

HISTORICAL APPROACH TO THE OPERA'S LIBRETTO-THEME  
IN ITALY FROM THE END OF THE 16TH CENTURY TO THE FIRST  
ITALIAN REFORM

---

*Areti Tziboula*<sup>1</sup>

PhD candidate in Historical Musicology, University of Macedonia,  
Thessaloniki, Greece

*Anna-Maria Rentzeperi-Tsonou*<sup>2</sup>

Associate Professor, University of Macedonia, Thessaloniki, Greece

ИСТОРИЈСКИ ПРИСТУП ТЕМАМА ОПЕРСКИХ ЛИБРЕТА У  
ИТАЛИЈИ ОД ЗАВРШЕТКА XVI ВЕКА ДО ПРВЕ ИТАЛИЈАНСКЕ  
РЕФОРМЕ

---

*Ареџи Цибула*

Докторанд историјске музикологије, Универзитет Македоније, Солун,  
Грчка

*Ана-Марија Ренцејери-Цону*

Ванредни професор, Македонски универзитет, Солун, Грчка

Received: 6 August 2021  
Accepted: 5 September 2021  
Review article

ABSTRACT

The creators of opera in Italy at the end of the 16th century gave great importance to the choice of their subject matter in order to reproduce an overall work of art according to the archetype of ancient Greek tragedy. During its progressive course, opera underwent changes, in which libretto and its subject matter constituted major issues of study and criticism and were reformed according to the style of each period but always with quality as a keystone. The present study examines the formation of the Italian opera based on the choice of the librettos from its birth to the first Italian reform.

1 atziboula@uom.edu.gr

2 arentzep@uom.edu.gr

KEYWORDS: Italian opera, Libretto, Florentine Camerata, Arcadian Academy, First Italian Reform.

#### АПСТРАКТ

Оперски ствараоци у Италији с краја XVI века велику су пажњу придавали избору тема опере, како би произвели свеобухватно уметничко дело према архетипу античке Грчке трагедије. Током свог развоја, опера се мењала, па су самим тим либрето и теме које су биране постајали повод за проучавање и критиковање и били су реформисани у складу са стилем сваке епохе, а кључна одредница реформе била је квалитет. У овој студији бавимо се формирањем италијанске опере на основу избора либрета, од њеног настанка до прве италијанске реформе.

Кључне речи: Италијанска опера, либрето, фирентинска камерата, Аркадијска академија, прва италијанска реформа.

The opera's libretto-theme varies depending on the historical period and the region that it comes from, while there are some common features in terms of its choice that reflect the historical and social context in which it is placed. This paper examines the development of the Italian libretto from its beginnings until the middle of the 18th century.

#### THEMATOLOGY OF THE FIRST LIBRETTOS

The first attempts to write an opera took place in Florence at the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> centuries by circles of intellectuals, including the so-called Florentine Camerata, under the auspices of Count Bardi and the composer Jacopo Corsi (Fawcett-Lothson 2009: 29–30). The choice of their subject-matter indicates the general tendency of Europeans for an intellectual and artistic Renaissance that began in the 15th century and continued in the 16th. This tendency was connected with the admiration for the Greek classical antiquity and the study of its philology. Thus, between 1502 and 1518, all the ancient Greek tragedies were translated, first into Latin and then into Italian. At the same time, the humanists of the Renaissance became acquainted with Aristotle's *Poetics*, a treatise that primarily focused on the analysis of tragedy. Specifically, in this work Aristotle states that tragedy is a complete imitation of a serious and remarkable act to a certain extent, which uses rhythm, harmony, chorus and dance, and, by stimulating the mental passions of compassion and fear, leads to purification. The revival of this total work of art was attempted by the first librettists, as they characteristically noted in prologues of their librettos (Aristotélès 1447a-1450b; Kimbell 1991: 35; Rana 2014a: 3).

The lyric theatre of Bardi's Camerata has similarities with the pastoral drama that had been popular in Italy since the mid-16th century. The pastoral drama is inspired by the golden age of classical antiquity and describes a blessed world where shepherds and nymphs, in cosmic harmony, lovingly relax in a nature of total beauty under the Mediterranean sky, with music as a way of life. Its basic techniques are the dream, the omens, the processions and the sacrifices. If in real life the combination of spirituality and feeling is difficult to achieve, in pastoral themes it is possible. The librettist takes the role of the shepherd and wishes to be in close contact with nature. The deities live blissfully in this blessed world and the phenomenon of passive delusion prevails, something that the artist takes full advantage of. Two of the most famous pastoral works of the time that inspired the first librettists were *Aminta* by Torquato Tasso (1573) and *Il pastor fido* by Battista Guarini (1581–1590). The first is superior in poetry and form, but the second is a model of combining poetry with theatrical and musical elements (Kimbell 1991: 42; Tampákē 2015: 42).

