

Italian Opera Librettos with Similar Plot: Plagiarism or Established Practice?

Luca Pavan

Abstract—The article analyzes several Italian opera librettos spanning various eras of opera's history. The librettos are divided in subgroups having in common the similar plot. The language of librettos is analyzed searching for common verses or parts of verses. The analysis is carried out using a software tool which compares two texts. It is showed that the librettos with the similar plot often have some similar verses or parts of verses.

According to the results of the analysis it is possible to assume that the librettists, especially in the XVII and XVIII centuries, used previous librettos with the similar plot not only as a source of ideas for their work, but also as a model of poetical style. The author assumes that this tendency also had economic reasons, being the opera a huge business in all Italian states and abroad.

The use of older librettos with similar plot as a model to write the new librettos started to disappear in the second half of the XIX century. One of the reasons for this can be the changes of librettos' language. With the new Italian language, which was partly different from the previous Florentine vernacular language, the oldest librettos could hardly be taken in consideration as a model of poetry.

Towards the end of XIX century the new copyright laws in Europe contributed to put end to the practice described in the article.

Finally, the adoption of repertoires by the theatres caused the decrease of new operas' request, contributing to stop such a practice.

Index Terms—Italian opera librettos, opera plot, plagiarism.

I. INTRODUCTION

Along three centuries of opera's history, starting from XVII century till XIX century, thousands of operas were written in the Italian states [1]. Since its birth opera quickly became very popular and a huge business. The request of new operas was very high. Often librettists and composers were constrained to work very hard to meet their deadlines. Under the social point of view, opera's performances were often a success, with many people involved in their realization.

According to the first rules established by the *Camerata dei Bardi* at the end of XVI century, the opera librettos were required to use a poetical style derived mainly from XIV century's Tuscan poets. Some studies already demonstrated that the librettos used the similar language coming from Florentine vernacular poetry [2], [3]. This, in some cases,

could be seen as a tendency to plagiarism, especially when complete verses of Florentine vernacular poets were used in the librettos [3].

Due to the high request of new operas, sometimes a libretto could be used for newest operas with new music. This was a common practice, especially in the XVIII century. However, the librettists had an alternative - to rewrite the libretto using the similar plot.

The article describes the tendency to use a previous opera's plot to write new operas through the examination of librettos' language. The analysis is conducted on a *corpus* of Italian librettos found on an internet site (www.librettidopera.it). The librettos are chosen according to the similar plot. In the most cases they also have an identical title. The similar plot librettos that author takes for analysis purposes sometimes are written with several decades distance. The librettos are analyzed using *Wcopyfind*, a software tool which compares two texts and searches for common words and phrases. The results of the analyzed librettos show that they often contain similar verses. This proves that the librettists were using oldest librettos with similar plot as a model. The further discussion provides some conjectures to explain this tendency.

II. THE ANALYSIS OF THE LIBRETTOS

The analyzed librettos come from different time periods of opera's history. One of the most popular opera's subjects, the tale of Orfeo, was brought to the scene many times. The first libretto, *L'Orfeo*, was written by Alessandro Striggio in 1607, but already in 1616, another libretto appeared with the title *Orfeo dolente*, written by Gabriello Chiabrera. The comparison among the two texts already shows some common parts of verses ("ch'a voi ritorno", "volta a porger preghi", "per queste selve", "al suo cantar"). However, even with these exceptions, still the two librettos are different.

In the XVIII century the tendency to write librettos with similar plots or featuring popular characters coming from a certain kind of literature is very common among librettists. There are several examples. Two librettos from the saga of Don Quixote are *Don Chisciotte in corte della Duchessa* by Giovanni Claudio Pasquini (1727, with the music by Antonio Caldara) and *Don Chisciotte della Mancina* by Giambattista Lorenzi (1769, with the music by Giovanni Paisiello). Both librettists are among the most prominent of the century, especially Pasquini [4]. More than forty years are in between the two librettos. The librettos have in common two characters, Don Quixote and Sancho Panza. However, when the librettos are compared, the Lorenzi's libretto shows many similarities with the Pasquini's libretto, including the use of

