

MARCO CAPRA

Aspects of the use of the chorus in 19th-century Italian opera

If one glances through the Italian 18th-century treatises one gets the impression that the chorus and its use in opera were not subjects worthy of discussion; nor for that matter a problem, no matter whether one is referring to the Italian school of opera (with its distinct aversion for the choral element) or to the reforming experiences of the second half of the century (which, conversely, were mainly responsible for prompting the emancipation of the chorus). In the 19th century, on the other hand, the situation changed radically.

In the operas of the Metastasian school, even when choral moments were sometimes contemplated in the librettos, they were often ignored and reduced to solo numbers in the musical setting. Or alternatively, when such moments constituted the operatic finale, they were transformed into four-voice pieces to be performed by the soloists. Naturally there were exceptions to this practice. For example, at the inauguration of the Teatro di San Carlo in Naples in 1737, the choruses of Metastasio's *Achille in Sciro*, set to music by Domenico Sarri, were duly included: indeed this was probably the first occasion in which a genuine opera chorus was performed on the stage in Naples.¹ The choristers were pupils drawn from the various conservatories of the city; and it is precisely this fact (which we have every reason to believe was exceptional) that indirectly suggests that the reason why choruses were kept to a minimum or even eliminated altogether was simply that few Italian theatres at the time possessed choral companies. The situation gradually changed in the second half of the century, and this was a tendency that the reforming tendencies significantly accelerated. Indeed, at the start of the 19th century, Naples could boast the existence of a chorus school attached to the theatre. The institution of this school is stipulated in the contract of 1812:

[...] for the choruses, parts that are so essential in the grand operas, the government will establish a school without preference in the choice of voices, which will be operated in the ridotto of the Royal Theatre, whereas both the *maestro* and the maintenance of the room for the pupils' study will remain

¹ See HELMUT HUCKE, "L' 'Achille in Sciro' di Domenico Sarri e l'inaugurazione del teatro di San Carlo", in *Il Teatro di San Carlo. 1737-1987*, vol II: *L'opera, il ballo*, a cura di Bruno Cagli e Agostino Ziino, Napoli, Electa Napoli, 1987, pp. 21-32: 28.

at the expense of the impresario Barbaja, under the orders of the said superintendent.²

From this occurrence, which was evidently not unrelated to the influence of both the decade of French domination and reformed opera,³ one might legitimately anticipate a period of fertility, during which the increasing artistic importance of the chorus in Italian opera was matched by a teaching organization capable of guaranteeing the necessary qualitative and quantitative standards. But as it turned out, this did not happen. Indeed, with few exceptions, the situations at the theatres, from Naples right up to Turin, remained disturbingly in counter-tendency to the process of general artistic re-qualification that affected other fundamental sectors of operatic production, such as the orchestra and staging.

* * *

In 1878, the Neapolitan journal *La musica* (which together with other publications partially anticipated the earliest strictly musicological publications of the 1890s) outlines the progress made by the chorus. It starts by referring to the time when “the choruses took no part in the action and limited themselves to crying out ‘*giuriamo, celebriamo, cantiamo, distruggiamo, combattiamo*’, while all the time standing completely still; and even though the art benefited from making the multitudes speak, nonetheless they were almost an embarrassment by being kept in a repose that was ridiculous and often even contradictory to the meaning of the words”.⁴ But now, the journal continues, “the chorus is used for a completely different reason: it plays an important part in the action of the opera and serves to express the feelings of a people, an army, priestesses, maids of honour, and so forth”.⁵ In this way the chorus had become a distinct item in the distribution and structure of opera. And indeed it perhaps even anticipated certain radical innovations, if another mid 19th-century journal was spreading the rumour that Verdi was about to “introduce into the art one of those reforms that would be of great benefit to the Italian theatre”: in other words, to “attribute the greatest importance in opera to the choruses, while the part necessary for generating the dra-

² Quoted in FRANCESCO DEGRADA, “Al gran sole di Rossini”, in *Il Teatro di San Carlo. 1737-1987*, pp. 133-168: 136.

³ See TOBIA R. TOSCANO, “Il rimpianto del primato perduto. Dalla Rivoluzione del 1799 alla caduta di Murat”, in *Il Teatro di San Carlo. 1737-1987*, pp. 75-118: 86.

