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GIUSEPPE GALLIGNANI AND THE BEGINNINGS OF DICKENSIAN OPERA

Giuseppe Gallignani (1851-1923) is one of those unfortunate artists remembered more for his death than his achievements. Dismissed from his post as the long-serving director of the Milan Conservatory by the Fascist authorities, Gallignani committed suicide: a tragedy arousing the ire of Toscanini, who made his feelings known in no uncertain terms to those he considered responsible¹. But Gallignani had enjoyed a distinguished career as a musical administrator and composer of sacred music, and though his attempt to establish himself as an opera composer was largely unsuccessful, he had, as a very young man, working as a music teacher in Genoa, claimed an outstanding 'first': writing both words and music of the world's first opera based on a story by Charles Dickens. His *Grillo del Focolare*, adapted from *The Cricket on the Hearth* (1845), was premiered at the Sala Sivori theatre, Genoa, on 27 January 1873.

Given that Gallignani was not even born until Dickens's literary career had reached its midpoint, the pioneering nature of this achievement can easily seem surprising. But Britain, the country which might have been expected to take the lead in operatising Dickens, lacked the cultural apparatus and incentive to take this step. The school of so-called 'English Romantic opera' that commenced with John Barnett's *The Mountain Sylph* (1834), and thus coincided almost exactly with Dickens's literary career, showed little interest in novelistic adaptation and none in stories of contemporary English life². The debased but still popular

¹ HARVEY SACHS, *Music in Fascist Italy*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London 1987, pp. 34-35.

² English Romantic opera is closely related to the pan-European 'Grand Opera' tradition with its preference for subjects of historic interest and/or exotic appeal.

'burletta' tradition had accommodated some of Dickens's stories in the 1830s and '40s, presenting them in mainly spoken dialogue with a seasoning of song, but even the most musical of them, W. T. Moncrieff's *Sam Weller; or, The Pickwickians* (1837), stands as a distant ancestor of the later Dickens musicals, not the operas. The United States, probably the country after Britain most interested in staging Dickens, similarly had no native tradition of opera capable of accommodating Dickens's stories, and when American writers and composers did get around to setting Dickens to music in the 1860s and '70s, their adaptations took the form of burlesque and pantomime³. Thus, unlikely as it might seem at first, when Gallignani looked at Dickens's work with an aspirant opera composer's eye, presumably in 1872, he had the field very much to himself.

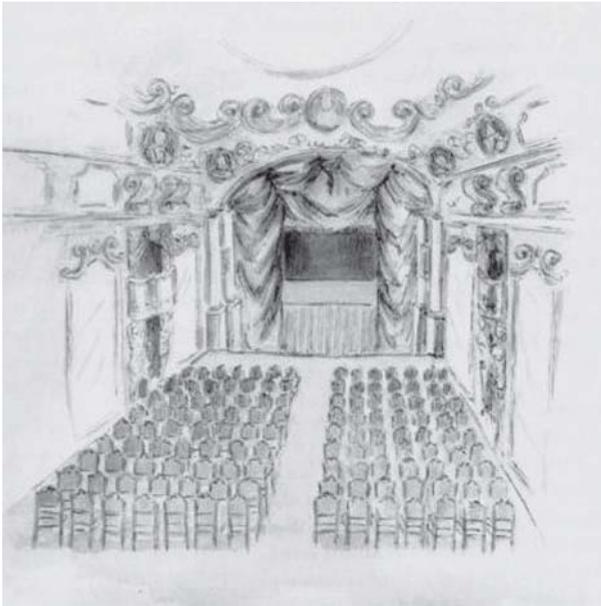
But what made Gallignani interested in Dickens? The great English writer was still little known in Italy⁴, and nineteenth-century Italian opera had no more partiality for typically 'Dickensian' material than English opera. There is certainly a distinct and important possibility that Gallignani was personally enthusiastic about Dickens, but it seems unlikely that he would have judged the novels to contain operatic potential were it not for the particular and unusual context in which he composed his *Grillo del Focolare*. It was put on for three performances at the Sala Sivori in January and February 1873 as the first in a series of small-scale operas, or 'operettas' as they were billed, played to raise money for charitable concerns. The profits from Gallignani's work went to the Genoa Institute for the Blind, a fact acknowledged with a large bouquet of flowers on what was obviously an emotional last night, 17 February⁵. As Dickens was mainly known in Italy for his Christmas books – *A Christmas Carol* having been translated in 1852, *The Chimes* in 1855, and *The Cricket on the Hearth* in 1856 – all of which were designed to inspire a spirit of seasonal kind-heartedness and charity in the reader, it is rea-

This explains why the novels of Dickens's friend Edward Bulwer-Lytton proved far more attractive to opera composers than Dickens's own (Wagner's *Rienzi*, composed as early as 1840, is just the most famous of the Bulwer-Lytton operas).