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complete verses (for example: “il tuo voler”, “me l’hanno detto altre duchesse [contesse] ancor”, “i cavalieri erranti”, “ha combattuto col capo general de’ galeotti, Gines di Passamonte”, “Come ti piace”, “di che temer”, “Come a dire?”, “Oh questo è troppo!”, “al grand’eroe si porga da lavare”, “corre precipitoso a tavola”, “promessa un’isola mi avete da governare a mia disposizione”, “di un’isola vacante, che mi trovo”, “Pensa, che alfin [infin] tu sei governatore”, “con seguito di Cacciatori, che portano”, “nel tempo stesso”, “con abito di Satiro, e detti”, “qui mi manda a cercare [di] Don Chisciotte”, “Dov’è questo guerrier?”, “da te stesso ravvisar”, “a riguardo de’ tuoi [tanti] meriti”, “o spada, o lancia, ch’io sono [sempre] Don Chisciotte della Mancia”, “mi porta la pietà”, “che ad onta”, “Perché si disincanti qui”, “ne destinar l’impresa al tuo scudiero”, “Questa sarebbe bella. Come a dire?”, “Sancio, felice te! Sentiamo il modo”, “la bella delle belle”, “con seguito di Matrone, e detti”, “mi sento venir meno”, “Io son contessa nel regno di Candaja”, “e tanto basta”, “Or Clavilegno ascendi”, “[e] in groppa teco il tuo scudier ti prendi”). Because of such a high number of similarities, it is possible to argue that this is a case of plagiarism. However, though Lorenzi uses the same verses of Pasquini, these verses are often sang by different characters in the two librettos.

Other two examples of the XVIII century are the librettos with the same title *Armida*, the character coming from Torquato Tasso’s *Gerusalemme liberata*. The first libretto was written by Jacopo Durandi in 1770 (the music was by Pasquale Anfossi) and the other was written by Nunziato Porta in 1784 (for the composer Franz Joseph Haydn). The comparison of those librettos shows many similar or identical verses (for example: “[Gran] sala nella reggia di Damasco”, “Idreno [sul trono] con seguito di Satrapi, e di Guardie”, “l’onde, si propaga improvviso a queste sponde”, “Ah, che dici, o signor! Cos’è sorpresa! Assaliti così!”, “Che paventi, idol mio? Rinaldo è teco!”, “Morir mi sento”, “con seguito di Soldati”, “Valorosi compagni, nuovi perigli a superar vi guido”, “Ti seguirò, ben mio”, “parte ascendendo il monte”, “Prencesse, alfin ti ritrovo. Io non credei”, “Ubaldo! Oh mio rossor”, “Ma fu dolce l’error!”, “Oh Dio! Tu non [sai] comprendi”, “Io prende per [la] mano”, “Barbaro! E ardisci ancor...”, “vieni, e placata io sono: ma non dirmi più mai”). In this case the Porta’s libretto could be considered a sort of remake of Durandi’s libretto. However, in Porta’s libretto there are also many original parts.

The most famous case of suspected plagiarism in opera’s history is probably the one involving the two librettos *Don Giovanni* by Giovanni Bertati (for the composer Giuseppe Gazzaniga) and, later, by Lorenzo da Ponte. Both librettos were written in 1787. Due to the exceptional quality of the Da Ponte’s libretto most of scholars reject to accuse Da Ponte of plagiarism [5]. His libretto is not a remake of Bertati’s libretto, even if sometimes it is possible to find similar verses when comparing the two librettos (for example: “agli occhi suoi”, “Oh, [in] quanto a questo”, “mio bene”, “che al primo [tratto] istante”, “v’invita il mio [signor] padrone”, “Dell’empio [Di colui] che mi trasse [al passo estremo] a morte ria”, “la statua china la testa”, “Tu m’invitasti a cena”, “Dammi la [destra] mano in [per] pegno”, “del mio cor”, “in un ritiro io vo a passar la vita [Io me n’ vado in un ritiro a finir

la vita mia]”). For sure, Da Ponte used the Bertati’s libretto as a model, as he also did with several authors of Italian literature [3]. Da Ponte was influenced by many authors, but his ability to create new dramaturgical contexts makes his *Don Giovanni* one of the best librettos ever written. Together with Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart’s music *Don Giovanni* is one of the most successful opera of all times. However, Bertati and Da Ponte had, as a model, also the Nunziato Porta’s libretto *Il convitato di pietra* (1776). There is almost no information about Porta’s life. However, it is known that he became popular in Prague in 1775 because of his libretto *Orlando paladino*, with the music by Pietro Guglielmi and, in a following version, by Joseph Haydn [6]. In the case of *Don Giovanni* there is a similar verse comparing Bertati’s libretto with Porta’s libretto (“Di colui che mi trasse a morte ria, dal ciel aspetto [n’attendo] la vendetta mia”). The same verse is similar also in the Da Ponte’s libretto (“Dell’empio che mi trasse al passo estremo qui attendo la vendetta”).