⁴ “Ricordi dei giovani compositori. Il coro”, *La musica*, III/6, 18 marzo 1878, pp. 1-3.

⁵ *Ibid.*

matic action would be declaimed, instead of being sung. In this way the popular element would have a wide field in which to expand, and the music would better suit the aim that it sets itself as art".⁶ Through groundless, the rumour is nonetheless significant, for it implies an acceptance of the principle that the chorus was now sufficiently important to be considered "the first poetic and musical expression of peoples", according to a definition proposed by a Milanese periodical in 1848.⁷ Even Peter Lichtenthal's famous dictionary, published in 1826, betrays (most likely involuntarily) a certain operatic distortion when the author defines the chorus as a vocal piece whose object is "to express the feeling of an entire multitude of people".⁸

In this context it is surely perfectly natural that the chorus, with all its possible implications, should play an important part in Mazzini's vision of music and its social role.⁹ The chorus seems to have found an almost exemplary incarnation in Mazzini's new, European idea of "musical drama", viewed as the fusion of individuality and sociality (corresponding, not without a certain approximation and obviousness, as the opposition of the concepts of melody and harmony, of Italian and German music). This perfect synthesis, rendered by the phrase "collective individuality", apparently anticipated Verdi's early "choral" operas, obviously *Nabucco* and *I Lombardi alla prima crociata* in particular. It is worth quoting the passage Mazzini devotes to the chorus in full:

And why – if music theatre is to run parallel to the elements that are progressively invading society – why should the chorus, which in Greek theatre represented the unit for impressions and moral judgements, the consciousness of the many shining onto the Poet's mind, be given ampler development in modern music theatre, and not rise from the passive secondary sphere that it is assigned today to the solemn and complete representation of the popular element? Today the chorus is generally speaking like the people in Alfieri's tragedies, condemned to the expression of a single idea, a single feeling, in a single melody that sounds in concord on ten, twenty mouths. At times it seems more like an opportunity for relieving the principal singers than as a philosophically and musically distinct element. It prepares or reinforces the expressions of feelings or thoughts that one or other of the important characters happens to express, and nothing else. Or,

⁶ "I Coristi sostegno dell'opera", *Gazzetta musicale di Firenze*, II/14, 14 settembre 1854, p. 55.

⁷ "Il coro", *L'Italia musicale*, I/37, 15 marzo 1848, pp. 293-94: 293.

⁸ PIETRO LICHTENTHAL, *Dizionario e bibliografia della musica*, Milano, Antonio Fontana, 1826, p. 215.

⁹ GIUSEPPE MAZZINI, *Filosofia della musica*, Milano, 1836. For the following quotations, the edition used is that published in Milan by the Fratelli Bocca in 1943.

why could the chorus, a collective individuality, not achieve individual, independent and spontaneous life like the people of which it is the born interpreter? Why, in relation to the protagonist or protagonists, should it not constitute that element of contrast essential to every theatrical work? And why, in relation to itself, should it not more often depict – in the concertato numbers, with the alternation and entwining of diverse melodies, diverse musical phrases, interwoven, combined, harmonized with one another in questioning and response – the manifold and various sensations, opinions, feelings and desires that generally palpitate in the multitudes?¹⁰ Why should the genius lack the ways of rising musically from that inherent variety to the no less inherent unity that nonetheless issues, certainly and judiciously, from that conflict of tendencies and judgements? Why should it be difficult for him, when translating the consent achieved step by step and by way of persuasion, to rise to a general accord, by combining first two voices, then three, then four and so on in a series of ascending settings, and by an artifice similar to that which Haydn applied (if I remember correctly) in the *Creation* to express the moment when the light is poured from God's eyes over all things? O why should it not leap out all at once, from one to all, every time the consent emerges, swiftly and omnipotently like the “*Mora, Mora!*” uttered by [the people of] Palermo, from an inspiration, from a recollection of glory, from a memory of outrage, or from a present outrage? The ways of popular expression and musical translation are a thousand; not that I know them; but the genius knows them, or will know them when he wishes to apply his mind to it and when the other more vital conditions of improvement have been satisfied, giving him comfort to develop this as well. Rather, what will be indispensable are certain material improvements in the choruses, in both science and other aspects.

