreter had become fully and simultaneously established, and once the forces of canonization had built an Operatic Museum centred on a restricted set of familiar old works. Although this last pillar of operatic *Werktreue* had not yet been fully laid in the 1930s, both Ebert and Walleck supported an intimate allegiance between music and visuals: an allegiance that, even when not conceived necessarily in terms of a duplicative or tautological relationship – the score 'contains' X, therefore I must stage or see X – clearly framed the score as the source for all staging decisions. Something similar can be said of the discourse that emerges from Italian writings. Crucially, however, 1930s Italian commentators had no one single way of capturing in words opera's audiovisual complex. Their vocabulary, which (as we shall see in the next section) constantly recalled that of film critics, was extremely varied, and their word choices are significant precisely because of their distinct conceptual implications.

The critical lexicon revolves around a series of semantic poles. First, we find terms that cast the relationship between music and staging in terms of a movement from inside out: 'estrazione' (extraction) and 'estrinsecazione scenica' (scenic externalization) each suggest that the substance of

⁵⁴ 'in der Partitur vorgzeichnete Kurve der Handlung den entsprechenden szenischen Rythmus zu finden': Carl Ebert, 'Moderne Opernregie', in *Atti del primo congresso internazionale di musica, Firenze 30 aprile–4 maggio 1933* (Florence: Le Monnier, 1935), 107.

⁵⁵ 'Aus der Partitur allein, sofern er sie als Offenbarung für die szenische Gestaltung zu lesen versteht, wird der Regisseur Einfälle, Gruppierungen und viele Nuancen empfangen': Oskar Walleck, 'Die Regie der Oper', in *Atti del terzo congresso*, 96.

a *mise-en-scène* must be drawn out from the musical work, the opera's inner meaning made to appear fully through its stage realization.⁵⁶ Unsurprisingly given his views on direction, this extractive idea was especially associated with Ebert. Between 1933 and 1937, he curated four productions at the Maggio and was repeatedly praised, as well as occasionally criticized, for the astonishing results of simultaneity that he achieved between musical and scenic movements, by 'extracting' the latter from the former.⁵⁷

A synonym for 'estrinsecazione scenica', or for what Italians today would more likely call 'messinscena' or 'allestimento scenico' – *mise-en-scène*, in the narrow, material sense of the word, and scenic setup – was 'edizione scenica' (scenic edition).⁵⁸ While after 1932 the term 'messinscena' started to shed its second, more abstract meaning relating to the sphere of direction, replaced here by the neologism 'regia',⁵⁹ and while 'allestimento scenico' normally retained the notion of materially preparing the stage for a performance,⁶⁰ 'edizione scenica' foregrounded the director's and the scenographer's interpretative acts and carried specific philological implications. Just as a musical text can be edited into several, more or less defensible forms, each carrying the creative signature of a second author of sorts (the editor), so could an opera's visual text now also admit of a range of more or less permissible presentations. Furthermore, the now antiquated word 'i(n)scenatura', derived from the verb 'i(n)scenare' and roughly corresponding to the German 'Inszenierung', could also indicate the *mise-en-scène* of an opera. This term was relatively common in the first few decades of the twentieth century, before losing ground to 'regia', and it initially

⁵⁶ See Augusto Hermet, 'V Maggio Musicale. *Ginghiero Tell* di Rossini', *Il Bargello*, 14 May 1939, 3; and [Andrea della Corte], 'Vibrante successo de *La Vestale* di Spontini al Teatro Comunale Vittorio Emanuele II: L'estrinsecazione scenica', *La nazione*, 5 May 1933, 5 (an almost identical version of this article appeared in *La stampa* on 5 May 1933, and was signed by Andrea Della Corte).

⁵⁷ See, for example, Massimo Mila, 'I primi spettacoli'.

⁵⁸ This expression was repeatedly used by Aniceto Del Massa in his reviews for *La nazione*. See, for example, the articles published on 10, 21–22, and 26 May 1939.

⁵⁹ See Sergio Raffaelli, *Cinema Film Regia* (Rome: Bulzoni, 1978), 240–4. In his book, Raffaelli discusses a series of (often multiple-meaning) terms for referring to both theatrical and cinematic staging that were in use in Italy in the early decades of the twentieth century.