³ For the early British and American musical theatre treatments of Dickens, see my *Singing Dickens: Part I – Musical Theatre Adaptations, 1837-1873*, «The Dickensian» 109/2 (summer 2013), pp. 127-142; and *Singing Dickens: Part II – Musical Theatre Adaptations, 1873-1889*, «The Dickensian» 109/3 (winter 2013), pp. 247-260.

⁴ See CARLO IZZO, *Dickens in Italy*, Annali dell'Istituto di Lingue e Letterature Germaniche Università di Parma, 1974, pp. 119-128.

⁵ «Gazzetta di Genova», 18 February 1873.



Reconstruction of the interior of the Sala Sivori as it appeared in the late 1800s.

Drawing by Tiziana Speranza. Reproduced by kind permission of Tiziana Speranza and Piero Pruzzo.

sonable to conclude that Gallignani judged Dickens particularly suitable for a charity event. The fact that *Il Grillo del Focolare* does not appear to have been performed anywhere else supports the assumption that it was composed quite specifically for the charity programme in which it appeared.

The Sala Sivori context shaped Gallignani's work in other ways, too. It was a tiny theatre named after the once legendary Genoese violinist, Camillo Sivori (1815-94), who played in the inaugural concert at the end of 1869⁶. The theatre was opened and managed by Giuseppe Bossola (1829-1916), a friend of Sivori, who had come to Genoa in 1856 and established himself as a composer, orchestra director, concert organizer and piano retailer. An annex of the Spinola Palace, the Sivori, though built as a private theatre, had subsequently been converted into stables, and extensive renovations were required before it could be restored to something akin to its original function. Bossola wanted the Sivori to be artistically, though not socially, exclusive, and worked hard to get star performers to play there, originally conceiving of it more as

⁶ Information about the Sala Sivori is from Piero Pruzzo's invaluable study, *La Sivori: Una sala storica di Genova da tempio della musica a centro polifunzionale* (Genoa: Provincia di Genova/AGIS Liguria, 2002). Pruzzo does not mention *Il Grillo del Focolare*.

an intimate concert hall. Gradually, though, there was a shift toward small-scale theatrical performances, magic lantern shows and the like, and in the early 1900s the Sivori was converted into a cinema. Tiziana Speranza's drawing, based on early descriptions, gives a good idea of how the Sivori appeared in 1873, when *Il Grillo del Focolare* was performed there. Galignani, then, needed to produce a work very small in scale, and, ideally, one that would encourage charitable thoughts and even, perhaps, touch on the theme of blindness.

The small scale requirement was the one that would, seemingly, eliminate any Dickensian possibilities, for the greatest obstacle to the development of Dickensian opera has been the extraordinary intricacy of Dickens's plots and the sheer number of characters who do something significant in his novels. Yet Galignani unerringly selected the Dickens story both most suited to operatic treatment and susceptible to adaptation on a very small scale (its closest rival in this respect was the following Christmas book, *The Battle of Life*, but as this was one of Dickens's least successful stories it is understandable why it has never been adapted as an opera). A striking demonstration of Galignani's astuteness is the fact that – as the present volume demonstrates – three more *Cricket* operas had been composed by 1908, and a fourth had been written, but not composed⁷; remarkably, all these appeared before any other Dickens story was adapted as an opera. The *Cricket's* principal attraction to Galignani and his successors was clearly the unusual (for Dickens) compactness and tidiness of the plot, with its straightforward emotional shape (happiness: crisis: happiness). Other key attractions were the economic distribution of the main roles (three young women, three older men, one younger man), the limited number of locations (which can be easily reduced to two: the Peerybingles house, and one other), and the story's simple, homely charm.