¹⁰ In another passage, Mazzini states: “Every man – and, more markedly, he who is chosen to be the actor in a drama – has his own tendencies, own characters and a style that is his own and not of others; in short, it is a concept that a whole life develops. Why not portray this concept in a musical expression that belongs to that individual and not to others? And why should you give a style of words to a man you do not deign with a style of singing? Why not avail oneself, more frequently and with more study, of the instrumentation in the accompaniments around each of the characters, to symbolize that tumult of affects, habits, instincts, material and moral tendencies that most frequently work on his mind, and incite it to desire, and enter to such an extent in the achievement of his destinies, in the ultimate decisions that contribute to fulfil the special event represented? Why not more types of melody where there are more types of character? Why, with the occasional recurrence of a musical phrase, of certain fundamental and striking notes, should you not reveal the tendency that most often dominates them, the influence of the organ that most often incites them?” (G. MAZZINI, *Filosofia della musica*, pp. 157-58). As examples in this respect he cites the characters of Don Giovanni in Mozart's opera and Bertram in Meyerbeer's *Robert le diable*.

Today, except in Milan, where performances are at least commendable, the choruses are atrociously conducted in almost every respect.¹¹

Mazzini's concluding comment on the quality of performances perfectly rounds off a *cahier de doléances* typical of all the commentators throughout 19th century. The lack of a professional choral tradition in the theatres is unquestionably connected with the episodic, and utterly subordinate, role played by the chorus in Italian Baroque opera: a subordination all the more striking when compared to the overbearing monopoly of the soloists. This is not the place, however, to reflect on the causes for its neglect. Nonetheless, one's impression is that the chorus was probably the only element to be left out of the progressive professional evolution that involved the entire system of opera production – artistic, managerial and pragmatic – from the advent of commercial opera in the 1630s onwards.

I started off by mentioning the substantial indifference to the subject shown in the Italian pre-19th-century theoretical works. Further proof of the total insignificance of the choral element is that not even Benedetto Marcello makes the slightest mention of the chorus as a significant component of the operatic fashion of his time, whereas if only the situation had only offered him the pretext, he would surely not have wasted such a tempting opportunity for satirizing the choristers. The 19th-century literature, on the other hand, is rich in such satirical representations. Indeed, there is such a boundless wealth of anecdote that the chorus almost competes with the figures, like the *impresario* and the *prima donna*, that traditionally dominated such portrait galleries (or *physiologies*, to use the contemporary terminology).

So in the 19th century the chorus seems to have acquired a role of primary importance in the artistic and organizational structure of opera without its new status being immediately matched by the requisite qualitative growth. All the sources, both archival and journalistic, agree on the humble social background of the choristers and on their lack of adequate musical training. Here, for example, is the situation in Turin mid century, as related by the composer Luigi Rossi:¹²

Our choristers are not truly bad, but, to be honest, they very far from good, especially the women, who were introduced into our theatres not many years back. Hardly any of our choristers are capable of studying their parts by themselves, even sketchily. They are nearly all ear-singers (*orecchianti*)

¹¹ G. MAZZINI, *Filosofia della musica*, pp. 159-62.

¹² Luigi Felice Rossi (Turin, 1805-1863), a pupil of Pietro Raimondi and Nicola Zingarelli in Naples, was a composer of sacred music and operas.

who are unable to learn their parts reasonably if not by dint of rehearsals, in which the poor director is continually forced to lead their voices with his own. The result is that too often they lack the confidence that alone can bring a performance to life. Their *forte* turns out either weak or strident and their *piano* (if they should ever attempt one) feeble, while their intonation is uncertain and their rhythm vacillating. The scant effect of our choruses is largely compounded also by the number of choristers, the scant consideration for the hugeness of the theatres and the power of the orchestras. Twenty-four male singers at the Teatro Regio is few, and twelve female singers is very few. The same applies more or less at the Teatro Carignano, where there are twelve men and eight women, and at the [Teatro] d'Angennes, where eight men make up the whole chorus. It appears, however, that the Turinese can expect to enjoy an improvement in the future, since the new contract of the two main theatres has provided for the establishment of a singing school specially for supplying the theatres with choristers.¹³

