

---

# “Musica adattata all’intelligenza ed alle esigenze del pubblico”: Giuseppe Verdi, Errico Petrella, and their Audience\*

---

Sebastian Werr, University of Bayreuth

When the company arrived, the people of Pescara were frantic with expectation....In the streets, in the piazzas, on all the walls, large handwritten posters announced the performance of *La contessa d’Amalfi*. The name Violetta Kutufà gleamed in vermilion letters. The hearts of the Pescaraesi were ignited. The long-awaited evening had arrived.<sup>1</sup>

The event so eagerly awaited by the Pescaraesi in one of Gabriele D’Annunzio’s early *Novelle della Pescara* is a performance of Errico Petrella’s *La contessa d’Amalfi* by the provincial diva Kutufà and her third-class opera company. Labeled “one of the fashionable operas” by Francesco Florimo even twenty years after its premiere, the opera later fell into complete oblivion, as did its composer.<sup>2</sup> It was not by chance that D’Annunzio chose this opera for his caricature of Italian society of the early 1870s. With the calculated sensuality of the *femme fatale*, Leonora, at its center, the plot of *La contessa d’Amalfi* made a good background for that of the novella, in which the petty bourgeois Don Giovanni Ussorio is smitten by the diva Kutufà. Furthermore, Petrella’s opera was particularly popular with the audience D’Annunzio wanted to portray, although it was regarded with condescension by the experts.

In fact, Petrella did not flatter himself too much when he observed that “after Verdi’s, [my operas] are the most sought after and applauded in the Italian repertory.”<sup>3</sup> For a long period at mid-century—until the generation of Filippo Marchetti (*Ruy Blas*, 1869), Antonio Carlos Gomes (*Il Guarany*, 1870), and Amilcare Ponchielli (revised version of *I promessi sposi*, 1872) emerged—Petrella was the most performed of all living composers in Italy after Verdi. He was at the zenith of his success in the 1860s. In 1862 the journal *Il trovatore* joked that

During this carnival season in Milan, Petrella is like Figaro in the *Barbiere*: tutti lo vogliono, Petrella qua, Petrella là—at La Scala with *Jone*, at the Carcano with *Precauzioni*; and if there were yet another theater, we would not be surprised to see a Petrella opera being performed there too.<sup>4</sup>

But of course, it was not without justification that the period between Donizetti’s last operas and the rise of the “giovane scuola” was called the “periodo verdiano.” Even at the peak of their success, Petrella’s 22 operas could not compete with the popularity of Verdi’s—a matter that was something of a disappointment for the publisher Lucca, who tried to establish Petrella as a rival to Verdi.

Although Petrella was born in the same year as Verdi, his career really began only in 1854, with *Marco Visconti*. He had written several operas before this date but had never managed to establish himself as more than one of the numerous Neapolitan composers who produced dialect operas for the smaller local theaters. After 1854 the lighter early works *Le precauzioni* (opera buffa, Naples, 1851) and

*Elena di Tolosa* (opera semiseria, Naples, 1852) gained a new audience both in Italy and abroad. It was also around this time that Petrella turned his primary attention to serious opera, of which *Jone* (after Bulwer-Lytton’s *The Last Days of Pompeii*, Milan 1858), *La contessa d’Amalfi* (Turin 1864), and *I promessi sposi* (Lecco 1869) were his most durable successes. As one fairly representative verdict from the period put it, “Petrella is no genius; he is neither a Rossini, Verdi, Bellini, Donizetti, nor even a Mercadante, yet his *Precauzioni* and *Jone* are works that do honor to a composer.”<sup>5</sup> Thanks to their solid position in the repertories of traveling Italian opera companies, Petrella’s operas were heard even in locales as remote as Calcutta and Manila. His popularity began to fade gradually even during his lifetime, although some of his operas continued to be performed occasionally in Italy even up until World War I. “I subject myself willingly to the severe (but always just) judgment of the times!” declared the self-confident composer in an 1868 letter.<sup>6</sup> A few years later, Petrella came to be considered a “jettatore” (a carrier of bad luck), after a theater in Naples had caught fire while the orchestra played the famous *Marcia funebre* from *Jone*. And as if that bad luck has finally caught up with him, he is virtually forgotten today.