Another element incorporated in these first operatic efforts that creates the conditions for the acceptance of opera by the general public is the *intermezzo* – a small-scale spectacular and independent action of allegorical or mythological nature, in the form of ballet or imitation that may contain songs for one voice or chorus. The *intermezzo* was presented at the intervals of the comedies, between the acts, during events in the princes' courts. It was influenced by the popular comic theater that flourished in Italy of the time, the *commedia dell' arte*. The comic characters of the 17<sup>th</sup> century librettos derived directly from improvisations of previous years based on scripts by *commedia dell' arte* (Pirrota 1955: 315; Smith 1970: 10; Tampákē 2015: 40–42).

The first operas were gradually shaped by a peculiar connection of social, ideological and artistic ideas and practices and were written, as mentioned above, by humanists and musicians who excelled in the circles of aristocratic academies and the court. They were played mainly at royal weddings, princes' birthdays and state visits, but also at the Academies.

The first opera was performed during the Carnival of 1597–1598 in Florence. Its libretto was written by one of the representatives of the Florentine Camerata, the poet and humanist Ottavio Rinuccini (1562–1621), a student of Tasso. The opera was called *Daphne* and the music was written by Jacopo Peri (1561–1633). The work however, had been written earlier, according to a note by the composer himself in the prologue of his next opera, *Eurydice*. *Eurydice* is the first surviving opera; it was premiered at the wedding of Mary of Medici to King Henry IV of France in 1600. The libretto for *Eurydice* was written again by Rinuccini. Both operas have elements from pastoral and Greek drama with themes inspired by mythological myths and they are placed in a pastoral setting, with the chorus leading the action. The first opera is short, possibly as an aftereffect of the *intermezzo*. The second opera lasts almost twice as long, due to the belief of its creators that music-drama can stand on a more ambitious scale (Smith 1970: 6; Kimbell 1991: 53, 58–59; Sternfeld 1993: 4).

*Eurydice* influenced the writing of the second surviving opera *Orfeo* (1607), for the 1607 carnival season at the Mantuan court under the patronage of the Accademia degli Invaghiti. This opera, to a libretto by Striggio and music by Monteverdi, is widely regarded as the first significant opera (Rosand 1989: 115; Whenham 2002; Coelho 2018: 311).

Rinuccini's third libretto, *Ariadne* (1608) for Monteverdi, shows significant progress in comparison to his two previous operas, while the influence of the composer who collaborates in shaping the libretto is evident for the first time. Although the opera is mainly pastoral, the main characters are distinguished as archetypes of a higher class. It is noticeably longer, with the dramatic possibilities developed and the virtuosic elements accentuated, as well as full of color and spectacle borrowed from the intermezzi Kimbell 1991: 61–62). According to the Milanese friend of Monteverdi, Aquilino Coppini, with this opera the magical powers of ancient music have returned since it has the power to cause thousands of tears to the audience. Unfortunately, this opera has not been preserved (Schrade 1951: 240).

Gradually the libretto stabilized in a number of practices that characterized it and that were reproduced, with minor differences, from town to town, whereas its full development was noted in Venice after 1637, fostered by the ruling class of the Republic of Venice, which consisted of an oligarchy of doges and aristocrats. It supported the arts, financed the construction of theaters and decided on their management and repertoire. It was in Venice that the first opera house opened, the Teatro *San Cassiano* (1637), for the general public of different social classes with a differentiated ticket depending on the part of the auditorium (Smith 1970: 13; Rutschman 1979: 84; Tampákē 2015: 42).

## THEMATOLOGY OF THE LIBRETTOS OF THE 17<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY OPERA

Opera found the appropriate conditions for its development in Venice. The crucial importance of Venetian opera for the history of libretto lies in the fact that the majority of its librettists were members of the Accademia degli Incogniti<sup>3</sup> and students of the Italian philosopher and scholar of Aristotle, Cremonini. The first generation of librettists of this Academy questioned the Aristotelian philosophy and discussed issues of opera's libretto, such as the subject of separation into acts, the Aristotelian units, the use of dance, the happy ending and the use of comic characters in opera. They decided that although specific rules had been applied in ancient Greek tragedies, their modern society allowed the infraction of some (but not all) of them. Thus, they wrote their works either in 3 or in 5 acts, they established the happy ending and their plots were complicated. Important works of this period were Monteverdi's last operas *Il Ritorno d'Ulisse in patria* (1640) and *Le Nozze d'Enea in Lavinia* (1641) with a libretto by Badoaro, and *L'Incoronazione de Poppea* (1643), one of the first historical operas with a libretto by Busenello (Rosand 1989: 114; Knippschild 2005: 4; Muir 2006: 350).