Mozart, several years before *Don Giovanni*, wrote the music also for a serious opera, *Mitridate re di Ponto* (1770), based on a libretto by Vittorio Amedeo Cigna-Santi. Another libretto with the similar title *Mitridate Eupatore* was previously written by Girolamo Frigimelica Roberti in 1707 for the composer Alessandro Scarlatti. The plot of both the librettos in this case is different [7] and it seems they have in common only the main character, but there are some similarities comparing their language (for example: “che del gran Mitridate”, “di questo seno”, “in questo di”, “se n’ vada”, “più, tanto più”, “Porto di mare, con due flotte [Spiaggia di mare, con tutta l’armata]”, “di mia morte”, “sia noto a Mitridate [a l’Asia]”, “sia tua cura”, “a tal segno”, “la tua vita”, “la sua gloria”).

Another popular libretto which is based on an older libretto is *Il barbiere di Siviglia (Almaviva, o sia l’inutile precauzione)* (1816) by Cesare Sterbini, with the music of Gioacchino Rossini. This libretto was based mainly on *Il barbiere di Siviglia (ovvero La precauzione inutile)* (1782) by Giuseppe Petrosellini, with the music of Giovanni Paisiello. Sterbini’s libretto could be considered as a remake of Petrosellini’s libretto. In fact when compared, the two librettos have many similarities (for example: “a suo tempo”, “Il Conte avvolto in un [gran] mantello”, “si lascia [fa] cadere la carta in strada”, “Oh me felice”, “v’è per insegna”, “Un ospedale ha fatto di tutta la famiglia a forza d’oppio [M’ha rovinato tutta la famiglia con narcotici]”, “col maestro di musica [cappella]”, “per disegnare un fiore sul tamburo [su la veste che ricamo per voi sopra il tamburo]”, “Presto, presto andate via! [a letto]”, “Oh questa è bella!”, “Gioia e pace sia con voi [per mill’anni]”, “No, vado io stesso”, “Vedete che gran male! [cosa], “giallo come un morto”, “tastandogli il polso”, “gli dà una chiave”, “o mio tesoro”). Even if it is a remake, the Sterbini’s libretto has also original features. Probably this was one of the reasons why the Rossini’s opera became much more popular than the Paisiello’s version.

In 1718 one of the major librettists of the century, Apostolo Zeno, wrote the libretto *Ifigenia in Aulide* for the composer Antonio Caldara. After a number of years, in 1788, another libretto *Ifigenia in Aulide* was written by Ferdinando Moretti for the composer Luigi Cherubini. The author was able to find only few similarities: “un cor di padre”, “i giorni

miei”, “in faccia al mondo [padre]”, “la sua ruina”, “più non lice”, “agli occhi miei”, “il mio sdegno”, “fosse in mio poter”, “mio fato”, “coronata di fiori”, “nel tuo core”, “più non ti rivedrò”. Certainly, Moretti used the Zeno’s libretto as a model, but his libretto does not lack originality. The same can be said about *Ifigenia in Tauride*, a libretto written in 1763 by Marco Coltellini (for the music of Tommaso Traetta) and only one year later written with the same title by Mattia Verazi (for the composer Gian Francesco De Majo). Verazi imitates the Coltellini’s libretto in few parts, though keeping the originality of his work almost untouched (for example: “pietà dei miseri”, “al caro amico”, “[il fin] cagion di tue sciagure”, “il ferro, il foco”, “io la sua fuga tentai [assicurai]”, “di mia morte”, “delle vittime il sangue”, “Ara nel mezzo”, “fulmini il ciel”, “simulacro della deà”, “il mio delitto qui”, “Che giorno è [mai] questo”, “E il nume chi m’involò [ti rende]”).

