

Robert L. Weaver
*Florentine comic operas
of the 17th century*

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William C. Holmes

Robert L. Weaver's dissertation is, without doubt, one of the most useful additions to our knowledge of seventeenth-century opera to have appeared in recent years. Early Florentine, Roman, Venetian, and Neapolitan operas have previously been studied, at least to the extent of providing the serious student with a few basic biographical-bibliographical tools. This is not to say that, especially in the case of Roman opera, nearly enough music has been made available in order to make it possible to reach definite stylistic conclusions. On the contrary, much more work will have to be done if we ever hope to unravel the complicated web of events which led to the well-known operatic masterpieces of the late 18th century.

A certain lack of interest in the first century of opera perhaps explains this scarcity of basic studies. Interestingly enough, most of the preliminary studies in 17th-century opera (with the notable exceptions of Grout's *Short History of Opera*, Anna Amalie Abert's *Claudio Monteverdi und das musikalische Drama*, a few articles, and a handful of dissertations) were written more than thirty years ago. Prevailing musicological interests change and with these changes, middle and late 17th-century opera has suffered neglect.

One of the most important and astonishing lacunae in musical history has been Florentine opera after the middle of the seventeenth century. Rome, Bologna, Naples, and Venice—to name only a few cities—have had their chroniclers of theatrical history, with which, of course, the history of opera is so intimately connected. As Weaver points out in his preface, Florence has not been so fortunate; there are few standard reference works dealing with theatrical life in that city.

Accordingly, Weaver devotes 200 of the 366 pages of his dissertation to the Academies, academic comedy, and the greatest Florentine writer of academic comedies, Giovanni Maria Moniglia (1624-1700). The chapter headings in this section of the dissertation are as follows: The Academies; G. M. Moniglia; The Academic Comedies; The Sources and Structure of the Librettos; Comic Operas in Florence and at Pratolino; The 18th-Century Critical View of 17th-Century Drama; and The Melani Family.

The Academy of the Immobili was one of the most active of the

Florentine academies and enjoyed the patronage of Cardinal Giovanni Carlo de' Medici. 1657 marks the first performance by the Immobili of a comic opera at "their" theater, La Pergola. Between 1657 and 1662 there were 6 comic operas presented at the Pergola. The projected seventh performance in 1662 was cancelled because of the death of Cardinal Giovanni Carlo. The librettos of all of these operas were written by Moniglia.

Interestingly enough, with the exception of the professional solo singers, all dancers, chorus members, etc. were noble members of the Academy. Indeed, as Weaver remarks, "It is the stamp of the cultured amateur which in fact sets off the comic operas of Florence in the middle of the century" (p. 84).

The librettos especially of the Florentine comedies are noteworthy for their economy of means and expression. This is in marked contrast to Roman opera of the period, which relied heavily on complicated stage machinery. Weaver's many allusions to "the Roman and Venetian spectacles" can, however, be misleading, for it is precisely the more economical means that set apart, generally speaking, Venetian operas from Roman. Such a spectacle as Cesti's *Il Pomo d'Oro* cannot be considered in the general picture since it is a gigantic exception to the usual theatrical style of Venetian opera. And, as for Roman comic operas, both *Chi soffre sperì* (1637 and 1639) and *Dal Male il bene* (1653 and many times later) are notable for the economy of means in their librettos. The *intermezzi* which close each act of *Chi soffre sperì* of course introduce lavish effects that have little if anything to do with the development of the plot, but the body of the opera is essentially simple and unadorned. In *Dal Male*, the number of dramatic parts is considerably reduced: there is no chorus and there are no *intermezzi*. Weaver remarks that as Moniglia grew older his librettos became simpler; the same can be said of Giulio Rospigliosi's aforementioned Roman comedies.

Weaver's investigation of the influences of the improvised *Commedia dell' Arte* on mid-century comic operas is enlightening and whets one's appetite for further studies in this area. The braggart warrior, the old doctor, and the many types of comic servant found in these academic comedies can all be traced back to classical Roman types, as Moniglia himself wrote in the introduction to his works published during his lifetime. Weaver aptly remarks that it is the academic environment into which these comedies were born which was responsible for their classical orientation.

Chapter VII introduces the Melani family, that extraordinary group—almost all of which were musicians. Atto, the famous singer, has certainly left posterity the most voluminous and colorful records of his life. His brother, the composer Jacopo (1623-1676), is the Melani who most concerns us here, for he set five of Moniglia's seven comedies to music. Chapter VIII deals with the first of these musical comedies, *La Tancia overo il potestà di Colognole*, a *dramma rusticale*, performed at the Pergola in 1657. Its extraordinary popularity can better be appreciated when one notes that its libretto was published

six times in 70 years and that the opera itself was revived as late as 1727. The recitative of *Il Potestà* is lively, especially in the comic parts. There are da capo arias, but these are assigned to other characters than the heroic lovers. Interestingly, Melani attached certain musical styles to the various types of characters, e.g., the comic parts are all in common time and major mode. I question Weaver's theory that the typical mid-17th-century mannerism of a slur "over the barline" from the leading tone to the tonic note should be performed other than as written (p. 230). Weaver suggests delaying the leading tone until the following beat in order to create a dissonant appoggiatura which resolves upward. Voice instruction manuals of this period never specifically mention this manner of performance and consequently one is left with the distinct impression that the slur should be performed as it is written on the page.

Goldschmidt long ago published some of the music from *Il Potestà* in his *Studien zur Geschichte der italienischen Oper*. A glance at these few pieces will convince any reader that Weaver does not exaggerate when he calls it "one of the masterpieces of the century."

Chapter IX is devoted to a listing of the Ballet-Operas performed at the Medici court. *Ipermestra* in 1658 (Moniglia - Cavalli) and *Ercole in Tebe* in 1661 (Moniglia - Melani) were among the first formally defined court operas of the type which were a few years later to be performed in such capitals as Paris and Vienna.

Chapter X takes up one of the great, but little-known, operaburlesques of the 17th century: Filippo Acciajouli's *Il Girello*, set to music by Melani. After its first performance in Rome in 1668, it was performed in a number of Italian cities. Some of these later performances, one of them staged with puppets, may have had additional music by other composers. The *Avvisi di Roma* described the opera as "un po' grassetta" (translated by Weaver as "a trifle long," but probably more accurately rendered as "a trifle racy"). *Il Girello* boasts, among other things, two full-fledged patter songs. However, though its comedy verges on the slapstick, its musical style is not at all venturesome.

Weaver's final chapter sums up his findings under the title "The Melani Rewarded." There are two appendices: a listing of the known compositions of Jacopo Melani (both scores and librettos), and all the operas and operatic entertainments performed in Florence from 1597 to 1741 (arranged both chronologically and alphabetically by title).

The reader can see that the main purpose of this dissertation is clearly to present hitherto uncollected bibliographical data; stylistic discussions of the music are held to a minimum. As such I have found this work to be an invaluable aid to the study of opera in the mid-17th century. Let us hope that some of the scores of the Moniglia-Melani collaboration will be made available in the near future.