But the Venetian opera itself was influenced by the developments in opera that took place in Rome between 1620 and 1640. These developments concerned on the one hand the settings which were supported by elaborate machinery and on the

3 Accademia degli Incogniti = Academy of the Unknown, as its members come in masks in order to have the comfort to express extreme ideological views (Rana 2014b: 3).

other hand the huge number of actors on stage with emphasis on immense choral parts. In addition, some of the operas in Rome were instructive and aimed to teach their audience the virtues of Christianity, so they used formal language to express finer feelings. The main opera house in Rome of the time was the Barberini Theater, founded by the homonymous family in 1632. It had a capacity of 3,000 spectators who came at the invitation of the owner and the audience was mainly noble and clergy. Festivals were also common in Rome and over time they become systematized. However, wars and rivalries among aristocratic families prevailed in the city, which resulted in an inferior operatic outcome. Thus, soon the main composers headed to Venice, taking with them the knowledge they had gained. Rome continued to produce opera, depending on the caprices of each pope, but its glorious days were over. In Venice conversely, there was cultural prosperity as evidenced by the fact that the number of four theaters that had been established until 1641, increased to sixteen by the end of the century, which operated in the various parishes of the city, with noble owners who rented them to businessmen, if and some fell into disuse<sup>4</sup> (Smith 1970: 12–13; Rosand 1990: 1).

As the audience flocked to the various theaters with enthusiasm, it was constantly asking for new productions. Thus librettists resorted to the method of renewing their popular librettos by inserting scenes and settings in the existing text and by adding new music. This policy lasted until the 18th century, with some examples found in the 19th century. Thus the same libretto could be used by many composers, a fact that indicated the importance of the libretto over the music which, after one or two performances, was lost. For this reason the music score of the operas of the period was seldom published while the opposite was done with the librettos (Smith 1970: 11, 14).

The preference for mythological themes soon subsided. A torrent of a variety of subjects overshadowed the pastoral. The Venetians were no longer attracted to the spectacle of man as a means of entertainment for the gods, nor were they fascinated by the heroes and deities of classical mythology. They were interested in the human element and the morality of the characters. Hence the librettos expanded with heroic, chivalrous, fictional and historical themes<sup>5</sup> (Ibid.: 9, 11; Kimbell 1991: 134).

4 All the theaters of Venice generally operated on the same basis. They opened in autumn and during the winter carnival season until the fasting period and the spectators went almost every night to see the same opera two or three times. At the beginning of the show, the lanterns and candlesticks were turned off to leave only the stage illuminated and the curtain was raised, while the opera often lasted until two in the morning. The general public attended in the open space of the theater and often had to stand while the boxes were leased throughout the year to nobles or diplomats who treated them like their private drawing rooms. Dinner was served there and at the same time there were transactions and gossip. Noise was very common in the theater and it bothered both composers and librettists as it did not allow the meaning of the opera to be understood. That is why librettists resorted to visual effects for the success of the performances (Smith 1970: 14–15).

5 Giovanni Faustini for example, known for his collaborations with Cavalli, wrote only 3 librettos based on mythological themes, while by the 1640s the plots of his librettos were based on his imagination (Kimbell 1991: 134).

Kimbell suggested that “the movement of opera away from a philosophical world of myth into an enchanted world of fantasy helps prepare the way for a strong influence from Spanish drama”, as touring Spanish troupes carried Spanish culture across the Italian Peninsula and mainly, for political reasons, Naples (Kimbell 1991: 134). The flourishing Spanish theater was characterized by complex and peculiar plots, full of intrigue and emotion. The Italian librettos borrowed the intricate plot from the Spanish drama and took elements from the style of the Spanish poet Luis de Gongora (1561–1627) which was characterized by phrasal exaggerations, ostentatious vocabulary, numerous metaphors and complex syntax. This tendency for charming language and embellished text become known as gongorism<sup>6</sup> (Smith 1970: 9, 11; Kimbell 1991: 134).

It is not possible to define the dominance of a genre among the various libretto-themes of the period because many librettos of this era were either lost or impossible to find. The first historical opera, however, is the opera *Il Sant' Alessio*, with a libretto by Giulio Cardinal Rospigliosi written in 1631 and performed in 1632. The opera attempts a depiction of the psychology of the Saint who lived in the 4th century A. D. The same opera is also regarded as the first opera buffa because it contains comic scenes with characters realistically designed from the everyday life of the 17th century. However, the comic scenes are secondary, so some musicologists suggest the opera *Diana schermita* (1629) by Parisani as the first opera buffa, and others the opera *Che soffre spera* (1639) by Rospigliosi<sup>7</sup> or the *Dal male il bene* (1653) by the same librettist.

After 1650 it became a constant practice to use the historical base of the classical sources differentiated and enriched with fantastic elements. Two of the most successful operas of the period were Cicognini's *Giasone* (1649) and *Orontea* (1656). The same tactic was used by the librettist Minato whose librettos were distinguished for their heroic tone. After the 1680s and 1690s there was a general tendency for historical operas due to the political conditions of the time, the Turkish threat and the establishment of the Holy Coalition in 1684 to fight it, but also to the trend of Italian society for reading history books. This trend was also promoted by the Italian politicians of the nationalist movement (Kimbell 1991: 135–136, 165).

