

Classy Scene for Connoisseurs or Snobby Meeting Point? Considerations upon the Repertoire and Functions of the Thun Theatre in Prague during the Years 1781-1784

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Abstract

The history of the Italian opera in Prague in 1780s is linked with the name of Pasquale Bondini. Although an impresario of famous Mozartian performances, the details concerning his enterprise and repertoire are often neglected or unknown. Starting in autumn 1781, he succeeded against concurrence and converted the Thun Theatre in public venue of many functions: a scene for connoisseurs, opera and music fans, as well as a meeting point of high society, or political rivals. The repertoire, although dominated by popular opera buffa composers as Anfossi or Cimarosa, reveals a distinct dramaturgical policy, which points toward Bondini's previous experience in Dresden. Through choosing concrete operas and its adaptations a relatively original mixture of titles and genres (comic, serious, mixed) was set up, which helped to attract various audiences and maintain high level of performances.

Keywords

Pasquale Bondini, Italian Opera, dramaturgy, Thun Theatre, Nostitz Theatre

The history of the Italian opera in Prague in 1780s is inseparably linked with the name of Pasquale Bondini (1731–1789), a famous Italian impresario, who, in 1787, commissioned (or at least paid) Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart to write *Don Giovanni*.¹ For a long time, Bondini's early activities lay in the shadow of the celebrated Mozart days, and Mozart's letters served as the main – frequently the only – key to the evaluation of the entire activity of his opera company.² In my present article, I would like to turn attention to Bondini's *impresa* a productions in the period of 1781–1784, i. e. the years preceding the Mozart premieres, when the operatic performances were mainly held at Thun Theatre in the Lesser Town of Prague from which Bondini expanded his activities to the Nostitz (later Estates) Theatre in late 1783. In addition to this, he staged opera in Leipzig for several years during the summer season. The repertory performed during these years has been scarcely studied for various reasons. The lack of music sources is certainly one major factor, a rather limited interest in Italian opera buffa of the period perhaps another.³ Nevertheless, a thorough examination of the situation in Prague reveals a number of important facts concerning Bondini's position, his enterprise, the rather peculiar character of the repertory and its relation to the Thun Theatre audiences. As a result, a somewhat different picture of these crucial years in Prague's opera history arises.

To better understand the 1780s developments, we should step back in time a little. It was after the 1777 carnival that the long-lasting Prague opera seasons came temporarily to an end when impresario Giuseppe Bustelli, who had been managing opera in Prague (at Kotzen-Theatre) and Dresden (Moretti-Theatre) since 1764 (1765), discontinued his opera productions and moved to Vienna.⁴ Prague thus remained without Italian opera until the autumn 1781 when Pasquale Bondini came from Dresden and inaugurated his seasons at the Thun Theatre.⁵ The timing of his arrival is sometimes being linked with the death of Giuseppe Bustelli in Vienna on 2nd March 1781. But even though this fact did have a significant impact on the development of theatre activities in Prague, it is more likely that Bondini had started planning his Prague productions prior to this event,

1 This text gives a partial summary of the author's long-term research into the Italian opera in Prague in the period of 1780–1785. For detailed argumentation and sources, see the author's monograph *Italská opera (nejen) v Thunovském divadle v Praze (1781–1785)* (in preparation).

2 For a general outline of the history of Prague opera in the late 18th century, the standard work by Oscar Teuber is still useful (TEUBER, Oscar. *Geschichte des Prager Theaters*, I. Theil, Prag, 1883, II. Theil, Prag, 1885). A wealth of new information and corrections, however, is brought together in: JAKUBCOVÁ, Alena – PERNERSTORFER, Matthias J. *Theater in Böhmen, Mähren und Schlesien. Von den Anfängen bis zum Ausgang des 18. Jahrhunderts. Ein Lexikon*. Wien 2013. An overview of Bondini's career prior to his arrival in Prague in 1781 can be found in: NIUBO, Marc. Pasquale Bondini before Mozart. *Hudební věda*, 2016, vol. LII, no. 3–4, pp. 317–330. A new look at Bondini's activities in Prague during the 1780s, albeit with Mozart as the focal point, is provided in: WOODFIELD Ian. *Performing operas for Mozart*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.

3 The situation changed only in the 1990s thanks to the improvements in the evidence of sources, starting with Claudio Sartori's notable catalogue and the emergence of online databases.