The above picture confirms the impression that, as regards quality, the concept and organization of the chorus was still confined to amateur practices and that in quantitative terms it played a secondary role in the overall distribution of the various components of the whole spectacle. Besides, the fact that a hasty attempt was made to remedy matters by establishing a school for choristers in the contract for the two theatres of royal pertinence (the Regio and the Carignano) suggests that the situation was still substantially the same as that stigmatized by Mazzini almost ten years earlier and that the resources were completely inadequate to satisfy the requirements of composers. It is worth remembering that when Luigi Rossi was outlining the situation in Turin in 1845, Verdi had already composed *Nabucco*, *I Lombardi alla prima crociata* and *Ernani*, works in which the chorus plays a leading role in every respect. Markus Engelhardt has analyzed the different ways of using the chorus in the operas of the young Verdi, from his first opera *Oberto conte di San Bonifacio* of 1839 to *Stiffelio* of 1850.¹⁴ The resulting classification, which can also be extended to the operas of other composers in the same years, illustrates the different ramifications of the choral element in those operas: 1. *thematic presence of the chorus in the overtures*; 2. *the chorus that opens the act*; 3. *choral passages in the four main components of the standard solo scene*

¹³ LUIGI ROSSI, "Sullo stato attuale della musica in Torino. Lettera I.^a. Della musica teatrale", *Gazzetta musicale di Milano*, IV/4, 26 gennaio 1845, pp. 15-16.

¹⁴ MARKUS ENGELHARDT, "Posizioni e funzioni del coro nella drammaturgia musicale del primo Verdi", in *Una piacente estate di San Martino*. *Studi e ricerche per Marcello Conati*, a cura di Marco Capra, Lucca, LIM, 2000, pp. 151-69.

(tempo d'attacco, cantabile, tempo di mezzo, cabaletta); 4. *the chorus of response*; 5. *the chorus in duet scenes*; 6. *separate choral pieces within the act*; 7. *the choral piece as an independent tableau*; 8. *the chorus as preparation of the finale*; 9. *the chorus in the concertato number*.

This broad range of options outlines a stable and consolidated system of elements, a compositional model in which the chorus had become an integral, well-foregrounded feature. In this context, the *Gazzetta musicale di Firenze* in 1855 can write without exaggeration that the chorus has become “a very essential part in operas, and that if the good or bad outcome of an opera always or almost always depends on the felicitous choice of the principal artists, no less does the chorus, by good or weak performances, contribute to enhance or diminish the effect to a very great degree”.¹⁵ But the central subject of the article in the Florentine journal concerns the need to provide for the musical training of the choristers, given the inadequacy of the choral masses and the gap between the composers’ artistic requirements and performing capacities:

Now since we have often had occasion, especially in recent times, to deplore very bad performances as regards choruses, also in our greatest theatre [the Teatro della Pergola], which boasts being the best provided, prompted by the love we profess for art, we dare to call for a reform, or at least a regenerating institution for the improvement and most essential education of such an important part of modern theatre.

It is certain that to interpret properly the best operatic compositions, both old and new, one would need choruses consisting not only of good voices, but also of individuals provided with sufficient musical knowledge who do not rely for guidance on just their ears, which in an ensemble of often intricate and difficult songs easily deviate from correct intonation and degenerate into deafening confusion. Such ear-singers will at most be able to correctly follow a popular song or psalmody, but will never execute perfectly an ensemble with varied modulations and subtle and awkward passages; nor will they even achieve their intent after many and frequent rehearsals, for such musicians will always cost the instructor-director a very great effort and will end up by becoming wearied and never succeeding in perfectly interpreting the composer’s ideas.

To remedy such a great inconvenience, there are those who would propose, on the example of Milan and perhaps of other cities as well, to make use of the pupils of the conservatories and public *licei*. There is no doubt that in this way one ill would be avoided, but one would certainly encounter

¹⁵ “I Coristi”, *Gazzetta musicale di Firenze*, II/32, 18 gennaio 1855, p. 125.

others. First of all, how does one force to sing in choruses people who are attending the public schools with no other intention than that of becoming artists and who might consider the condition of chorus singer imposed on them to be humiliating? How, all of a sudden, can one expect to replace and exclude people who gain their livelihood mainly from what they consider as their profession and the exclusive right of their group? Who will be the first to put his hand to such a bold and peremptory reform? And even if this were ever done, could one ever replace, with youthful and insufficiently developed voices, the strong and sonorous voices of the present choristers, who will nonetheless always be found exclusively among the working class? in that class where the more laborious and active habits contribute to a greater development of physical strength and more virile and sonorous voices?