Apart from historical themes, popular themes were those related to love affairs, where the lovers had to overcome obstacles in order to achieve happiness. The advantage of this type of libretto was that it could include a wide variety of emotions; furthermore, it offered opportunities for frequent changes of scenes during the

6 The Italian society of the time was generally extroverted, hungry for learning and receptive towards the culture of various European countries. In this context the Italian playwright, actor and publisher Flaminio Scala in 1611 published a volume of 50 works, mainly comedies and pastoral works from distant lands such as Russia and Poland (Smith 1970: 10).

7 Rospigliosi, since 1667 Pope Clement IX, was fully committed to the idea of opera – so much that, when he was crowned pope, he was accused of paying more attention to opera than to church matters. His comedies were influenced both by the Spanish theater and the *commedia del' arte*, for which he had a deep knowledge. He also enriched the libretto with exuberant scenes inspired by the hustle and bustle of the 17th century Italian city (Smith, 1970: 12).

performance resulting in a majestic and imposing spectacle (Smith 1970: 11; Kimbell 1991: 134).

Thus, the plot of the Italian opera libretto of the second half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century is based rather on emotion and love than on logic, unfolding magically, with all sorts of spectacular mechanisms, and developing on a series of intrigues, mixing the quality of mythology and tragedy with the scandal of comedy. Most themes revolve around the trials of a knight or a heroine who opposes the tyrant. Disguise, cunning, courage and luck play a major role in the development of the story, while elaborate love chains occur as sub-themes. After many adventures, which usually include imprisoning the hero, the tyrant is defeated and the hero merges with his lover in a victorious closing scene. Towards the end of the 17th century librettos with a satirical character appear, which indirectly refer to the customs of the time and to specific public figures.

From the genesis of the opera, much emphasis is given to the subject of the ending. In the first mythological operas the ending is characterized by the transformation of the tyrant-villain through the *deus ex machina*. That is in line with the general belief of the people of the time in the divine intervention to give a solution when the situation reaches a dead end. But this solution is not so happy after all. By the end of the 17th and the beginning of the 18th century, the happy ending evolves into the repentance and reformation of the evil tyrant. The librettist Giacomo Badoaro writes in the introduction to his opera *L'Ulisse errante* (1644) that the first librettists wrote operas that just showed the flaws of tyrants and led the public to despise tyranny, while the happy ending that is based on the reformation of the tyrant is instructive and also makes the audience happy.

Many scenes and comic characters are stereotyped and appear in every opera. These scenes become known as *contrascenes* and they derive from the *commedia dell'arte*. Typical comic characters are: the cute and lively younger cousin, the wrinkled nanny who whines about her old age and gives advice to the audience, the servant who stutters while the audience has understood what he wants to say and shouts it. These characters serve to emphasize, through contrast, the superior nature of the main heroes, to reveal the different aspects of their personalities and to provide a pleasant tone to the opera (Smith 1970: 8, 18–20; Kimbell 1991: 135, 186).

The opera of the 17th century also includes a number of standard scenes. One of them is the scene of light sleep, something that was common in the plays long before opera. It usually occurs in a garden or in woodland. The protagonist is often sleep-talking, revealing their real feelings for another character in the story. Occasionally their beloved arrives and overhears the unconscious confession of love and is pleasantly surprised. At times the hero is attacked by a villain. Other times he falls asleep without being noticed and when he wakes up he overhears the others. By the end of the 17th century and early 18th, these scenes evolve into dream scenes and are used as an occasion for impressive ballet.

There are also shadow scenes where a ghost or a shadow comes to the protagonist's sleep to advise or alert him. These scenes are known as *ombra* scenes. They are associated with dream scenes or they are independent.

Another standard scene is that of the protagonists reading aloud letters they receive. According to Smith, the reason that the librettists of the 17th century

preferred such scenes was that the audience, illiterate to a large extent, considered reading to be particularly important, almost magical, like the magic tricks unfolding in front of it. The same applies to the mirror, another standard object of the opera of the time (Smith 1970: 20–21).

As for the machines of the settings, they are the result of professional work and include clouds hanging from the stage, large chariots, moving walls, monsters that turn into warriors, downhill dragons, buildings that collapse due to earthquakes, magicians resurrected from the depths of the earth to a fireball, falling libraries, and other common smaller stage props. Objects such as chains symbolizing the prison, crowns and scepters, are entered into the stage in a basin covered with a cloth and are revealed when the cloth is removed (Larson 1980: 453).

Disguises are also necessary. It is rare for the 17th century opera not to involve one or more gender reassignments through costume. The beginning of this tactic is found in the *commedia dell'arte* but it extends beyond comic opera, when for example the female protagonist disguises herself as a man to save her beloved.

All of the above are complemented by more immediate effects such as smoke.

It is very important to have a balance between the settings. Thus in the opera of the beginning of the 17th century that is based on mythological plots, God, who symbolically and naturally excels all, descends from heaven to the center of the scene and the smaller deities descend in clouds on the sides. In the second half of the 17th century, when opera abstains from mythology, the difference in height is given by the use of towers: e.g. tyrants manipulate their people from their towers. The towers are also used as prisons for the heroes. Often there are two towers on stage at the same time where rival warriors shout curses at each other. When boats are needed for the plot, the person on deck stands higher than the others. The ship, as a stage object, gives the engineer the opportunity to demonstrate his abilities with the waves he is called to create (Smith 1970: 22–23).