One benefit of exhuming this briefly successful contemporary of Verdi is that certain aspects of Petrella’s career throw into relief the very different professional and artistic paths taken by Verdi. As we shall see, the two composers can be understood as opposites in many respects. While some superficial details of Verdi’s style were imitated by contemporary operatic composers, Verdi should be understood as exceptional, as pursuing a unique path amidst the Italian opera of his time. Rather than imitating either the concision of Verdi’s operas or their even more striking dramatic intensity, Petrella and most other Italian composers of the period instead downplayed these elements and sought instead to develop melodic appeal above all.

## II

There is barely an article on Petrella that can resist the temptation to quote Verdi’s statement that “Petrella does not know music.” Verdi expressed his animosity towards Petrella on several occasions: for example, in his annoyance that Petrella had written to Alessandro Manzoni for permission to write an opera based on *I promessi sposi* and received a flattering letter in response, and that Petrella, after having accepted the invitation to contribute to the *Messa per Rossini*, refused to compose the movement assigned to him.<sup>7</sup> And although Verdi’s dislike may have been exacerbated by Petrella’s character and his extraordinary and undisguised thirst for recognition, Verdi’s criticisms were also aesthetic. In reaction to an article in the journal

*Continued...*

*Arte* that lauded Petrella as one of the most important composers of the “scuola napoletana” and championed him as the best candidate to succeed Mercadante as director of the Conservatorio di San Pietro a Maiella, Verdi asked Cesare de Sanctis rhetorically, “Paisiello, Cimarosa, and Jomelli [sic], did they never write better operas than *Le precauzioni*?” The famous attack runs in full:

Petrella does not know music, and his masterpiece, *Le precauzioni*, may please the *orecchianti* [people who love opera, but cannot read music] for its several brilliant violin melodies, but as a work of art, it cannot stand up either to the great works or even to operas like *Crispino*, *Follia in Roma*, etc., etc. In these operas Ricci relies not on *parlanti* but on good melodies. The characters are well defined and the opera has substance. Not so with *Le precauzioni*.<sup>8</sup>

In a sense, Verdi's comparison of *Le precauzioni* with the operas of the Ricci brothers (which were written for Venice and Paris) represents a confrontation between northern and southern opera buffa. Petrella's first six operas belong to the genre of Neapolitan dialect opera, a style cultivated in the smaller theaters of Naples (Teatro Nuovo, Teatro La Fenice, and others), differing from northern comic opera mainly through its use of spoken dialogue rather than recitatives and of local dialect for some roles. Verdi's charge that *Le precauzioni* is dominated by *parlando* is justified: except for a *barcarola* for tenor, an aria for soprano, a duet for soprano and tenor, and the aria finale (later replaced by an ensemble), the numerous comic characters are on stage and singing in pater or *parlando* through most of the opera. But what Verdi did not realize (or refused to acknowledge) is that the opera's extensive use of *parlando* is not a sign of Petrella's laziness or lack of melodic invention, but rather grows directly out of the dramaturgy of Neapolitan dialect operas, with their strong vestiges of *commedia dell'arte*, constant allusions to local circumstances, and their almost slapstick comedic style played by numerous buffoons who sing pater while the orchestra provides melodic continuity.<sup>9</sup>

Petrella was often accused of lacking technical competence, a verdict that was mostly based on his free use of the “ritmo,” e.g., his irregular periods. It was this idiosyncrasy that prompted the critic Girolamo Alessandro Biaggi to publish the defense “Petrella ed i pedanti” in the *Gazzetta musicale di Milano* on the occasion of the composer's death in 1877.<sup>10</sup> Some critics considered this an aspect of Petrella's personal style, while others saw it as another trait of the Neapolitan school.<sup>11</sup> But Verdi's critique seems rather to be focused on Petrella's conception of opera. It is certainly true that Petrella wrote for the “*orecchianti*,” but his willingness to please a wide audience was shared by most nineteenth-century Italian composers including Verdi; what differed was the means. Petrella was perhaps guided by the advice of his teacher Nicola Zingarelli, the director of the Naples Conservatory:

If you sing in your compositions, rest assured that your music will be found pleasing. If you amass *harmonies, double counterpoint, fugues, canons, notes, contranotes*, etc. instead, the musical world may applaud you after half a century or it may not; but the audience will certainly disapprove of you. They want *melodies, melodies, always melodies*. If your heart can give birth to them, learn to

express them as simply as possible, and your success will be secure: you will be a composer. Otherwise, you will be only a competent organist in some village.<sup>12</sup>

Berlioz noted that Italian audiences demanded operas that could be understood immediately, a tendency that was of course particularly pronounced among the “*orecchianti*.” This sense of a divided audience and a majority of listeners who listened purely for melodic pleasure is neatly expressed in a review of the Venetian premiere of *Stiffelio* in the *Gazzetta ufficiale di Venezia*:

Opinions on *Stiffelio* are divided. On one side are the orchestra, the presidents, the composers, those who consider art for art's sake and who study the beauties of music as a mathematician studies the solution to a mathematical problem; such listeners proceed from theories and principles, and a canon, a fugue, or a pedal point can make them jump with joy. On the other side are lined up the amateurs from the wonderful Rossinian days: the youngsters . . . who seek, as with virtues, *simple melodies*... One can easily understand that the first group found everything [in *Stiffelio*] golden . . . while the others estimated it as dross and wanted to throw it to the ground or into the mud.<sup>13</sup>

To imagine that Petrella conceived his operas for such an audience, either consciously or unconsciously, helps to explain certain stylistic tendencies such as his use of the “*melodie facili*”—features that, if we are to believe the Venetian critic, were demanded by his target group. From this point of view, Petrella's often criticized “conventionality” also begins to appear less as an aesthetic failing and more as a careful, and even a democratic, calculation of style in which the balance between “old” and “new” elements, between accessible, tried and true structures that could be easily followed by listeners and innovations departing from these structures was carefully calibrated.<sup>14</sup>

### III

Some literary exaggeration aside, the vignette from D'Annunzio's *Novelle della Pescara* quoted above depicts what would have been a fairly common setting for performances of Petrella's operas. The theater in Pescara, where the performances of *La contessa d'Amalfi* take place, is a typical “teatro minore”:

The theater was in a hall of the old military hospital at the end of the city, near the sea. The hall was low, narrow, and long like a corridor: the stage, was constructed completely of wood and painted paper, rose a few hands' breadths above the floor; against the main walls were the galleries, constructed out of boards and tables, covered with tri-color flags. . . . The chairs, taken from the church, occupied half of the parquet. Benches, taken from the schools, filled the rest.<sup>15</sup>

D'Annunzio's description of the town notables sitting in the best seats provides an image of the audience that we may also take as typical. This petty bourgeois public must have irresistible target of parody for an intellectual like D'Annunzio:

Don Giovanni Ussorio dominated, well-groomed, with magnificent black and white checkered trousers, an overcoat of glossy beaver fur, a great quantity of jewelry from

Chieti on his fingers and his shirt. Don Antonio Brattella, ... a man who exuded his importance through all his pores and particularly through the lobe of his left ear, which was as large as an apricot, recited aloud Giovanni Peruzzini's lyric drama; and the words, coming out of his mouth, took on a Ciceronian rotundity.<sup>16</sup>

Petrella's operas disappeared from the programs of the major theaters only a few years after they first saw the light of day, but they remained important much longer in the repertoires of the minor theaters, whose aim was not to satisfy the needs of the experts but those of a wider public. For example, Naples' Teatro San Carlo performed *Jone* for the last time in 1869, while the local Teatro Bellini kept the opera in its repertory until 1913. One typical "teatro minore" was the Milanese Circo Cineselli,<sup>17</sup> later known as the Teatro dal Verme. "Among the popping of corks and cigar smoke, opera buffa and opera seria have made their triumphant entry in those two popular theaters, called the Nuovo teatro Re and the Circo Cineselli," one reads in the *Gazzetta musicale di Milano*; "we will not go to such places to seek sublime art."<sup>18</sup> Especially after Italian unification, more of these houses opened; their audience was mainly the growing middle-class, a wider public than that which frequented the major theaters.<sup>19</sup> The repertory tended to be narrow, avoiding those works considered "difficult" operas and concentrating on Verdi's most popular operas such as *Il trovatore* and *La traviata*, established "classics" like *Il barbiere di Siviglia* or *Lucia di Lammermoor*, a handful of works by now-forgotten composers, and, later in the century, also some French operetta. During its first season in 1866, in what seems to have been a representative program for these minor theaters, the Circo Cineselli staged Petrella's *Le precauzioni*, Rossini's *Il barbiere di Siviglia*, and Serafino De Ferrari's *Pipelet* (Venice, 1855).<sup>20</sup>

The existence of these theaters confirms the thesis—proposed most famously by Antonio Gramsci—that opera in nineteenth-century Italy took the place of an almost non-existent popular literature: for reasons of both economics and taste, these minor theaters could be genuinely "popular" in a way that the major opera houses never were. In 1874 a writer for the *Gazzetta musicale di Milano* attempted to explain *Jone*'s popularity with reference to this notion of an influential popular audience, with tastes quite distinct from those reflected by critics:

that score, although criticized by the scholars, always exerts a fascination for the masses, who, without spending their time quibbling over the incorrect musical periods, faulty rhythm, and banality of certain numbers, find in it a wealth of melody and effect: in short, much to enjoy.<sup>21</sup>