It is not, therefore, in this way or on such foundations that we believe an essential reform among the choristers can be instituted, even though the reform is most necessary and the chorus is the only part of the modern theatre that does not keep up with musical progress. Instead, we believe that the easiest and surest enterprise for a reform of this kind can only be attained through instruction and the proper musical education of the masses.¹⁶

We deduce therefore that the problem censured by Mazzini in 1836, then reiterated in the similar terms by Luigi Rossi in Turin in 1845 and the anonymous Florentine columnist ten years later, was not an easy one to solve. Nor was it geographically limited, if in 1878 someone in Naples was still asking: “But where are the performers? For there would be performers wherever choral schools were instituted.”¹⁷

On closer inspection, the situation of the Italian choruses in the first half of the century would seem to be the same as that of the orchestras, which in the same period found themselves having to tackle operatic and symphonic music of broadly French and German provenance. Indeed a characteristic of the period is the widespread awareness that the Italian orchestras, which had originated and developed to satisfy the instrumental needs of Italian opera, were technically and stylistically ill-equipped to deal with other repertoires. The issue emerged with great clarity when the intellectual reaction to the opera monopoly, which was already spreading in the first half of the century, began to reap significant fruits from the 1850s onwards. It took various forms: the progressive establishment and diffusion of the concept of “classical

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ “Ricordi dei giovani compositori. Il coro”, pp. 1-3.

music”; the cultivation of instrumental music at the *società filarmoniche*; the birth of a number of specific associations and initiatives; and the emergence of a musicological approach already in the music journals of mid century. Also benefiting from this broad movement were the orchestras, which in any case had the advantage of having a professional basis and hence not encountering surpassing difficulties in adapting to new repertoires when the taste of audiences required it and the market offered the opportunity.

In line with this general tendency, a new ferment was also noted in the choral sector. Initiatives associating teaching and performance practice arose more or less everywhere, from Turin and Genoa to Florence and Milan. Milan in particular witnessed a flowering of associations in the second half of the century, some inspired by the experiences of the European choral societies, the French and German above all.¹⁸ The year 1874 saw the foundation of the Società del Quartetto Corale and the Società di Canto Corale, respectively on the initiatives of the German Martin Röder and Alberto Leoni, the inspiring force behind the Scuole Popolari di Musica. Both of these institutions were made up of amateurs of upper-middle class extraction (unlike the choruses in the theatres) and were the exact counterpart of the initiatives launched in Italy to cultivate and spread instrumental music (chamber music in particular, though foreign and past repertoires were also studied and performed). Also common to both was a desire to undermine the opera monopoly dominating Italian musical life. These choral societies, in Milan as elsewhere, addressed the performance of sacred music and secular choral works, so it would appear that they utterly failed to transmit to the operatic field either their underlying fervour or, above all, the general tendency to professional qualification.

In mid-century, however, we witness the birth of projects relating to opera. Worthy of note is that of the impresario Boracchi, who set up a music school for young choristers in Milan, as a support for the chorus at La Scala. The history of this school is worth outlining briefly here. The *Gazzetta musicale di Milano* offers the following report of its first school concert, a private event that took place at the Teatro della Canobbiana in November 1854:

Over fifty young people of both sexes took part in the experiment. On the whole they have good voices: among them, those of the mezzo-sopranos and second tenors or baritones seemed to prevail in freshness, evenness and power. However, there are also some metallic soprano voices, which

¹⁸ On this specific subject and on the other choral societies of the period, see: MARIA GRAZIA SITÀ, “L’associazionismo a Milano”, in *Milano musicale. 1861-1897*, a cura di Bianca Maria Antolini, Lucca, LIM, 1999 (Quaderni del Corso di Musicologia del Conservatorio Giuseppe Verdi di Milano, 5), pp. 233-81: 248-60.

will bring a noticeable advantage to the chorus of women as a whole, which in truth is too deficient in true sopranos.