All these visual media were important for the public to understand the plot of the 17th century opera, as the noise that prevailed in the theater made it difficult to understand the text. The spectacle was therefore a key component of the opera of the time. Sometimes however, the optical media was abused, hence, towards the end of the 17th century, Italian opera was in a chaotic state (Ibid.: 23).

## THE FIRST ITALIAN REFORM

As the 17th century drew to a close, the opera lacked moral meaning and the sacred was increasingly mixed with the profane, the historical with the imaginary, the natural with the unreal, the mythology with the modern, the truth with the allegory. Critics and scholars of the time perceived all of those as a shame of art and looked with contempt on the Italian opera productions of the 17th century. In addition, the pompous scenes with the magical mechanisms ceased to impress the audience that



had matured and thus saw the ridiculous sides of the spectacle and asked for something different<sup>8</sup> (Ibid.: 63; Kimbell 1991: 182).

Thus, the artists and intellectuals of the last decades of the 17th century and the beginning of the 18th, believed that the opera had to be purified and returned to the only true golden path of classicism and simplicity from which it had begun. In addition, they realized the perspective of installing moral, national and artistic ideas through opera and they were not satisfied with its mere entertaining role. Furthermore, the decay of excessive machinery on stage served the impresarios since they saved money by reducing it (Smith 1970: 63, Kimbell 1991: 184).

The operatic change, however, began with literature<sup>9</sup> and was centered in the Queen Christina's of Sweden (1626–1689) salon in Rome. Christina was one of the leading figures for culture in Rome. Poets recited their poems in her salon having adopted names of classic shepherds-poets of the mythical region of Arcadia in Peloponnese. They called Christina "Empress" or "Queen". They officially established an Academy after Christina's death in 1689, under the name Arcadian Academy and with the pipe of Pan as its emblem. Its members were clergy, aristocrats, poets and musicians. Their name referred to the Golden Age of the simplicity of Greek antiquity, but this was somewhat misleading as the character of the Academy evolved even as anti-pastoral. Namely, the main concern of its members became the "cleansing" of Italian poetry mainly from Marinism<sup>10</sup> which characterized the verse of the 17th century and the return of drama to the model of ancient Greek tragedy as expressed in the Aristotelian principles. Nevertheless, the libretto grew beyond Rinuccini and Striggio.

For the "aristocratic" opera written for the royal court, a simple folk pastoral tale was not enough. The ideals of Cornelius and Rakina worked to the benefit of both the "Greek ideal" and opera, as they provided a solid cohesion within a field far more comprehensive than the pastoral could ever offer (Burt 1955: 151; Smith 1970: 64; Kimbell 2014: 184; Rana 2014a: 5–6).

In the first half of the 18th century the Arcadian Academy grew and dominated in the Italian literature, having members from all over Italy and with the patrons of the opera seeking their inclusion in it and considering it an honor to receive Arcadian names.<sup>11</sup> Music was a major topic for its members. They considered the 17th century opera libretto as inferior poetry with unfortunate impurities of ancient elements with modern and tragic with comic, violating the Aristotelian principles of drama. They claimed the return to the pastoral character of the libretto-theme,

8 The French critics also commented negatively on the Italian opera and they wrote that it distorted the Greek ideals (Smith 1970: 63).

9 This may seem strange to the modern era that classifies opera to the musical genres. But in 18th century Italy, opera was considered a drama, a trend that had begun in 1650 (Burt 1955: 152).

10 Marinism is the elaborate and witty style of poetry and drama lyrics written in the style of the poet Giambattista Marino (1569–1625) <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marinism>, [accessed on 22. 8. 2020]

11 After these names they often added the initials P.A. for Pastor / Pastorella-Arcade (Smith 1970: 66).

purity of style, clearness from the comic aspects, re-establishment of the chorus and reduction of the arias which impeded the development of the action with equivalent increment of the recitativo parts. In other words, they argued for the reform of the libretto. In order to do that, the authors of the Arcadian Academy adopted the model of the French drama taking after the style of the French dramatists such as Corneille, Racine, Pradon and Molière. These writers stood out for their pure dramatic organization, austerity of structure, clarity and perspicuity of style, recording of the natural and real, analytical and discriminating moral and psychological analysis of the characters. The first libretto to adapt the above model was Grimani's *Orazio* (1688) and it was linked to Corneille's French drama, *Horace* (Smith 1970: 66; Rana 2014b: 6–7).

Whereas opera was forbidden in the Papal States during 1697–1709, certain changes in opera occurred in San Giovanni Grisostomo theater in Venice. There, the operas of previous years were gradually replaced by reformed ones, with librettos written by major poets, mainly members of the Arcadian Academy. One element remained constant though, and that was the aspect of love that the audience of all social levels and times looked for.