⁶⁰ See, for example, A[niceto] D[e]l M[assa], 'Maggio Musicale Fiorentino. Caloroso successo de *I Puritani*. L'allestimento scenico', *La nazione*, 26 May 1933; [Unsigned], 'Lieto inizio del "Maggio Musicale Fiorentino". *Il Nabucco* alla presenza delle Principesse', *Corriere della sera*, 23 April 1933; and, on the verb 'allestire', Virgilio Marchi, 'Introduzione alla scenotecnica', 36.

emphasized the action of literally and physically putting a work onto the stage, even more than directing it.⁶¹

Alongside this jargon that characterized staging as the external manifestation of an opera's inner meaning, one version among many of its visual text, or a physical, material activity, another group of expressions posited some kind of 'framing' or 'bringing into focus' of the music by the *mise-en-scène*. The vocabulary here comes down to two phrases, 'inquadratura scenica' and 'messa a fuoco', which popped up in reviews of Rossini's *Mosè* and Gluck's *Alceste* at the 1935 Maggio. Two critics, both distinguished musicologists – one was probably Andrea Della Corte and the other was Carlo Gatti, not to be confused with Guido Gatti – used them to describe how the rationalist architect Pietro Aschieri and the Austrian director Herbert Graf approached the task of staging the music of *Mosè* and *Alceste* respectively. Aschieri was set designer for Rossini's opera, a role that must have partly overlapped with that of Ebert, the *regista*. With him, Aschieri created a series of 'scenic framings' through lighting that structured *Mosè*'s musical and dramatic action.⁶² For his part, Graf was invited to direct a run of outdoor performances of *Alceste* in the majestic Boboli gardens, directly behind Palazzo Pitti (the Renaissance residence of the Medici family), where he brought Gluck's music successfully 'into focus' through unspecified aspects of the *mise-en-scène*.⁶³ The general idea was that through the performers' gestures and movements, through the masses' choreographies, and especially through the lighting, a production should emphasize particular moments in the musical and dramatic action, helping to give it rhythm and structure. 'Messa a fuoco' could furthermore refer to a highly theatricalized rendition of old operatic works. As Salvini explained in his 1938 speech on opera direction, in order to shake the widespread conviction that nineteenth-century Italian opera is unsuited to twentieth-century sensibilities, works in this

⁶¹ See Andrea Della Corte, 'Un'eccezionale serata d'arte inizia il Maggio Musicale Fiorentino', *La stampa*, 23 April 1933; and Raffaelli, *Cinema Film Regia*, 244–9.

⁶² [Unsigned], 'L'inizio del Maggio musicale fiorentino', *La stampa*, 25 April 1935. Andrea della Corte wrote regularly for *La stampa*, and this article (as several others about the 1935 Maggio) is most likely his.

⁶³ Carlo Gatti, 'Chiusura del Maggio Musicale Fiorentino. *Alceste* di Gluck', *L'illustrazione italiana*, 9 June 1935, 942.

repertoire must be ‘brought into focus’ by directors who believe in their ‘near-eternity’, and who are willing to explore logical stage solutions for musical moments that, static as they are, can otherwise appear anti-theatrical, lessening of drama.⁶⁴

‘Inquadratura scenica’ and ‘messa a fuoco’ may be foreign to our present-day vocabulary for expressing the relationship between an opera’s music and its *mise-en-scène*. Yet another set of terms will sound more familiar. ‘Accordo’ (accord) and ‘aderenza’ (adherence) indicated not so much a coincidence as a welcomed and purposeful alignment between a staged work’s musical and visual components. Stage movements, lights, and colours should not, it was argued, exactly match or duplicate the music, but rather cling to it, conform to it harmoniously – with regard to its rhythm and atmosphere, for example.⁶⁵ Although ‘contrasto’ (contrast) often signified the opposite – a lack of that desirable adherence or correspondence – it could also be a positive trait.⁶⁶ It could apply to a *mise-en-scène* that retained the tensions and ambiguities that always exist between an opera’s literary, musical, and visual texts, what David Levin has called ‘opera’s agitated and multiple signifying systems’.⁶⁷ Whatever the term used, and whether or not the audiovisual interaction was deemed successful, in the parlance of the period ‘music’ meant multiple and variable things, being understood in a relatively abstract sense, far away from its gestural meaning. Sometimes it stood for the so-called ‘style’ of the work, sometimes for its ‘colour’, quite often for its ‘rhythm’, all terms that were rarely and vaguely defined. Finally, some commentators contended that the staging of an opera should offer a ‘commento’ (commentary) on its music and drama. These critics conceived of scenery, colours, and lighting as integral, enhancing, but ideally also ‘discreet and accompanying’

⁶⁴ ‘il melodramma dell’Ottocento, messo a fuoco da chi crede sinceramente alla sua quasi eternità’: Salvini, ‘La regia moderna del melodramma’, 118.

⁶⁵ See Vittorio Gui, ‘Dibattiti d’attualità. La scenografia moderna’, *La nazione*, 31 May 1933; A[niceto] D[el] M[assa], ‘Fervono i preparativi per la *Norma* di Bellini’, *La nazione*, 23 May 1935; [Unsigned], ‘Il vivo successo de *La Vestale* a Firenze’, *Corriere della sera*, 5 May 1933; and A[niceto] D[el] M[assa], ‘Scene e regia’, *La nazione*, 28 April 1939.

⁶⁶ In his article ‘Dibattiti d’attualità’, Vittorio Gui talked of ‘jarring contrast’ (‘stridente contrasto’). On the other hand, in his book *Storia della scenografia italiana* (Florence: Rinascimento del libro, 1930), Valerio Mariani explained that ‘we need an intelligent, genial set design that can adhere to, or contrast with, the play or the opera’ (‘abbiamo bisogno di una scenografia intelligente, geniale, che possa aderire (o contrastare) con il dramma o l’opera musicale’, p. 8).