Three pieces were played: first, Rossini's *La Carità* chorus sung by the women, then that in F major from Act II of *Norma* performed by the men; finally, the third was that in A minor from the opening scene of *Mosè*, sung by the men and women combined. The performance was laudable for the ensemble, intonation and colouring. The performance of the three choruses was preceded by that of certain harmonious *solfeggi* specially written for the school by Maestro Carrer: these polyphonic *solfeggi* were also performed *en masse*.

All in all, I repeat, the concert could not have been more satisfying. These fifty young people, joined to the mass of the customary fifty other singers, will form a body of over a hundred voices, with a strong impact not only on the ears, but also on the eyes as well.¹⁹

From the same article we also learn that the school, which had been founded that very year, took in no less than 100 pupils, and that instruction, under the responsibility of Venceslao Cattaneo, aimed not only to teach good ensemble singing, but also to ensure that “every pupil should emit sounds with healthy method, in such a way that with practice the voices may benefit instead of suffer”, as well to provide a sufficient theoretical foundation for reading music.²⁰ The next year, when the impresario Boracchi went bankrupt, the Scuola di Canto per Coristi was re-established under the control of its former director Cattaneo thanks to the proceeds of a subscription. The new regulations of the school established that admission was restricted to boys aged 17-21 years and girls aged 15-21; and that definitive admission was possible only after three trial months and a confirmation exam. The course consisted of a first year open to all those who showed sufficient aptitude to belong to a chorus, and a further two years for the more gifted pupils, who could aspire to future employment in the theatre in secondary or comprimario roles. The regulations also stated that during the first year the lessons, which were common to the pupils of both sexes, took place daily for a duration of two hours for each sex; in the two following years, the lessons – in this case referred to as lessons of “bel canto” – were increased to three hours a day and were separate for the two sexes.²¹ Initiatives of this kind would appear to have depended exclusively on private enterprise. Following Boracchi's project was that of

¹⁹ “Rivista. (Milano, 25 novembre)”, *Gazzetta musicale di Milano*, XII/48, 29 novembre 1854, pp. 381-82: 382.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ “Rivista (Milano, 11 agosto)”, *Gazzetta musicale di Milano*, XIII/32, 12 agosto 1855, pp. 251-52.

the Bogetto brothers, who announced the foundation of a free singing school in Turin in 1857 “for forming choristers, secondary parts and *supplimenti*”. The Bogetto brothers, who were part-owners and impresarios of the Regio Ippodromo Vittorio Emanuele II,²² entrusted the direction of the school to Luigi Fabbria and organized a three-year course for pupils of both sexes, who could also be employed in the musical events produced at the Vittorio Emanuele (at fees proportioned to their skills).²³ Such initiatives, however, were sporadic and always encountered difficulties, as is confirmed by another project of a school for opera house choristers launched within the Conservatory of Milan in 1858, only to come to nothing and be hastily forgotten, in spite of the initial support, after the political-military events of the following year.²⁴

Though needful of reform – as attested not only by the complaints of critics and journalists, but above by the continual initiatives that arose in various places to improve standards – the opera house chorus seemed resistant to all treatment and remained tenaciously anchored to a characteristic physiognomy that traversed the whole century with few changes:

All it is, is some forty men, including cobblers, carpenters, shop-boys and *servitori di piazza* that keep us occupied at present. Together with some twenty quondam-*prime donne*, *ex-comprimarie* and *seconde-donne-emerite* they are called to fulfil an important role in the opera: that of the chorus. The chorus part in these operas is neither of little moment nor of little difficulty: it has its solo pieces; it takes part in the action and dialogue; and in the concertato numbers it is often required to perform a service that is awkward and of no little complexity. And yet all these arduous conditions are lightly overcome by a company of worthy people who have barely a sprinkling of music theory and often none at all: but, good and patient ear-singers as they are, and carefully instructed by their special *maestro*,

²² Inaugurated in 1856, and with a capacity of 4,500 seats, the Regio Ippodromo almost immediately lost its initial function as a circus venue to be adapted also for performances of opera and ballet.