Silvio Stampiglia (1664–1725), founder member of the Arcadian Academy and court poet in Vienna was influenced by the ideas of the Arcadians. He reformed his librettos into concise and coherent works and he became the precursor of the well known librettists of the time Apostolo Zeno and Pietro Metastasio (Smith 1970: 68; Rana 2014b: 7).

The opera *La Forza del Virtui* by Domenico David of the Teatro san Giovanni Grisostomo in Venice in 1693 was considered by the Arcadians themselves as the first Arcadian opera. This work achieved great success, it was admired by Zeno and provided the source of inspiration for the development of opera of Metastasio (Burt 1955: 154).

Apostolo Zeno (1668–1750) originated from a well known Venetian family and he was a historian, critic and member of the *Accademia degli Animosi*. In his free time he wrote librettos which served mainly pedagogical purposes and were supposed to be read or recited in his cycle rather than to be sung. He felt that the Italian libretto had to be cleared from the exaggeration and that its reputation had to be reestablished towards the French predominance. As he was one of the founders and a main publisher of the journal *Giornale de' letterati d' Italia* from 1710 until 1719, he was aware of the criticism from the other side of the Alps for the decadent artistic values that predominated all over Italy. His major contribution to the Arcadian reform was the standardization of the form and the systematization of verse, with the order: recitativo – aria da capo – exit of the singer. Zeno was considered to be the initiator of the reformed style. His collaboration with the composer Antonio Caldara in Vienna helped the establishment of *opera seria* and opened up the way to Metastasio's innovations. He was indifferent to the music though, and his contribution was probably overestimated (Smith 1970: 68–69; Canon 2012: 34; Rana 2014b: 7).

As far as Metastasio<sup>12</sup> (1698–1782) is concerned, he literally grew up in the Arcadian Academy as he was grandson of the librettist and member of the Academy, Cardinal Ottoni and student of the author and one of the founders of the Academy, Gravina. His operas were played in Venice from the 1720s until the beginning of the 1730s when he succeeded Zeno at the post of court poet in Vienna. He was influenced by the Arcadians' style, but he developed it believing that he wrote in the Aristotelian style, in spite of the fact that he did neither obey the Aristotelian principles of space and time, nor used a chorus. Characteristic were the hints on philosophical and theological matters. His literary sources were the texts by Pertarch, Tasso, Ariosto, Guarini and Marini and from the ancient Greeks, Thoukididis and Herodotus while remarkable is the absence of the classical tragedians such as Euripides.<sup>13</sup> He also used travel and memory books as a source for inspiration such as the *Travels in the Mogul Empire* by Francesco Bernier. His plots usually represented the everyday life of the time and often had an exotic element given in an alleged historical way. He used six or maximum eight basic characters: at the top a couple of nobles to which another noble couple is added and a couple of servants or peasants, with intrigues developing among all the couples. The plots were developed in three, or four or five acts and in the form of dramatic scenes until the climax, which led to the happy ending. Metastasio achieved balance among the Arcadian rules, the practical needs of the Italian scene and the demands of the composers and the singers. He closely collaborated with his musicians and perhaps he understood the music more than any other theatre-poet of his time. His art was closer to the comic spirit than to drama even in his most passionate plays. For example, in his opera *L'Olimpiade* (1733), he plays amid lament and idyll and there is no sign of tragedy at all. In the next century, more than 300 composers set music to his librettos. He was not considered to be a mere "librettist" but the most acclaimed Italian poet, although he lived mainly in Austria (Burt 1955: 147; Kimbell 1991: 193; Burney 2010: 179; Rana 2014b: 8, 11).

The Arcadians, in general, did not base the development of their plots on the machinery, the spectacular settings and the magical elements. Furthermore, they collaborated with the composers only very rarely, so the latter missed the opportunity to intensify the dramatic climax with music. Of course the operas of the time offered spectacle, happy ending and a wide range of feelings – with those coming from erotic passions regarded as effeminate by the conservative critics of the time. The librettists chose their literary sources according to the morality and the patriotic actions of the main characters. In their plots, they dissociated the social classes and reduced the number of the servants and peasants. They removed the comic elements and established a sincere style, with special emphasis on outlining the virtue and the noble feelings of the protagonist, rather than recording their whole personality. But the most significant result of the Arcadian reform was the actual distinction between the genres of opera into *opera seria* and *opera buffa* (Kimbell 1991: 187, Rana 2014b: 10).

12 His real name was Pietro Antonio Trapassi.

13 He wrote a libretto with the name *Ifigenia*, but his source was Racine (Smith 1970: 70).

Of course, the Arcadian Academy was not the only advocate of the libretto's reform towards classicism. Other scholars and writers, such as Giuseppe Gaetano Salvatore in his work *Poetica toscana all'uso* (Naples, 1691) and Andrea Perucci, member of the Accademia dei Raccesi, in his work *Dell'arte rappresentativa premediata ed all'improvviso* (Naples, 1699), were strong proponents of the reform (Rana 2014b: 9).