⁶⁷ Levin, *Unsettling Opera*, 11.

elements in an opera production, a subdued idea of staging that was similarly conveyed by the painterly notion of a ‘cornice’ (frame) that must never prevail over or distract from the music and action.⁶⁸

Between opera and film

What are we to make of these words? We might start by noting the many implicit or explicit contact points with film discourse. Opera and cinema have long attracted scholarly attention through their complex historical relationship.⁶⁹ Particularly in the early twentieth century, at a time when film was striving to affirm itself as a new art form – something fundamentally different from lowbrow mass entertainment – operatic theatres, plots, works, and actors provided it with the physical and symbolic resources needed for it to gain aesthetic and cultural prestige. The entanglements reached even deeper, for they were also economic, cinema being regarded as a crucial competitor of theatre on the market, and technical-aesthetic, at least if we espouse the argument that certain operatic compositional techniques anticipated cinematic ones.⁷⁰ While these aesthetic, cultural, and economic ties have all been examined by scholars, usually with an emphasis

⁶⁸ ‘una cornice e un commento discreto, d’accompagnò’: Cipriano Efisio Oppo, ‘*Lucrezia Borgia*. Ovvero: Sironi scenografo al Politeama Fiorentino’, *La tribuna*, 16 May 1933, 3. See also Veniero Colasanti’s letter to Mario Labroca, 19 January 1938, I-Fammf 145/90ff. Colasanti talked of ‘light effects that should almost serve as a luminous comment on the music and the acting of the characters’ (‘effetti di luce che quasi dovrebbero servire di commento luminoso alla musica e all’agire dei personaggi’).

⁶⁹ For some classic studies of opera and cinema, see Jeremy Tambling, *Opera, Ideology and Film* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1987); Marcia J. Citron, *Opera on Screen* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000); Jeongwon Joe and Rose Theresa, eds, *Between Opera and Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 2002); Michal Grover-Friedlander, *Vocal Apparitions: The Attraction of Cinema to Opera* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); and Marcia J. Citron, *When Opera Meets Film* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

⁷⁰ For an examination of opera and early cinema’s interactions from a number of different aesthetic, cultural, and economic perspectives, see Peter Franklin, ‘Underscoring Drama – Picturing Music’, in *Wagner and Cinema*, ed. Jeongwon Joe and Sander L. Gilman (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2010); Melina Esse, ‘The Silent Diva: Farrar’s *Carmen*’, in *Technology and the Diva: Sopranos, Opera, and Media from Romanticism to the Digital Age*, ed. Karen Henson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Christin Thomas, ‘When Opera Met Film: Casa Ricordi and the Emergence of Cinema, 1905–1929’ (PhD diss., Yale University, 2016); Marco Ladd, ‘Film Music *avant la lettre*? Disentangling Film from Opera in Italy, c.1913’, *Opera Quarterly* 34/1 (2018); Gundula Kreuzer, ‘Flat Bayreuth: A Genealogy of Opera as Screened’, in *Screen Genealogies: From Optical Device to Environmental Medium*, ed. Craig Buckley, Rüdiger Campe, and Francesco Casetti (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019); and Ditlev Rindom, ‘Celluloid Diva: Staging Leoncavallo’s *Zazà* in the Cinematic Age’, *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 144/2 (2019).

on how opera influenced cinema in its earliest stages of development, historical modes of spectatorship and critical ideas shaping (or shaped by) the aesthetic possibilities of the two media are less well trodden territory.⁷¹ Considered in this broader, interdisciplinary context, the terminological surplus unleashed by the early Maggio's 'modern-taste' productions, at a time of major transitions in operatic staging more broadly, has the additional benefit of allowing us to recapture the multiple and often contradictory ways in which the audiovisual relationship central to both opera and film – arts that also shared one and the same aesthetic and critical culture – was understood in 1930s Italy.

Let us, then, take a closer look at the exact nature of the overlap between stage and film discourse. Several of the terms used by contemporary Florentine critics to explain an opera's *mise-en-scène* vis-à-vis its music will be known to film scholars. As Marco Ladd has shown, 'aderenza' was frequently employed by 1920s Italian film critics: the musical accompaniment of a film (in the silent period) or its musical score (in the sound period) were expected to 'aderire alla visione' (adhere to the picture), the opposite of what an opera's staging was increasingly expected to do in relation to the music. As Ladd further explains, 'adherence' spoke to a broad idea of synchronization that Italians also captured through such words as 'appropriato' (appropriate) and 'adeguato' (well-adapted), adjectives that indicated a match, in temporal or affective terms, between a film's setting and action and its music.⁷² Similarly, 'contrast', which stood for the now positive, now negative tension between an opera's musical and visual components, might recall the terms in which contemporary film theorists defined 'counterpoint': a mode of audiovisual presentation that

⁷¹ Rindom also makes this point in 'Celluloid Diva', 290. For a notable recent exception to the standard, unidirectional narratives emphasizing opera's influences on cinema, see Christy Thomas Adams, 'Staging the Cinematic: Puccini, *Fanciulla*, and Early Silent Film', *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 76/1 (2023). For a study of opera spectatorship that also considers film, see Campana, *Opera and Modern Spectatorship*, esp. 172–90.