One of the most popular librettos of XVIII century was *Semiramide riconosciuta* (1729) by Pietro Metastasio, with the music by Leonardo Vinci. This libretto was used by many librettists as a model for new music scores. Among the poets Metastasio was an authority in the century and often he was imitated by other writers. In the XIX century it is also possible to find librettos based on Metastasio’s work. Among the most popular of those librettos is *Semiramide* (1823) by Gaetano Rossi, with the music of Gioacchino Rossini. Almost a century has passed since Metastasio’s libretto. The Florentine vernacular language started to change towards the modern Italian language, but sometimes it is still possible to find similarities in the two librettos (for example: “E tu pretendi?...”, “tu mi rendi la speranza [pace]”, “il tuo riposo”, “è [fa] il tuo dover”, “il tuo pensier”, “a tal segno”, “Che far dovrò?”).

Maybe the same Metastasio used an older libretto as a model: he wrote *Didone abbandonata* in 1724 for the composer Domenico Sarro (which later was used by many composers in the century [3]). Though it is possible to find a few similarities in *Didone* (1624), a libretto written a century before by Giovan Francesco Busenello for the composer Francesco Cavalli. Some similarities in the two librettos are also found in Petrarca’s *Canzoniere* (for example: “in un punto”, “in un momento”), other similarities seems to derive from Busenello’s libretto (“di sé stesso”, “d’Italia il regno”, “i miei giorni”, “oh dio, come”, “in tua difesa”, “il valoroso Enea”, “che Iarba io sono [son]”, “alla vendetta mia”, “I miei tormenti”, “passami il core”).

The libretto *Orazi e Curiazi* (1846) by Salvatore Cammarano, with the music by Saverio Mercadante, is another example similar to *Didone abbandonata*. The model in this case is the libretto *Gli Orazi e i Curiazi* (1796) by Antonio Simeone Sografi, with the music by Domenico Cimarosa. As in *Didone abbandonata*, there are similarities in the two librettos (for example: “mi sento il core”, “di Roma il fato”, “cinta [coperta] dal flammeo”, “d’è mostrar [mostra] che sei nata”, “in atto di”, “ma ti conosco ancora”, “per la gloria”, “cui si discende per lunga serie di scalini [cui si discende per varie scoscese gradinate]”, “Sabina con séguito di Nobili [Matrone] romane”, “il mio dolor”, “il sangue de’ fratelli miei [il sangue de’ Romani]”, “spoglie di Curiazio”).

At the end of XIX century the things started to change due

to the birth of modern Italian language. One of the examples could be the famous opera *Falstaff* (1893), with the libretto by Arrigo Boito and the music by Giuseppe Verdi. Another libretto for *Falstaff* (*Le tre burle*) was written almost a century before (1799) by Carlo Prospero, with the music by Antonio Salieri. However, comparing the two librettos, it is hard to find some similarities. In fact, language of literature in XIX century changed and the librettos started to include many words previously unused by poets.

III. DISCUSSION

The huge number of operas written till the end of XIX century demonstrates a great involvement of business in this field. Opera quickly spread in all Europe and the number of ancient theatres which survived till today testify its popularity. The librettists and the composers had to work fast and satisfy the taste of the audience. This resulted in many remakes of librettos. However, these remakes do not necessarily should be considered as plagiarism.

As well as plenty quotations of Italian poets in librettos [2] [3] does not prove the existence of plagiarism. Merely, it is just an imitation of language style, which, according to the rules from the end of the XVI century, had to be based on Florentine vernacular poetry.

The tendency to use the oldest librettos with similar plot as models could be considered as a normal practice. Till XIX century, the concept of copyright was not so strict as it is today. With the invention of the printing press, the pirated editions of books and music scores increased a lot [8], but often the librettists and composers were payed only once after they wrote an opera. The copyists could write extra copies of an opera’s score and to sell them to other pirate publishers, causing an economical damage to the official printing house [8].

At the same time each European state had different regulations about copyright. What it was not possible to print in one state could become possible in another one. Till the XIX century the Italian peninsula was fragmented in many states and a general copyright law was missing. Therefore, the librettists could do remakes of previous librettos without paying rights to the authors. It was also possible to use a libretto to write a different music score. A system of royalties, as we have today, was also missing. Since the XV century the Venetian Republic introduced a system of *privileges* [9], to regulate industry and, in the case of books, to give licenses for publications. The system of privileges was actually the origin of patent [10]. However, this system was valid only in Venice and still it was different from a copyright law. In fact, the system of privileges often created monopolies of several printing houses or guilds, leaving the authors without an adequate protection. The first copyright law introducing the concept of intellectual property and its validity for a number of years, was the Statute of Anne (1709) [11]. However, this law was valid only in England.