Between the years 1725 and 1740 opera seria, at the time termed *dramma per musica*, reached a peak of perfection and preference on behalf of the public. Still, the Arcadian reform though utopian. It would be very hard, if not impossible for a theatre to survive only by performing reformed operas since the audience thrived on spectacle and the singers wanted to showcase their talent. In the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century *opera seria* entered a new critical phase which led to the second Italian reform (Kimbell 1991: 228).

## CONCLUSIONS

The Italian opera was conceived as a total work of art, in accordance with the Aristotelian unities. Consequently, the first librettists searched for subjects from the Greek mythology, but soon opera evolved into a popular phantasmagoric spectacle, whereas the mythological subjects subsided and heroic, chivalrous, fictional and historical themes emerged. By the end of the 17th century, it ceased to exhibit noble feelings and in the 18th century an attempt were made for a reform which led to the distinction between the genres of *opera seria* and *opera buffa*. The librettists of the time were inspired by the great French playwrights and by Italian poets of the Renaissance. That reform seemed utopian though, and opera entered a new critical phase while a second reform was approaching.

The Italian libretto, since its inception, was subject to changes and continuous developments, always owing to the unceasing effort of the librettists and musicians to produce a finer form of art. It did pass through periods of decline or exaggeration, but a constant strain for purification and perfection with quality as a keystone, ultimately led to reforms (Kotnik 2013: 303).

### LIST OF REFERENCES

- Aristotélēs *Poiētikē* [Aristotle *Poetics*], 1447a-1450b, Psēphiakē Vivliothēkē tēs Archaías Ellēnikēs Grammateias “Mnēmosynē”. / Αριστοτέλης *Ποιητική*, 1447a-1450b, Ψηφιακή Βιβλιοθήκη της Αρχαίας Ελληνικής Γραμματείας “Μνημοσύνη”. [http://www.greek-language.gr/digitalResources/ancient\\_greek/library/browse.html?page=1&text\\_id=76](http://www.greek-language.gr/digitalResources/ancient_greek/library/browse.html?page=1&text_id=76), [accessed on 7. 7. 2021].
- Burney, Charles (2010) *Memoirs of the life and writings of the Abate Metastasio*, New York: Gale ECCO Print Editions, North America.
- Burt, Nathaniel (1955) “Opera in Arcadia”, *Musical Quarterly* vol. XLI, no. 2: 145–170.
- Cannon, Robert (2012) *Opera*, Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Coelho, Julia (2018) “Claudio Monteverdi and L’Orfeo, Favola in musica: character construction and depiction of emotion” *Philomusica on-line*, Vol 17, N° 1, Rivista di Musicologia del Dipartimento di Musicologia e Beni Culturali dell’Università degli Studi di Pavia: 309–343, [http://riviste.pavianauniversitypress.it/index.php/phi/article/view/2013/11\\_COELHO\\_309\\_343](http://riviste.pavianauniversitypress.it/index.php/phi/article/view/2013/11_COELHO_309_343) [accessed on 7. 7. 2021].
- Corrigan, Beatrice (1973) “All Happy Endings: Libretti of the late Seicento”, *Forum Italicum: A Journal of Italian Studies* vol. 7, issue 2: 250–267.
- Fawcett-Lothson, Amanda (2009) “The Florentine Camerata and their Influence on the Beginnings of the Opera”, *IUSB Undergraduate Research Journal* Vol. 9: 29–34.
- Kimbell, David (1991) *Italian Opera*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Knippschild, Silke (2005) “Homer to the defense: The Accademia degli Incogniti and the opera Il Ritorno d’Ulisse in Patria in Early Modern Venice”, *The Homerizon: Conceptual Interrogations in Homeric Studies*, <https://classics-at.chs.harvard.edu/classics3-silke-knippschild-homer-to-the-defense-the-accademia-degli-incogniti-and-the-opera-il-ritorno-dulisse-in-patria-in-early-modern-venice/>, [accessed on 12. 12. 2021].
- Kotnik, Vlado (2013) “The Adaptability of Opera: When Different Social Agents Come to Common Ground”, *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music* Vol. 44, No. 2: 303–342.
- Larson, K. Orville (1980) “Giacomo Torelli, Sir Philip Skippon, and Stage Machinery for the Venetian Opera”, *Theatre Journal* Vol. 32, No. 4: 448–457.
- Lazarevich, Gordana (1971) “The Neapolitan Intermezzo and Its Influence on the Symphonic Idiom”, *The Musical Quarterly* Vol. 57, No. 2: 294–313.
- Neville, Don (2001) “Metastasio [Trapassi], Pietro (Antonio Domenico Bonaventura)”, <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.53181>, [accessed on 14. 7. 2021].
- Muir, Edward (2006) “Why Venice? Venetian Society and the Success of Early Opera”, *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History, Opera and Society: Part I*, Vol. 36, No. 3: 331–353.