⁷² See Marco Ladd, 'Synchronization as Musical Labor in Italian Silent Cinemas', *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 75/2 (2022), 302. For more on early ideas of synchronization, see James Lastra, *Sound Technology and the American Cinema: Perception, Representation, Modernity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000) and Carolyn Abbate, 'Overlooking the Ephemeral', *New Literary History* 48/1 (2017), 83–4.

involves dialectical montage and asynchronous, hence not merely redundant, sound.⁷³ More intriguing still, ‘commento musicale’ and ‘commento orchestrale’ (musical and orchestral commentary) were standard terms for ‘musical accompaniment’ in 1920s and early ’30s Italian cinemas.⁷⁴ Once again, these two expressions suggest a similar if reverse hierarchy between music and visuals to that articulated by the discourse of the stage, which prioritized the former over the latter element, even though it increasingly posited *mise-en-scène* as an indispensable and creative part of an opera’s production.

The correspondences between the critical lexicon of opera and that of cinema do not stop here. A whole strand of 1930s opera criticism concerns ‘rhythm’, a term that referred not only to the musical parameter that determines the relative speed at which the notes should be played, but also to a broader notion of staging as an experience of tempos and durations stemming from, or emphasized by, an appropriate interaction of music and visuals. According to the anonymous critic for *La stampa* who reviewed Aschieri and Ebert’s production of *Mosè* at the 1935 Maggio, ‘music, action, and atmosphere must blend into a single rhythm’.⁷⁵ A couple of years later, Aniceto Del Massa, an art critic who wrote prolifically about *mise-en-scène* at the early Florence festival, argued that Ebert’s expert use of lights in *Luisa Miller* helped to ‘underscore not only the scenario but the harmony of the whole, the movement, and especially the substantial rhythm of the musical action’.⁷⁶ As film scholar Giorgio Bertellini has observed, a musical analogy centred on rhythm ran through 1910s and 1920s Italian silent film discourse, which held cinema as a fundamentally lyrical and anti-mimetic art. ‘Film visuality was understood as a musical vibration of spaces and figures’ – a poetic, plastic flow of images shifting more or less rapidly – a structural, ‘pure’ notion of film that

⁷³ See James Buhler, ‘Ontological, Formal, and Critical Theories of Film Music and Sound’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Film Music Studies*, ed. David Neumeyer (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), esp. 190–3.

⁷⁴ See Ladd, ‘Synchronization as Musical Labor’, 296–7, 300fn100, and 302fn110.

⁷⁵ ‘Musica, azione, ambiente hanno da fondersi in un ritmo unico’: [Unsigned], ‘L’inizio del Maggio’, 4.

⁷⁶ ‘le luci hanno qui giocato in modo ottimo ponendo bene in rilievo non soltanto lo scenario ma l’armonia dell’insieme, il movimento e più che altro il sostanziale ritmo dell’azione musicale’: A[niceto] D[el] M[assa], ‘L’inaugurazione del “Maggio Musicale”. Il Sovrano assiste alla prima di *Luisa Miller*. Le scene e la regia’, *La nazione*, 28 April 1937, 6.

persisted in Italy well after the transition to sound, finding abode particularly in the writings of Sebastiano Arturo Luciani.⁷⁷ A musicologist and an influential film critic, Luciani made rhythm into the core of his cinematic aesthetics, in which music held a central place and film resembled a living organism even more than a medium for faithfully reproducing reality.⁷⁸

At the risk of projecting too coherent a picture of opera and cinema's lexical overlaps, I might broach two last areas of conceptual and terminological exchange. Cinema's instant scene changes, its capacity to cut rapidly between two locales, clearly appealed to theatre and opera practitioners as well, during a period when (as we saw earlier) proponents of novel stage technologies praised their capacity to convey rapidly shifting or even simultaneous actions.⁷⁹ At the same time, colour, understood as an expressive and interpretative tool more than a tool for depicting reality, was becoming a newly central element of operatic *mise-en-scène* just as it was re-entering Italian film, particularly as an object of discourse. While applied-colouring techniques had been standard tools in silent film production, they had fallen out of favour with the transition to sound, a fact that, coupled with the Italian film production crisis of the 1920s, may have hastened the peninsula's 'forgetting' of cinematic colour until its rediscovery in the mid-1930s.⁸⁰ The theatrical stage of the years around 1930 might therefore be said to have wielded colour as an element that placed theatre even (just) *ahead of cinema*. A 1933 critic writing for Rome's newspaper *La tribuna* thought that Aschieri's 'lines and colours' in *Nabucco* 'gave the scenes an absolutely original quality', freeing them from any realistic attributes, while two years later the Florentine

⁷⁷ Giorgio Bertellini, 'Dubbing *L'Arte Muta*: Poetic Layerings around Italian Cinema's Transition to Sound', in *Re-viewing Fascism: Italian Cinema, 1922–1943*, ed. Jacqueline Reich and Piero Garofalo (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2002), 42.