²³ See “Torino. Scuola gratuita di canto per formare allievi coristi, seconde parti e supplimenti”, *Gazzetta musicale di Milano*, XV/24, 14 giugno 1857, pp. 190-91.

²⁴ “In 1858 a chorus school was projected, to be set up at the Conservatorio with the aim of providing the royal theatres with good choristers. The project was warmly welcomed by the Director, who presented a *regolamento interno* for the new institution and pressed the Direction of Public Works to set aside a special room. But when the events of 1859 occurred, the Conservatorio was occupied by the national troops until June of the following year, and nothing more was said about this project, although the opportunity to re-examine the matter presented itself in a new reform of the *regolamento*” (LODOVICO MELZI, *Cenni Storici sul R. Conservatorio di Musica di Milano*, Milano, R. Stabilimento Ricordi, 1873, pp.15-16).

they often manage to do their duty as best as they can. [...]

The choristers (and here I refer to those of the main theatres) generally do not do their parts badly, considering their importance and difficulty. This is well known by the composers, who would not lightly venture to expect more than so much from them, seeing that they act blindly [...].²⁵

This final consideration raises an important issue: that of the effects that the quality of these singers must have had on composers' choices. In his "Ricordi pei giovani compositori", the Neapolitan journalist already quoted writes of composers forced to lead the choristers "by the hand" in the performance of the pieces entrusted to them:

[...] a good *maestro* can show all his skill in the chorus provided that he has the performers; but the lack of good choristers prevents the *maestri* from making use of all the resources that this piece of music offers, with the result that the composers are often condemned to putting the melody in the orchestra, and to place the words of the chorus on the chords on which the melody is based, thereby making the human voice an accompaniment, to the detriment of art and good sense. And to these same accented chords often no correct placing is given, with the composer ordinarily doubling the parts, as is forbidden in counterpoint; and all of this is done to facilitate the weakest performers.²⁶

The writer's notes are illuminating for those who know of the criticisms made about the early Verdi, called the "father of choruses" in the 1840s, who was often accused of doubling the sung melody in the orchestra, unisons, parallel octaves and similar things. They also throw new light on both the conduct of his most successful choruses and their effect on audiences. For the most part they were unison choruses, which appear to dilate the cantabile section of a solo aria to the ultimate degree. In the light of this evidence, one could hazard the following hypothesis about the choral style of early Verdi, though the same also applies to other contemporaries and successors: that although this style was certainly due to a conscious choice in favour of immediate expression, i.e. to create a chorus that aspires to being the compact expression of a people (what we could call the "nation-chorus", as suggested by Gilles De Van),²⁷ it was probably also determined by practical requirements connected

²⁵ C. M., "Schizzi musicali. I Coristi", *Gazzetta musicale di Milano*, XI/44, 30 ottobre 1853, p. 191.

²⁶ "Ricordi pei giovani compositori. Il coro".

²⁷ "The protagonists of the first operas generally stand out against a background constituted by national communities (Hebrews against Assyrians, Lombards against the Infidel, Indians

with the characteristics and limitations of the choral forces to which they had to entrust their works.

In actual fact we know little about the rendering of choruses in performance. As a rule the articles on choruses and choristers offer judgements that are general and very often caricatured, and the reviews of individual operas are often very sparing of information on the subject. Moreover, even the composers in their letters generally behave in the same way.

Some objective data, however, can be gleaned on one aspect of by no means secondary importance: that of the actual size of the forces.

From Emanuele Muzio, a friend and pupil of Verdi, we learn that in the course of an academy given at the Teatro San Carlo in 1845 for the benefit of the nursery schools, the two main choruses of *Nabucco* and *I Lombardi* were sung by 120 women and 100 men accompanied by 200 instrumentalists.²⁸ The event, however, is hardly significant for our purposes, given the wholly exceptional context, that of a benefit performance. Even less to the purpose, for that matter, is the 370-strong chorus that sang Verdi's *Ave Maria* and *Pater noster* in Milan in 1880: a number that was attained by putting together at least six different groups (among which the chorus of La Scala, which one therefore assumes was much smaller).²⁹ In the first half of the 19th century, the situation in the larger theatres probably differed little from that at the start of the century in Naples, where, even in a period of relative splendour for choruses, the number of singers at the Teatro di San Carlo was fixed by contract at 30 men and women.³⁰ Only slightly lower is the number of singers active at the Teatro Regio in Turin in the mid 1840s, as we saw above.³¹ In Parma, for the opening of the new Teatro Ducale (the future Teatro Regio) in 1829 – an occasion of particular pomp and importance, therefore – the chorus numbered