An 1883 review from the same journal underlines the importance of Petrella's works within this repertory:

At the Carcano we have had yet another production . . . of *Jone*, an opera that should be given a bit of a rest, along with those other works that are . . . the [war horses] of the minor theaters. It seems impossible that, while Italy produces about fifty new operas every year, between the good, the mediocre and the bad, if an impresario wants to open a theater he must always turn back to the oldest and most worn-out scores.<sup>22</sup>

Verdi's operas were performed in such theaters but also in first-class opera houses, while from a certain period onwards Petrella's works were played only in the minor theaters. In other countries, the entertainment of a wider public was taken over by the operetta. It is true that the works of Offenbach and Lecocq were performed all over Italy beginning in the 1860s, but Italy developed an operetta tradition of its own only slowly. As Volker Klotz points out,

while elsewhere during the late nineteenth century the public's relentless longing for melodious sound was increasingly disappointed by the opera and satisfied instead by operetta, Italian opera remained obliged to the *bel canto* tradition. . . . Operetta as a clear alternative and as a provider of musical gratification was therefore not needed.<sup>23</sup>

The Italian opera of the nineteenth century has often been compared with the cinema, a comparison which seems more applicable for the minor theaters than for the major opera houses. A certain number of the former were indeed converted into movie theaters. In 1854 a critic praised Petrella for having written with Marco Visconti "a work suited to the intelligence and the needs of the audience."<sup>24</sup> The public whose needs were satisfied with Petrella's operas no longer exists. Verdi's operas have retained their public.

### Notes

\* I would like to thank David Rosen and Mary Ann Smart for their comments and suggestions about earlier versions of this article.

<sup>1</sup> Gabriele D'Annunzio, "La contessa d'Amalfi," in *Le novelle della Pescara* (Rome: Newton, 1995) [first published 1902], 117. (All translations are mine.) "Quando la compagnia giunse, i Pescaresi smaniavano nell'aspettazione. . . . Per le vie, nelle piazzette, su tutti i muri, grandi scritte a mano annunziavano la rappresentazione della *Contessa d'Amalfi*. Il nome di Violetta Kutufà risplendeva in lettere vermiglie. Gli animi dei Pescaresi si accendevano. La sera aspettata giunse."

<sup>2</sup> Francesco Florimo, *La scuola musicale di Napoli e i suoi conservatorii*, 4 vols. (Naples: Vincenzo Morano, 1880-82), 3: 372.

<sup>3</sup> Letter to an unknown correspondent of 17 August 1868; see Werr, *Die Opern von Errico Petrella. Rezeptionsgeschichte, Interpretationen und Dokumente* (Vienna: Edition Praesens, 1999), 213.

<sup>4</sup> *Il trovatore* (1862), No. 5, 1. "Petrella a Milano in questo carnevale è il Figaro del *Barbiere*; tutti lo vogliono, Petrella qua, Petrella là, alla Scala colla *Jone*, al Carcano colle *Precauzioni*; se ci fosse ancora un altro teatro d'opera non ci faremmo meraviglia di vedere anche in quello rappresentarsi un'opera di Petrella."

<sup>5</sup> *Il trovatore* (1869), No. 7, 1. "Petrella non è un genio; non è nè un Rossini, nè un Verdi, nè un Bellini, nè un Donizetti e nemmeno un Mercadante; ma le sue *Precauzioni* e la *Jone* sono opere che onorano un compositore."

<sup>6</sup> Werr, *Opern von Errico Petrella*, 213. "volentieri mi sottometto al severo giudizio (ma sempre giusto) del tempo!"

<sup>7</sup> See Verdi's letter of 3 August 1869 to Opprandino Arrivabene, *Verdi intimo: carteggio di Giuseppe Verdi con il conte Opprandino Arrivabene [1861-1886]*, ed. Annibale Alberti (Milan: Mondadori, 1931), 107-8.

<sup>8</sup> *Carteggi verdiani*, ed. Alessandro Luzio, 4 vols. (Rome: Reale Accademia d'Italia and Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, 1935-47) 1: 128-9. "Petrella non sa la musica, ed il suo capo-d'opera, *Le precauzioni*, pos-

Continued...