Such a statement inevitably suggests that *The Cricket on the Hearth* was easy to adapt, but this was not the case. Galignani and his successors had to overcome some quite difficult obstacles that Dickens had

⁷ At some point in the mid-1890s, Francis C. Burnand wrote a libretto based on *The Cricket on the Hearth*. Very little is known of this, but B. W. Matz, editor of «The Dickensian», later reported, in an obituary notice, that «Sir Francis C. Burnand prepared an operatic book from *The Cricket on the Hearth*, for which Edward Solomon was to write the music. Owing to the death of the latter it was abandoned». See *Sir Francis C. Burnand*, «The Dickensian» 13, 1917, p. 159. Some idea of the work's style and intended audience can be obtained from *Pickwick* (1889), a 'dramatic cantata', an earlier collaboration between Burnand and Solomon.

placed in their way. The central narrative thread of Dickens's story is supplied by the miserly Tackleton's impending marriage to the reluctant and much younger May Fielding, who is rescued from him at the eleventh hour by her old lover, Edward Plummer. Tackleton experiences a very late, Scrooge-like conversion and reconciles himself to the loss. This simple sequence of events supplies the ground for everything else that happens, but, making things difficult for adapters, Dickens shows little interest in the Tackleton-May-Edward plot. May hardly appears in the story at all, while Edward, though present, is disguised as an old man, and for most of the story is a witness of events rather than a participant. The most obviously dramatic action in this plot, Edward's marriage to May even as Tackleton is on his way to the church, is not described at all, and the reader only discovers what has happened when Edward and May turn up as man and wife at the end. Dickens's real interest is, instead, in the impact of the disguised Edward's arrival on the idyllic marriage of John Peerybingle the carrier and his much younger wife, Dot. Edward, disguised, reveals who he really is to Dot (as the reader discovers at the end), drawing her into a clandestine communication which her husband sees and misunderstands. In Dickens's telling of the story, the dramatic crisis is not whether May can be rescued from marriage to Tackleton, but whether John can conquer his suspicion of his wife, and desire for revenge. But this is an internal crisis which seems on the whole better described in prose than enacted on stage. The other strand of Dickens's story is focused on Edward's blind sister, Bertha, who lives in a fantasy world because of her father's well-meaning lies, but she does not obviously add to the dramatic possibilities of *The Cricket*.

When *The Cricket on the Hearth* first appeared in 1845, there was the usual rash of theatrical adaptations in Britain but none of them enjoyed enduring success. In fact, in the period before opera composers turned their attention to the work there was only one really proven stage version: Dion Boucicault's *Dot* of 1859. When the British «Athenaeum» came to notice *Dot*, the reviewer pointed out that it «differ[ed] from preceding adaptations» in that Boucicault had dealt «freely and dramatically with the story ... thus avoiding that obscurity and mystery which, in its original state, were calculated to puzzle rather than to please an audience»⁸. In general, Boucicault shifted the focus of the story much more towards the May-Tackleton-Edward plot, a shrewd move in terms

⁸ «Athenaeum», 19 April 1862, p. 536.

of generating continuous dramatic interest. In *Dot*, May Fielding becomes a principal character, introduced in the first act agonizing over whether she should fulfill her engagement to Tackleton. Similarly, the audience is made aware of who Edward is early on, and knows why he has adopted his disguise. The operatic versions mostly follow Boucicault's general change of emphasis, not, I suspect, because of any direct influence, but because the change was forced by theatrical considerations.

Gallignani's skilful adaptation is the exception, though: either because of the very small scale on which he was working, or because he was attempting to be as faithful to Dickens as possible, he kept the focus very much on John and Dot. He clearly and crucially recognised that the Tackleton-Edward-May plot is simply a structural device to provide a narrative shape, a mechanism to reveal the depth of love in the Peerybingle marriage, and therefore, to a large extent, reducible to a number of offstage events registered rather than portrayed. This recognition allowed him to reduce the story to operetta proportions with remarkable ease. In his version, there are, with the sole exception of the drinking chorus (possibly made up from the musicians), just three singing parts – Gianni (John), Maria (Dot), and Tackleton [sic] – with a silent role for an unnamed 'stranger' (Edward). Gallignani's three little acts, or 'Parti', faithfully reproduce Dickens's three 'Chirps', with Maria's conversation with the stranger in Parte 2 and the stranger's driving past the Peerybingles' house with Marina (May) in his carriage in Parte 3 taking place offstage. The only significant change Gallignani was obliged to make was to relocate the party in Parte 2 from the Plummers' house to Tackleton's: an economical decision, required by the omission of Bertha and Caleb, which tightens and strengthens the plot. Altogether, it is remarkable how much this stripped-down version seems to capture everything essential in Dickens's novella, and the emotional temperature steadily and effectively rises until the middle of Parte 3, the climactic moment when Gianni realises first, that he loves his wife despite everything, and second, that his suspicions of her were wholly unfounded. Given that Gallignani's operetta was raising money for the blind, one naturally wonders whether it was Bertha and her blindness that first drew his attention to *The Cricket on the Hearth* and whether it was, accordingly, difficult to strike out that part of the story. But there was no good reason to keep it, within the limits Gallignani had to set himself, and he may perhaps have perceptively noticed that the theme of blindness spills out into the main story, too.