⁷⁸ See Peter Del Monte, 'Le teoriche del film in Italia dalle origini al sonoro. Parte terza', *Bianco e nero* 30/7–8 (1969), here 8–9. For Luciani's views on the role of music in film, see in particular his *L'antiteatro. Il cinematografo come arte* (Rome: La Voce, 1928).

⁷⁹ One of these supporters was Bragaglia, a theatre director, set designer, and cinematographer, who nevertheless called for a 're-theatricalization' of theatre in a cinematic age; see his *Del teatro teatrale, ossia del teatro* (Rome: Tiber, 1929).

⁸⁰ On applied colouring, see Paolo Cerchi Usai, 'The Color of Nitrate: Some Factual Observations on Tinting and Toning Manuals for Silent Films', in *Silent Film*, ed. Richard Abel (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1996) and Joshua Yumibe, *Moving Color: Early Film, Mass Culture, Modernism* (New Brunswick, NJ, and London: Rutgers University Press, 2012).

writer Alessandro Bonsanti praised Primo Conti's set designs for *Un ballo in maschera* for their innovative 'language of colours that comment on the mood of the characters'.⁸¹ In film, a new watershed colour-wise came precisely in 1935, when Venice's Mostra Internazionale d'Arte Cinematografica featured, for the first time on the peninsula, two American films produced with so-called three-strip Technicolor.⁸² In the wake of these screenings, the re-emerged 'problem of colour' became a major topic of film debate. It was addressed particularly insightfully by Salvatore G. Gatto in an article published in the Fascist trade unions' newspaper *Il lavoro fascista*. A journalist and a politician, Gatto made a case for colour as having 'a function of interpretative and symbolic expressivity' identical to that of a film's musical commentary. In his view, which reflected how colour was actually used in silent cinema until the 1920s, colour must not emphasize a film's 'photographic basis', it must not imitate human perception in an effort of 'realistic integration, useless and pleonastic strengthening' of the meanings already conveyed by the film's sequences. Rather, it must fulfil 'a role of suggestion, of chromatic commentary on the action', an idea that once again challenged any mimetic notion of film as a medium.⁸³

Multiple concepts, therefore, traversed and bridged together opera and film criticism, alerting us to a shared aesthetic and discursive ground on which not only could cinema influence operatic practices and ideas (as much as vice versa), but hierarchies between music and visuals could easily become reversed depending on the aesthetic object under scrutiny. We might even take this intermedial line of enquiry further and argue that, far from intruding only through the critical terminology discussed above, film constituted a constant, silent, and deeply ambiguous presence

⁸¹ 'Le linee e i colori hanno dato alle scene un aspetto assolutamente originale': [Unsigned], 'Il lieto inizio', 7. 'L'innovazione però è evidente nel linguaggio dei colori che commentano lo stato d'animo dei personaggi': Alessandro Bonsanti, 'Cronache del "Maggio Musicale" Fiorentino', *L'eco del mondo*, 18 May 1935, 4.

⁸² The two films were the short musical *La Cucaracha* (1934) by Lloyd Corrigan, and the full-length historical drama *Becky Sharp* (1935) by Rouben Mamoulian. The first Italian short produced with Technicolor was Alessandro Blasetti's documentary *Caccia alla volpe nella campagna romana* (1938).

⁸³ 'funzione di espressività simbolica ed interpretativa', 'base fotografica', 'un compito di suggestione, di commento cromatico all'azione', 'non avrà più un compito d'integrazione realistica, di rinforzo pleonastico ed inutile applicato all'eloquenza delle sequenze': S[alvatore] G. Gatto, 'Il problema del "colore"', *Il lavoro fascista*, 22 June 1935, 3. For early Italian debates on colour in cinema, see also Corrado Alvaro et al., 'Presente e avvenire del cinema a colori (Referendum de *Lo schermo*)', *Lo schermo* 1/5 (1935) and 2/1 (1936).