- Pirrota, Nino (1955) “Commedia Dell’ Arte and Opera”, *The Musical Quarterly* Vol. XLI, Issue 3: 305–324.
- Rana, Iren (2014a) “The Role of Renaissance Humanism in the Origins of Opera”, [https://www.academia.edu/14192236/The\\_Role\\_of\\_Renaissance\\_Humanism\\_in\\_the\\_Origins\\_of\\_Opera](https://www.academia.edu/14192236/The_Role_of_Renaissance_Humanism_in_the_Origins_of_Opera), [accessed on 12. 12. 2021].
- Rana, Iren (2014b) “The Arcadian Reform Movement in Opera”, [https://www.academia.edu/14192203/The\\_Arcadian\\_Reform\\_Movement\\_in\\_Opera](https://www.academia.edu/14192203/The_Arcadian_Reform_Movement_in_Opera), [accessed on 12. 12. 2021].
- “Ombra scene”. In Root, Dean et al. (eds.) (2002) *Grove Music on line* <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.O903608> [accessed on 13. 7. 2021].
- Rosand, Ellen (1989) “L’incoronazione di Poppea”, *Cambridge Opera Journal* Vol. 1, No. 2: 113–137.
- Rosand, Ellen (1990) *Opera in Seventeenth-Century Venice The Creation of a Genre*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, Oxford: University of California press.
- Rutschman Edward (1979) “Minato and the Venetian Opera Libretto”, *Current Musicology* vol. 0, issue 27: 84.
- Schrade, Leo (1951) *Monteverdi, Creator of Modern Music*, London: Victor Gollancz Limited.
- Smith, Patrick J. (1970) *Tenth Muse: A Historical Study of the Opera Libretto*, New York: A. A. Knopf.
- Sternfeld, F. W, (1993) “Rinuccini and His Successors: Transformations of the Orpheus Libretto”, *The Opera quarterly* Vol. 10 (2): 4–9.
- Tampákē, Ánna et al. (2015) *Istoria kai Dramatologia tou Eurōpaikou Theatrou. Apó tēn Anagēnēsē ston 18o aiōna* [History and Dramatology of European Theatre. From Renaissance to the 18<sup>th</sup> century], Iōánnina: Sýndesmos Ellēnikōn Akadēmaikōn Vivliothēkōn, Ethnikó Metsónio Polutekhneío. / Ταμπάκη Άννα κ. ά. (2015) *Ιστορία και Δραματολογία του Ευρωπαϊκού Θεάτρου. Από την Αναγέννηση στον 18ο αιώνα*, Ιωάννινα: Σύνδεσμος Ελληνικών Ακαδημαϊκών Βιβλιοθηκών, Εθνικό Μετσόβιο Πολυτεχνείο.
- Whenham, John (2002) “Orfeo”, *Grove Music on line*, <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.O005849> [accessed on 13. 7. 2021].

## АРЕТИ ЦИБУЛА И АНА-МАРИЈА РЕНЦЕПЕРИ-ЦОНУ

### ИСТОРИЈСКИ ПРИСТУП ТЕМАМА ОПЕРСКИХ ЛИБРЕТА У ИТАЛИЈИ ОД ЗАВРШЕТКА XVI ВЕКА ДО ПРВЕ ИТАЛИЈАНСКЕ РЕФОРМЕ

#### (РЕЗИМЕ)

У овој студији разматрамо развој тема за либрето од момента настанка опере до друге италијанске реформе (Аркадијска академија) у првој половини XVIII века, као и релевантне податке о оперским жанровима.

Крајем XVI века ренесансни хуманисти створили су оперу као скупно уметничко дело, придајући велику пажњу избору сижеа. Прве опере писали су чланови Фирентинске камерате према архетипу античке грчке трагедије и Аристотеловим јединствима елаборираним у његовом спису *Поетика*. Уметници су бирали теме из античке грчке митологије и преузимали утицаје од пасторалног комада, интермеца и комедије дел' арте.

Ускоро је опера еволуирала у популарни фантазмагорични спектакл у којем је сценска поставка имала пресудну улогу за развој радње, док су митолошки сижеи потиснути у други план у корист херојских, витешких, фикционалних и историјских тема, са сложеним заплетима и интригама, под утицајем шпанског драмског театра.

Крајем XVII века италијанска опера више није имала моралну потку. Почетком следећег века чланови Аркадијске академије покушали су да прочисте либрета и да се врате начелима класицизма и једноставности, брисањем комичних елемената и редуковањем сценског ексцеса. Ово је довело до раздвајања два оперска жанра, названа *opera seria* и *opera buffa*. Либретисти тога доба инспирисали су се остварењима великих француских драмских писаца попут Молијера, Корнела и Расина, али и италијанских ренесансних песника попут Петрарке, Ариоста и Таса. Истакнути либретисти тога доба, Цено и Метастазио, играли су важну улогу у развоју реформисаног стила. Ипак, аркадијска реформа је била утопијска и ускоро је опера запала у нову кризу, отварајући простор за нову реформу.

Кључне речи: Италијанска опера, либрето, фирентинска камерата, Аркадијска академија, прва италијанска реформа.