4 JAKUBCOVÁ, op. cit., 2013, p. 91–95.

5 With the only exception of *Il Socrate immaginario* by Giacomo Rust staged at Prague Kotzen-Theater by Bustelli in 1780, most likely with the aim to make up for the financial loss of his Viennese enterprise in the previous year, and to form a new company which subsequently started to perform in Brunswick.

and that Bustelli, for whom Bondini had worked for some 12 years in Dresden, was in fact well acquainted with these plans.⁶

An important factor to consider is that Bondini had a powerful rival – count Franz Anton von Nostitz-Rieneck (1725–1794). In those years Count Nostitz occupied himself with the idea of building a large modern theatre in Prague and Bustelli's death gave it a powerful impulse. The original Nostitz's plan counted with the construction of a new theatre on his own property in the Lesser Town, but in the spring 1781 it was decided that the theatre would be built at its present location at the Fruit market at Old Town, close to the municipal Kotzen-Theater. Inspired by Emperor Josef II's Nationaltheater in Vienna, Count Nostitz envisioned his new theatre primarily as a stage for national, i.e. German language productions, with the aim to give Prague's prestige a boost and make his theatre one of the best in Germany. To secure his position, Nostitz supported Karl Wahr, then impresario of the German troupe at the Kotzen-Theatre, leased the building and later made sure it would never be again used for theatrical performances.⁷

It is crucial to realise that neither the commencement of the construction works of Nostitz theatre in the summer 1781, nor Nostitz's later patriotic proclamation to the people of Prague and his indirect criticism of Bondini, deterred the Italian impresario from his intention.⁸ It is evident that Bondini must have enjoyed from the very beginning a substantial backing and guarantees, inspiring hope in the success of his undertaking. Although the Italian opera had a long-standing tradition in Prague, and although it was by no means a pastime reserved to only one privileged social group, it is certainly right (for social as well as financial reasons) to look for Bondini's main supporters among Prague aristocracy. Count Thun set the rent for his theatre at a bargain price, 400 gulden a year: less than a half of the sum then charged for the similarly-sized Kotzen theatre. No doubt, the favourable rent arrangements in themselves would not have been sufficient to guarantee success. Judging from the extant librettos and other sources, Bondini was championed also by the Supreme Burgrave Prince Karl Egon Fürstenberg, Prague archbishop Antonín Petr Příkladný and other members of aristocracy. The location of the theatre in the Lesser Quarter perfectly met the needs of the main circle of patrons: the Prague nobility, who resided mostly in this quarter of Prague.

Just as elsewhere in Europe, theatres served as focal points of social and cultural life, and for many of their visitors, meeting, conversing and gaming in the boxes was not only the necessity of social life, but its primary goal. An in-depth analysis of the make-up of the Prague spectatorship would require much more time than this presentation allows. Suffice it to say that the Prague society was widely differentiated along social, linguistic as well as cultural lines, with individual groups overlapping as they frequented theatre venues. Moreover, enlightenment reforms contributed to their fast development in the 1780s and 1790s.

6 This idea is supported by singers's careers, the theatre situation in Prague, as well as several source evidence, see note no. 1.

7 TEUBER II, pp. 66, 78–79.

8 TEUBER II, pp. 93–95, published also in Czech translation in: VONDRÁČEK, Jan. *Dějiny českého divadla*, I. Orbis: Praha, 1956, pp. 58–60.

In the 1780s, nobility seems to have been the most stable audience group. With a bit of exaggeration, Italian opera was their mother's milk and they could easily identify (or communicate) with its world view and aesthetics. This applies not only to *opera seria* but also to *opera buffa* as its occasional critical jabs at aristocracy never crossed acceptable limits and – mainly – the overall subversive potential of the genre was usually fairly feeble. At the same time, Prague aristocracy continued to nurture cultural cosmopolitanism and in addition to Italian opera, championed also French drama and ballet, as well as new German-language drama. The latter may have appealed to progressive, enlightenment-oriented aristocrats as well as to the slowly growing circles of Prague intelligentsia and educated urban upper class. However, unlike German drama or singspiel, Italian opera was better suited to traditional forms of reception, ranging from passive enjoyment of the pleasing musical background where intimate conversation in the box did not disturb, over hedonistic delight in the music and other pleasures the venue had to offer, to more serious spectatorship of those, who followed the performance with libretto and a candle in hand. On occasion, the audiences of Prague theatres could stratify in line with their political views, e.g. following the change in the office of the Supreme Burgrave as Prince Fürstenberg was forced to abdicate in the summer 1782 and replaced by Count Nostitz.⁹