throughout the Maggio debates on operatic *mise-en-scène*. For although accounts of the productions hardly ever mention it explicitly, cinema hovers all over them as a spectre, and could be said to play a double role. On the one hand, it stands for avenues in which operatic staging might technologically renew itself, catching up with the ‘modernity’ of film. Cinema here plays the role of forerunner of long-awaited stage developments, developments that the Maggio debates put in the limelight and that seemed to offer a possible solution to opera’s ongoing ‘crisis’ – for which cinema itself was one of the defendants. On the other hand, cinema paradoxically helps to assert opera’s *own* modernity and even its ahead-ness of film: opera’s new-found freedom from naturalistic conventions. Far from constituting simply the ‘eye of the [twentieth] century’, in Francesco Casetti’s formulation, film also functions as a haunting mirror of opera’s past: it epitomizes a realist aesthetics that should decidedly be left behind rather than brought forward; it summons the burden of nineteenth-century scenic traditions even more than a fresh, twentieth-century aesthetic outlook.⁸⁴ Read in this light, cinema’s twofold role is significant because it challenges simplistic, unidirectional understandings of the historical relationship between opera and film. The story, the historical materials tell us, is more complex, the two art forms’ interactions less linear; and we must recognize their Janus-faced cohabitation in cultural contexts in which the survival of one or both arts was so vitally at stake.

Besides fidelity

The lexical bundle I have just tried to unravel shows that new expectations were gradually arising about the role of music in shaping a staging. Low critical investment in the possibilities (and duties) of dramatic mimesis nevertheless suggests that the belief that an opera’s *mise-en-scène* ought to reassert on stage what is already ‘present in’, ‘stated by’ the score was not quite yet fully active. True, some contemporary assertions gesture in that direction: writing on Sironi’s scenery for

⁸⁴ Francesco Casetti, *Eye of the Century: Film, Experience, Modernity*, trans. Erin Larkin with Jennifer Pranolo (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).

Lucrezia Borgia, Elio Vittorini praised the fact that ‘one could not distinguish between his painting and Donizetti’s music; one wondered whether those fabricated ghosts were evoked by the sounds, and sometimes whether the sounds were not oozing from the dark, icy, gloomy walls’.⁸⁵ The extreme fusion of musical and visual sign here constituted a positive mark because it was achieved through affect or atmosphere, but it appeared more problematic when it involved rhythm. Occasional criticisms of Ebert’s approach to musical and scenic movements ensued from a discomfort with an excessive sense of mechanization: a rhythmic over-alignment, as it were, between music and visuals caused by Ebert’s stylized treatment of the chorus, which he moved as a mass rather than as a group of individuals.⁸⁶ Such reservations may, after the discussion above, call to mind similar statements by film critics. No matter how widespread so-called mickey-mousing was by the 1920s, such instances of exaggerated mimicry were increasingly understood as outmoded: they recalled an age when film still betrayed a certain aesthetic clumsiness as an audiovisual medium.⁸⁷ Critics such as Roberto Falciai and Augusto Caraceni advocated an integration of music and screen pictures that enhanced the expressive capacities of both, warning against the exact superimposition of aural and visual images (what they called a mechanical adherence or ‘enslavement’ of the music to the action), the effect of which, they thought, ranged from the repugnant to the grotesque or the annoyingly redundant.⁸⁸

⁸⁵ ‘non si distingueva tra la sua pittura e la musica del Donizetti, ci si chiedeva se quei fabbricati fantasmi non venissero evocati dai suoni, e qualche volta se quei suoni non fossero trasudati dalle oscure, gelide, tetre pareti’: E[lio] V[ittorini], ‘Rapporto conclusivo sulla scenografia del Maggio Musicale’, *Il bargello*, 2 July 1933, 3.

⁸⁶ See Della Corte, ‘Un’eccezionale serata d’arte’; and X. Y., ‘Magnifico inizio del Maggio Musicale fiorentino’, *Il nuovo giornale*, 24 April 1933.

⁸⁷ See Marco Ladd, ‘A Screen Translated into Notes and Rhythms: 2D Music Theories of Italian Silent Film’, paper presented at the ‘Surfaces’ symposium of the Cambridge Italian Research Network, Cambridge (UK), 11 June 2021 (my thanks to the author for sharing his paper with me).

⁸⁸ As Falciai put it, one must ‘choose [musical] commentaries for the individual frames that will clothe the action without adhering to it’, and ‘music must follow the picture, but not mechanically’ (‘scegli i commenti [musicali] dei singoli quadri in modo da rivestire l’azione senza aderirvi’; ‘la musica cioè deve seguire non meccanicamente il quadro sullo schermo’): cited in Marco Targa, ‘La prassi della compilazione musicale nel cinema muto italiano’, *Musica e Storia* 17/3 (2009), 692. Caraceni instead explained that ‘music . . . must not become enslaved to the action, it must be *asynchronous*’ (‘la musica . . . non deve divenire schiava dell’azione, deve essere *asincrona*’; Caraceni, ‘Ruolo della musica nel cinematografo’, *Bollettino dei musicisti* 3/4 (1936), 53.