The Berna Convention (1886) was the first international agreement about copyright producing a common law for a group of European countries, including the Kingdom of Italy. The authors’ rights were recognized for published or unpublished works, later extended to translations, drawings,

paintings, sketches and so on. In the case of operas, it became rather difficult to act like in the past century and to do remakes not paying rights to the authors, unless the librettos were separated by a certain number of years.

The new law of copyright helped some printing houses, like Ricordi, to create monopolies in Italy. These printing houses became in a brief time very strong in the market. Because of their size they could easily afford and to win cases in the courts against piracy and infringers of intellectual property rights [12]. Finally, the opera's authors started to be paid also for each performance of their work, like it happens with the modern concept of copyright. However, it is difficult to say how this revolution effected author's creativity - good or bad [12]. Nowadays the copyright issue for operas is not so much of importance, since, unlike in the past, just a few new operas are written. Opera genre is replaced by the *musical* [13]. However, thanks to the information technologies, all the artistic expressions brought by the medias are today even more subjected to the infringement of copyright.

The practice to use older librettos described in the article ended up in the second half of XIX century not only for the copyright law, but also for the changes of language. The Florentine vernacular language, which was used by librettists for two centuries, started to disappear from librettos in the first half of XIX century. Thanks to some writers, like Alessandro Manzoni, the language of literature started to change. The new tendency of prose was to use a language closer to the spoken Florentine. This allowed to eliminate the gap between the language of literature and the one spoken by the cultured people [14]. Also, the poetry language slowly started to change: new words were introduced. At the same time archaic words and Latinisms were now avoided. Poems, books, essays and, of course, librettos were written in a new style. The grammar structures became closer to the spoken language. In the XVIII century librettists could use, as a model, a libretto written a century before. With the language changes in the second half of XIX century, this became no longer possible. The language of the last operas of the century is therefore already very similar to the modern Italian language.

Another possible reason that put end to the practice described in this article is the economic crisis in the Kingdom of Italy immediately after its birth, in 1861. This crisis, which already began earlier in Europe with the riots of 1848, caused in Italy the decrease of public funds to opera's theatres. Therefore, the theatres, in which many new operas were performed till the first half of XIX century, started to change their role of art promoters. In the second half of the century the industry of *repertoires* was born [15]. Only selected lists of operas, usually of the past, could form a repertoire. With the appearance of repertoires, the librettists and the composers started to write much less operas than in the past. This trend remains as of today, leaving more work time to operas' authors. The librettists were not forced anymore to write a lot and fast, therefore, no meaning to use older librettos as models for their work.

The first half of XX century is marked by the production of experimental operas, both in librettos and in music. Operas written in that period are generally based on an original

libretto and not influenced by previous works so significantly.

Finally, the birth of entertainment competitors like movie industry and the music recording industry accelerated the crisis of creativity of opera. After the economic crisis in 1929, many small companies in music industry disappeared and the birth of monopolies in Europe and the USA started to promote also new genres of popular music. The big companies were controlling all the market through publishing houses, radio stations and distribution networks [16].

Unlike in the XIX century, due to the few requests for new operas nowadays, most composers are not specialized anymore in writing scores only for operas [17]. Today it is uncommon to perform new operas. However, the art of opera survives through the mass media distribution and especially through the repertoires of many theatres in all the world.

IV. CONCLUSION

The examples proposed in this article shows that, till the second half of XIX century, the tendency to use older librettos with similar plot as a model was accepted by librettists and audience as a normal practice. It was also accepted from a legal point of view. Therefore, before to accuse a librettist of plagiarism, it is important to analyze in which context he worked. The case of Da Ponte is emblematic: as a librettist he could quote many authors of literature or to use a previous libretto as a model, but his librettos are generally considered highly innovative in the conception of the dramaturgical features. Today the modern copyright laws do not allow anymore such a freedom to use other authors' work, unless otherwise agreed among the authors. The infringement of copyright today generally is relevant to the newest forms of art. The "golden age" of opera probably ended up in the first years of XX century, though nowadays a number of operas in the repertoires are still widely performed in many countries of the world.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

The author conducted the research and wrote the paper, and has approved the final version.

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