Bondini, an experienced practitioner, must have been fully aware of all the theatre's functions and invested not only in new repertoire, sets and theatre equipment, but – to make his venue even more attractive to higher classes – also in opening a casino at the Thun Palace. If we consider the geography of the cities of Prague, the state of public roads, and the fact that Charles Bridge provided the only stable communication between the Vltava river banks, it becomes obvious that especially in the winter months, the Thun Palace Theatre was better suited to serve as the centre of the Lesser Quarter's social life than the Old Town theatres. What seems to support this interpretation is firstly the fact that Bondini continues to rent the Thun Theatre even at times he nearly exclusively stages opera at the new Nostitz Theatre, and secondly the words of his colleague, impresario Franz Seconda who considered the Lesser Town audiences a relatively independent entity, whether in terms of productions and rentability. Last but not least, the excellent acoustics of the Thun Theatre seems to have played its role: it was the only – and far from negligible – parameter the Nostitz Theatre could not boast in those days.¹⁰

In addition to the location of the venue, two other factors typically influence the audience make-up: the actual repertory and financial accessibility. Nothing is known about entrance fees in the beginning of Bondini's tenure but taking into account later development, it can be safely assumed they wouldn't significantly differ from those at Kotzen, and later, Nostitz theatre – in other words, the tickets were affordable for wider

9 MAUR, Eduard. Karl Egon I. als Oberstburggraf in Prag. In *Die Fürstenberger. 800 Jahre Herrschaft und Kultur in Mitteleuropa*. Erwein H. Eltz – Arno Strohmeyer (eds.). Weitra: Niederösterreichische Landesausstellung, 1994, pp. 295–296.

10 TEUBER II, s. 123.

audiences.¹¹ As for the repertoire, the absolute dominance of contemporary *opera buffa* is visible at first sight (see Tab. 1).

Tab. 1 Bondini's repertoire performed at Thun Theatre 1781–1784

Sacchini, A.	Il finto pazzo per amore	1781 autumn
Anfossi, P.	I viaggiatori felici	1781 autumn
Cimarosa, D.	L'italiana in Londra	1781 autumn
Gazzaniga, G.	Andromeda	1781 autumn
Valentini, G.	Le nozze in contrasto	1781 autumn
Anfossi, P.	Il matrimonio per inganno	1781 winter
Cimarosa, D.	L'amor costante	1782
Cimarosa, D.	Il pittor parigino	1782 carnival
Zannetti, F.	Le cognate in contesa	1782 carnival
Anfossi, P.	Il curioso indiscreto	1782 spring
Anfossi, P.	L'imbroglio delle tre spose	1782 spring
Gazzaniga, G.	La vendemmia	1782 spring
Anfossi, P.	Gli amanti canuti	1782 autumn
Cimarosa, D.	Il falegname	1782 autumn
Guglielmi, P.	Gl'intrichi di Don Facilone	1782 autumn
Schuster, J.	Il marito indolente	1782 autumn
Cimarosa, D.	Il convito	1782 winter
Caruso, L.	Il matrimonio in comedia	1783 carnival
Salieri, A.	La scuola de' gelosi	1783 carneval
Amendola, G.	Le schiava fedele	1783 spring
Sarti, G.	Fra i due Litiganti il terzo gode	1783 spring
Anfossi, P.	Isabella e Rodrigo	1783 [autumn]
Astarita, G.	Circe ed Ulisse	1783 autumn
Cimarosa, D.	Giannina e Bernardone	1783 autumn
Paisiello, G.	Le due contesse	1783 autumn
Traetta, T.	L'isola disabitata	1783 autumn
Bernardini, M.	Il conte di bell'umore	1783 autumn
Anfossi, P.	Il trionfo d'Arianna	1784 carnival
Paisiello, G.	Il barbiere di Seviglia	1784 carnival
Gazzaniga, G.	L'isola d'Alcina	1784
Paisiello, G.	L'avaro deluso	1784 autumn
Schuster, J.	La schiava liberata	1784 autumn
Alessandri, F.	Il vecchio geloso	1784 winter

Opera buffa indeed prevailed on Bondini's repertoire lists – a fact reflecting the state of Italian opera in general, and its reception in Central Europe around 1780, rather than the specific character of Prague audiences. In conformity with the mainstream opera market, contemporary production predominated (70%) and, interestingly, the best selling composers (Anfossi, Cimarosa, Paisiello) made up 50% of the repertoire.

¹¹ The usual fee for a first-tier box at Kotzen and Thun theatres was around 4 gulden while at Nostitz Theatre, it cost 6 gulden and 40 kreuzer.