‘Visual-sonic doublers’ is what an anonymous film critic called these effects of over-synchronization to be avoided. The expression also aptly captures the idea of duplication between an opera’s music and its staging that became a leitmotif in the discourse on *mise-en-scène* in subsequent decades.⁸⁹ What lies behind this tautological attitude is the modern conception of the score, in Richard Taruskin’s words, as “notational” and therefore binding’ – unlike an opera’s *visual* text – a notion which 1930s Italian opera critics and directors took notice of, but which they stopped short of pursuing with the rigour to which later twentieth-century observers would become accustomed.⁹⁰ In practice, of course, there rarely was such thing as *the* score of an opera: even conductors such as Gino Marinuzzi, who complained that directors were ignorant of or did not attend to the music, were addicted to cuts.⁹¹ Furthermore – and this brings me to my final point – there stood the larger question of how to reconcile ‘modern’, ‘interpretative’ staging with a former, nineteenth-century mentality that held the visual side of things in Italian opera to have a relatively low aesthetic and cultural prestige. How could *mise-en-scène*, that supposedly secondary, superfluous, accompanying element of an opera production, be reformed at its very core while that diminishing national view of staging lasted? How could opera’s visible stage manifestation play a key role in the reanimation of Italy’s ‘dying’ operatic tradition given an ideology that held music, and particularly voice, as the key ingredient of a genuine Italian operatic experience?

I should like to close this article with a brief examination of these questions, via one final contemporary source. In 1933, Guido Gatti – the musicologist, critic, and Maggio administrator we met earlier – neatly summarized and challenged the cultural view of opera just mentioned in an essay on the role of the director. Gatti argued that in Italy the operatic *regista* struggled to be

⁸⁹ ‘doppioni visuali-sonori’: [Unsigned], ‘Formule e realtà’, *Cinema illustrazione*, 11 March 1931, 5, cited in Stefania Carpiceci, *Le ombre cantano e parlano. Il passaggio dal muto al sonoro nel cinema italiano attraverso i periodici d’epoca (1927–1932)* (Dublin: Artdigiland, 2012), 49.

⁹⁰ Taruskin, ‘Setting Limits’, 460.

⁹¹ For Marinuzzi’s views on directors, see, for example, his letters to Oliviero de Fabritiis (10 July 1937) and Giuseppe Mulè (20 June 1940), published in Lia Pierotti Cei Marinuzzi, Giorgio Gualerzi, and Valeria Gualerzi, eds, *Gino Marinuzzi: Tema con variazioni. Epistolario artistico di un grande direttore d’orchestra* (Milan: Mondadori, 1995), 747–8 and 859–61. Musical cuts occurred regularly at the early Maggio and are documented in the archival correspondence.

recognized because Italy was the country where ‘the exclusively musical conception of opera [had] become first and foremost established’.⁹² It was the widely-held, if wrong (Gatti thought), belief that the scenic apparatus is ‘something added, parasitic, pleonastic’ that had tipped the scales in favour of the conductor – the true ‘interpreter’ of the operatic work – while hindering an understanding of director and *mise-en-scène* as equally integral to opera.⁹³ Such a view, Gatti observed with enthusiasm, had finally had its day. The *regista* as interpreter now could and should be recognized because of the relative instability of the musical text itself. ‘Let us not cry scandal’, he explained, if the opera director

si permette di dare un’impronta nuova e personale alla realizzazione scenica, quando nessuno pensa a sollevare un’obiezione se il direttore d’orchestra sopprime – dico sopprime – pagine e pagine di partitura, come avviene più o meno per tutte le opere di Wagner, o traduce le sonorità orchestrali di Mozart o del primo Rossini in quelle che gli fornisce la moderna orchestra wagneriana, con qual capovolgimento di prospettive è facile immaginare.⁹⁴

(takes the liberty to give a new, personal imprint to the stage realization, when nobody raises any objection if the conductor deletes – I say, deletes – pages and pages of the musical score, as happens with nearly all of Wagner’s operas, or translates the orchestral sonorities of Mozart or early Rossini into those provided by the modern Wagnerian orchestra, with the overturning of perspectives that one can imagine.)

⁹² ‘in Italia . . . la terra dove è nato il melodramma e cioè s’è affermata prima e più che in ogni altro paese la concezione esclusivamente musicale dell’opera’: Gatti, ‘Scene e musica dell’opera’, 288.

⁹³ ‘qualcosa di aggiunto, di parassitario, di pleonastico’: Gatti, ‘Scene e musica dell’opera’, 289.

⁹⁴ Gatti, ‘Scene e musica dell’opera’, 289.

If one was ready to admit that an opera's musical system was, at least in performance, not stable but fluid – because it was subjected to cuts, or because the sonorities of period instruments were rendered through modern instruments – then the 'editing' or 'updating' of that same opera's *visual* system could be understood in the same light.