While the printed libretto of *Il Grillo del Focolare* (presumably in-

tended to accompany the performance) survives, Gallignani's music appears to be lost. The best idea of how it sounded is found in much the fullest review of the operetta, written by one 'G. B.' – probably Giuseppe Baffico – for the Genoa «Corriere Mercantile»:

La propria indole riflessiva e rifuggente dagli estremi, il carattere proprio dell'Autore al quale abbonda gentilezza di modi e di sentire, gli fanno prediligere la morbida e delicata forma gounodiana, come ben dice quest'operetta. Le ben congegnate combinazioni armoniche non vi mancano, e a qualche punto persino con discapito della melodia. Se però questo genere tutto delicatezza melodica e sfumature, qual è il gounodiano, sia il più conveniente per un'opera buffa, o anche di mezzo carattere, qual è questa del Gallignani, io non oserei affermare. Parmi che per tal genere di operette la Mignon, la Marta ed altre consimili avrebbero fornito all'autore un più acconcio modello. Di queste lievi mende si riscatta l'Autore con alcuni pezzi che posson dirsi di buona fattura, quali ad esempio il preludio, il duetto [Maria and Gianni in Parte 3], il terzetto [in Parte 3], il coro dei bevitori e la romanza della prima donna nella terza parte, improntata di una gentil malinconia che tocca il cuore, perché si sente che parte pure dal cuore⁹.

The dominating influence of the French composer is hardly surprising, for, as Julian Budden says, Gounod and Meyerbeer were «the strongest of strictly operatic influences» affecting Italian opera in the 1870s¹⁰. Gallignani's orientation towards Gounod is supported by the fact that his next opera, *Atala* (1876), was also judged as strongly influenced by the French master¹¹. In other respects, G. B.'s account of Gallignani's music for *Il Grillo del Focolare* seems to boil down to a question of how Dickens's story should be interpreted. Gallignani, perhaps influenced by his preference for the Gounodian style, interpreted it as sweetly pathetic and sentimental, whereas G. B., who clearly knew the original novella (for which he has words of high praise), thought it should be given a more lively, robust treatment. There is no reason to suppose that Gallignani's interpretation is significantly at odds with that of many English readers, however. G. K. Chesterton, for example, widely considered the greatest of all Dickens's critics, felt that *The Cricket on the*

⁹ «Corriere Mercantile», 31 January 1873.

¹⁰ JULIAN BUDDEN, *The Operas of Verdi 3: From Don Carlos to Falstaff*, Oxford UP, New York 1981, p. 271.

¹¹ See GIUSEPPINA MASCARI, *(S)fortuna dell'Atala di Chateaubrind nei libretti d'opera dell'Ottocento in Scapigliatura & Fin de Siècle: Libretti d'opera italiani dall'unità al primo Novecento: Scritti per Mario Morini*, ed. Johannes Streicher, Sonia Teramo and Roberta Travaglini, ISMEZ, Rome 2004, pp. 17-35 (25).

Hearth revealed the «very real weak side» of Dickens's Christmas philosophy:

The actual tale of the carrier and his wife sounds somewhat sleepily in our ears, we cannot keep our attention fixed on it, though we are conscious of a kind of warmth from it as from a great wood fire. We know so well that everything will soon be all right that we do not suspect when the carrier suspects, and are not frightened when the gruff Tackleton growls¹².

Gallignani may have captured this warm, comfortable, rather dreamy and not very dramatic quality of *The Cricket* very well, and in that case any lack of comic liveliness in his operetta could be attributed to Dickens himself.

Gallignani conducted the performances of *Il Grillo del Focolare*, with professional musicians borrowed from the Carlo Felice Opera House. The singers were all amateurs: a Maria Paradis played Maria, «signori Paradis e Bacigalupo» took the male parts¹³. The occasion was undoubtedly unusual. G. B. judged that «il fatto che essendo limitato lo spazio della sala e quindi anche il numero dei biglietti, questi son tutti facilmente allogati dai promotori presso gli amici, i parenti e i conoscenti». There was thus a friendly and encouraging atmosphere, very different from the normal opera audience, and Gallignani faced:

un pubblico disposto ad applaudire per poco che ci sia di lodevole, disposto a incoraggiare chi ha qualche merito ed è ricco di promesse per l'avvenire, in grazia del quale è assai più indulgente per il presente che non sia il pubblico degli altri teatri, che spesso o per prevenzione, o per fretta di giudicare, o per altro gusto che ci abbia, uccide in germe i più begli ingegni, come fu a un pelo di fare con Bellini e Rossini.