Nevertheless, Bondini offered also serious titles which distinguish his theatre from the usual Central European fare. Between 1781 and 1784, he presented at least four serious works: *Andromeda* by Giuseppe Gazzaniga, *Il trionfo d'Arianna* by Pasquale Anfossi, *Circe ed Ulisse* by Gennaro Astaritta and *Isola disabitata* by Tomaso Traetta. With the exception of the last named work on a popular libretto by Pietro Metastasio, the remaining three were more or less inspired by contemporary *opera seria* trends. Especially in the case of Astaritta's opera it can only be regretted that the score has not survived.

The presence of these *opera seria* titles indicates that Bondini had to take care to satisfy diverse groups and needs of audiences, including connoisseurs. However, serious repertoire was more difficult to finance and organise and especially the modern *opere serie* required specialised singers, new sets, and a trained ballet ensemble, that Bondini could not afford to maintain. These operas were therefore partially adapted and performed at times when the constellation of the singers-ensemble was favourable. Nevertheless, a closer analysis of the entire repertoire demonstrates that the emphasis on high style, bel canto and virtuosity ranked among important priorities of Bondini's dramaturgy. In addition to a handful of „pure“ *opere buffe* such as *L'isola d'Alcina* by Gazzaniga or *Il matrimonio in commedia* by Luigi Caruso, there was a number of works featuring traditional *parti serie*, and also some very interesting “mixed” works, such as two „Serail-operas“, *La schiava liberata* by Joseph Schuster and *La schiava fedele* by Giuseppe Amendola. The key evidence of these dramaturgical priorities is provided by the presence of the castrato singer Pietro Gherardi who was hired during Bondini's first season in Prague.¹² Not only did Gherardi performed the role of Perseo in Gazzaniga's *Andromeda*, first staged in November 1781 on the occasion of the celebrations of the name day of Prince Fürstenberg, but also in a number of comic titles, including the Thun Theatre inauguration opera, *Il finto pazzo per amore* by Antonio Sacchini.

As a result of the developments in the comic genre and changing interpretation practices, *opera buffa* with castrato singers in *parti serie* had become somewhat obsolete in Italy by 1780s. Bondini, however, was familiar with this type of opera from Dresden where it continued to be staged, and even newly written, albeit in a modern guise, by court composers.¹³ This is where we should look for one of the main reasons why Bondini, and his stage director Domenico Guardasoni (who spent several years in Dresden as well), continues – even after Gherardi left Prague – to stage works reflecting the division of parts between *parti buffe* and *parti serie* and why some new works were adapted in a similar spirit.

Insertion of arias in high style was, to be sure, a widespread trend, often initiated by singers who also provided their own material. However, a detailed comparison of adaptations of the Prague repertory with those in Dresden or Vienna makes it obvious that Bondini's (or Guardasoni's) adaptations follow, at least to some extent, a dramaturgical

12 VERTI, Roberto (ed.). *Un almanacco drammatico: l'indice de' teatrali spettacoli 1764–1823*. Pesaro: Fondazione Rossini Pesaro, 1996, p. 424.

13 NIUBO, Marc. Isabella e Rodrigo: Towards the Late 18th Century Performance Practice at the Dresden Court Opera Theatre. In *Partita. Siebenundzwanzig Sätze zur Dresdner Musikgeschichte. Festschrift Hans-Günther Ottenberg*. Wolfgang Mende (ed.). Dresden: Thelem, 2012, pp. 389–404.

concept. Under no circumstance was the insertion of arias an „automatic“ practice: the Prague repertoire includes many works without any or only one insertion, and the total number of changes is generally lower than in Dresden or Vienna.¹⁴ Combined with the original works in the serious or mixed style, the adapted *opere buffe*, with their emphasis on bel canto and virtuosity, undoubtedly contributed to the musical quality of the repertoire thus increasing its appeal also to that segment of audiences who appreciated Italian opera not as much for its dramatic qualities but for the music and as a means of representation. In consequence, Thun Theatre could meet the varied needs of its aristocratic and other spectators, gained in social lustre and offered a hint of luxury typical of prestigious Italian scenes. There is no reason to doubt that Bondini and Guardasoni acted to a plan, following their own artistic beliefs, but also the wishes of their aristocratic supporters. Although they did not meet always with success, their efforts resulted in one of the last heydays of the Italian opera in Prague and created fertile grounds for enthusiastic reception of Mozart.

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