Gatti's rhetorical strategy was twofold. On the one hand, he used old musical practices to validate modern notions of *mise-en-scène* – validate the future of staging as 'an art in its own right'. On the other, he implicitly reclaimed staging as (also) Italian, by dismissing the critical view that held visual display in opera as 'non-essential' or even 'non-*Italian*': a secondary element in a fundamentally voice-centred operatic experience.⁹⁵ Paradoxically, Gatti's reappraisal of *mise-en-scène* along these reformed national lines occurred at a time when opera production values in Europe and beyond were becoming less nationally demarcated than ever before, due to burgeoning theatre director networks of the kind promoted by the early Maggio.⁹⁶ It was in this context, in the face and midst of stage practices that were eroding already flimsy operatic national borders further, that staging as an idea, staging as the 'creative' bringing into life of the visual component of opera, gained potential for Italian national pride. This is not to say that the incipient principle of 'fidelity' of a *mise-en-scène* to the score per se contradicted Gatti's position. For what mattered in the two-level critical discourse of the period was not just the elevation of the visual to a previously unknown vitality and prestige, but also its increasingly codified relationship with the musical – opera now understood as a blended audiovisual whole rather than a sum of independent parts.

The main and final point we can take away from Gatti's article, however, relates precisely to the limits, both past and present, of operatic *Werktreue*. Rather than uphold the cause of cutting-

⁹⁵ Cormac Newark, "In Italy We Don't Have the Means for Illusion": *Grand Opéra* in Nineteenth-Century Bologna', *Cambridge Opera Journal* 19/3 (2007), 215. Newark's point concerns specifically the reception of French *grand opéra* in 1860s Bologna, but late nineteenth-century critical discourses more broadly emphasized how the 'real' Italian operatic experience was one centred on music and voice.

⁹⁶ On the role played in these burgeoning director networks particularly by German theatre practitioners (including Ebert) who had emigrated under the Nazi regime, see Nils Grosch, "Mobile Exile" and Urban Musical Theatre in the 1930s', in *Urban Exile: Theories, Methods, Research Practices*, ed. Burcu Dogramaci et al. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2023).

edge, director-driven stagings because of their ‘mindless commitment to textuality’, as Taruskin might have put it – because, that is, such stagings could direct the best (and worst) of their energies towards corroborating the *musical* texts of operas – Gatti took a more liberal view, arguing that the un-*Werktreue* musical practices of the past could inspire and authorize similarly un-*Werktreue* (read ‘free’, ‘strong’, ‘creative’) staging practices in the present and future.⁹⁷ Put differently, Gatti posited no necessary illustrative relationship between music and visuals, no tautological bond whereby the *mise-en-scène* ought to reproduce on stage what is supposedly already ‘contained’ in the score. For him, the conceptual foundations of the modern director as ‘interpreter’ lay not in any assumed capacity of him or her to reveal visually the inner meanings of a musical work, but in the freedom and creativity that have characterized operatic cultures throughout history. To be sure, the connection between cuts in the music and what I have called (freely interpreting Gatti) scenic ‘updating’ is a tenuous one: one could argue that the equivalent of such ‘updating’ in musical terms would be radical changes to the orchestration or harmony – something, particularly the latter change, not quite envisioned by Gatti. But focused as he was on affirming a non-hierarchical relationship between conductor and director, musical and visual text, Gatti was clearly concerned less with proposing an extreme, notional form of *Regietheater* both *avant* and *après la lettre* that might involve musical as well as plot and scenic revisions, than with showing his readers how so-called fidelity to a composer’s score and intentions had, in reality, never existed, and how pursuing it would not constitute a recommendable course of action, for it would prevent the renewal of staging values.

Today, at a time when public and critical discussions of opera productions show a remarkable persistence of *Werktreue* values, the notion – implicitly proposed by Gatti and tenaciously pursued by the early Maggio – that (a) *mise-en-scène* might be reason for national pride seems rather harder to accommodate within our culture. For how national can staging be in the twenty-first century? What would it mean, in the contemporary world of opera, to claim staging, or particular stagings, as

⁹⁷ Taruskin, ‘Setting Limits’, 460.

British, or French, or Italian? Owing to both financial and technological factors, the operatic ecosystem of the last fifteen to twenty years has increasingly fed on international co-productions, HD simulcasts, on-demand streamings, and long-distance operatic tourism. Even just asking the question of the relevance of ‘national staging’ in such a fluidified operatic environment may seem to ignore the very question’s historicity – to forget that never before have the aesthetics and consumption of staged opera been so *trans*-national. Yet, pursuing even briefly Gatti’s against-the-grain fantasy about Italian *mise-en-scène*, or the manifold discursive configurations that the audiovisual could take in 1930s Florentine operatic discourse, has its benefits, for it prods us to imagine alternative pasts and alternative futures for twenty-first-century staging: to resist the temptation, ever lurking in times of crisis, to retrace a single, linear evolution between past and present, constructing the latter as the inevitable outcome of the former; and to keep alive a certain degree of healthy uncertainty about what staged opera ‘is’ and might become. With their legacy of (now) both familiar and foreign ideas, the 1930s remain a refreshingly transitional period in the history of modern staging: a period when Italian attempts to dissociate opera from its stage past contained only the faintest hint of the text-fetishism that was to come, and when a whole host of imaginative possibilities for conjugating music and *mise-en-scène* still peacefully rubbed shoulders with each other, both on stage and on the page.