Not surprisingly, then,

il giovine maestro e i professori furono applauditi già dal bel principio appena finito il preludio. E vivi applausi e chiamate al proscenio s'ebbero pure insieme col maestro, di tre egregi dilettanti ai quali era affidata l'esecuzione dell'operetta, specialmente la signora omonima della protagonista¹⁴.

Il Grillo del Focolare was Gallignani's second stage work to be performed. His first, *Il Sindaco Cavaliere*, an opera buffa, had been privately

¹² GILBERT KEITH CHESTERTON, *Charles Dickens*, ed. Toru Sasaki, Ware, Wordsworth Editions, 2007, pp. 89-90.

¹³ «Gazzetta di Genova», 18 February 1873.

¹⁴ «Corriere Mercantile», 31 January 1873.

performed in 1870, when he was still a student of the Milan Conservatory, at the small theatre owned by Eugenia Attendolo Bolognini. His first bid for wider, commercial recognition as an opera composer came with *Atala*, which was a *succès d'estime* at the Teatro Carcano, Milan, in 1876, but never revived. It is worth giving brief consideration to *Atala* here, for the great difference of subject from *Il Grillo del Focolare* says something about the unorthodox nature of the latter in the 1870s. The libretto of *Atala* was by Emilio Praga (1839-75), a notable member of the *Scapigliati*, and was adapted from the celebrated French novella of the same name by François-René de Chateaubriand, originally published in 1801. *Atala*, significantly, had thoroughly proved its operatic potential before Praga and Galignani turned their attentions to it: there had already been seven operatic versions, including three Italian ones. Pacini's version, with an altered, happy ending was staged as early as 1818, and there were further versions by Giovanni Sebastiani (1850) and Andrea Butera (1851). Nor had the subject exhausted itself: there was a later Italian version by Filippo Guglielmi (1884), and eight operatic adaptations in all subsequent to Galignani's¹⁵. Here, then, the choice of subject was conventional, and very much in tune with what nineteenth-century audiences expected in an opera; the novella itself, furthermore, presented no significant obstacles to stage adaptation. Chateaubriand's tale of doomed love across tribal boundaries in eighteenth-century Florida, culminating in the heroine's suicide, offered all the exoticism and excuses for intense expressions of emotion in which nineteenth-century opera audiences revelled, and Galignani may have reasonably considered that the subject had particular resonance in the wake of *Aida*.

Atala, then, was a work in the operatic mainstream, and though ultimately it did not manage to establish Galignani as a significant opera composer, it shows him well aware of market tendencies. It highlights, by contrast, the unconventional nature of *Il Grillo del Focolare*, a work composed for a special occasion, and with the sort of subject matter that would only become standard after the rise of more domestic and realistic opera a generation later: a rise that explains the appearance of Zandonai's much more complete and profound treatment of *The Cricket on the Hearth* in 1908. Yet given the fact that Galignani's main-

¹⁵ For a complete list, see CHARLES H. PARSONS, *Opera Subjects* (Volume 9 of the Mellen Opera Reference Index), Edwin Mellen Press, Lampeter 1989, p. 27. For discussion of the Italian versions, see G. MASCARI, *(S)fortuna dell'Atala...*

stream operas like *Atala* had a very limited impact, and are most unlikely to be revived in the future, it is arguably the unconventional *Il Grillo* that most justifies him claiming a small place in operatic history. With Dickens now thoroughly established as one of the greatest and most influential novelists of the nineteenth century, it is a considerable achievement to have been both the first opera composer, by over twenty years, to manage what Michael Halliwell calls ‘metaphrasis’ – that is, the complete «‘translation’ or transposition of a particular artistic work from one genre to another»¹⁶ – and to have set the agenda for operatic adaptations of Dickens for the next four decades¹⁷.

¹⁶ MICHAEL HALLIWELL, *Opera and the Novel: The Case of Henry James*, Rodopi, Amsterdam 2005, p. 11.

¹⁷ I am deeply indebted to Luigi Astengo, who searched for reviews and notices of Gallignani’s *Grillo del Focolare* in the Biblioteca Berio, Genoa. Parts of this essay have appeared in «Doshisha Studies in English» and «The Dickensian»; I am grateful to the editors for permission to reprint the material here.