against Spaniards) or groups of outcasts (brigands, corsairs, gypsies). The individual consequently appears as the exponent of an ethnic or social group whose values he assumes and shares. The compact nature of the community is manifested in the numerous choruses to be found in the early operas and which gave Verdi the nickname *papà dei cori*. While some have a secondary function, like the choruses of “handmaids”, “ladies in waiting”, “companions at arms”, the more celebrated ones generate an image of a community that is strong, united, free of all rifts, in short that of a nation: examples are “Va, pensiero” of *Nabucco*, “O Signore dal tetto natio” (*I Lombardi*) and even “Si ridesti il leon di Castiglia” (*Ernani*) right up to the choruses of *La Battaglia* or *Les Vêpres siciliennes*” (GILLES DE VAN, *Verdi. Un théâtre en musique*, Paris, Fayard, 1992; Italian reference in GILLES DE VAN, *Verdi. Un teatro in musica*, Firenze, La Nuova Italia, 1994, pp. 169-70).

²⁸ Letter from Emanuele Muzio to Antonio Barezzi, dated 10 April 1845.

²⁹ See M. G. SITÀ, “L’associazionismo a Milano”, pp. 233-81: 254.

³⁰ See F. DEGRADA, “Al gran sole di Rossini”, in *Il Teatro di San Carlo. 1737-1987*, pp. 133-168: 135.

³¹ See L. ROSSI, “Sullo stato attuale della musica in Torino”.

40 singers.³² At Carnival 1929/30, however, the number immediately dropped to 16,³³ as was besides established in the contract enforced from 26 December 1831 to 30 November 1840: “There will be a head of the choruses with at least 16 singers; female singers will be added when the spectacle requires it and it is considered necessary by the management”.³⁴ The agreement therefore provides for a lower limit for the chorus, with the possibility of employing others as “extras” whenever the needs of the operas programmed required them. In this context what also clearly emerges is that the use of women was an exceptional event and, as such, subject to the approval of superiors. This situation was both normal for the time (the number of male singers always outnumbered the female) and also geographically widespread, as we deduce from the article cited earlier on the situation of the theatres in Turin, which refers to “women introduced into our theatres not many years ago”.³⁵ But to return to the situation of Parma, the chorus settled at 24 singers during the year 1830; a figure that was unchanged at Carnival 1833/34, a season that saw the first local performance of *Norma* (a work in which the choral commitment was far from negligible).³⁶ In the 1840s the number oscillates between 26 in 1844/45³⁷ and 45 in 1843/44.³⁸ In Spring 1844, when the local premiere of *I lombardi alla prima crociata* was programmed, there were 35.³⁹ The previous year, during the 1842/43 Carnival season, for the local premiere of *Nabucco* there were 33 singers.⁴⁰ The standard, however, is that defined in art. 12 of the contract that applied from December 1846 to the end of 1849: “For every spectacle at both Carnival and Spring there will be twenty male singers and ten female singers”.⁴¹ In those years, however, the differences between the various theatres could be considerable, as attested by the case of the Teatro

³² See ALESSANDRO STOCCHI, *Diario del Teatro Ducale di Parma dall'anno 1829 al 1840*, Parma, Giuseppe Rossetti, 1841, p. 2.

³³ *Ibid.* p. 17.

³⁴ Parma, Archivio storico del Teatro Regio, *Capitolati e regolamenti: 1812-52*, “Quaderno de' patti per l'Impresa degli Spettacoli del Ducale Teatro di Parma”, p. 2, art. 3.

³⁵ L. ROSSI, “Sullo stato attuale della musica in Torino”.

³⁶ See A. STOCCHI, *Diario del Teatro Ducale di Parma dall'anno 1829 al 1840*, p. 88.

³⁷ See A. STOCCHI, *Diario del Teatro Ducale di Parma dell'anno 1845*, Parma, Tip. Ferrari, 1846, pp. 2.

³⁸ See A. STOCCHI, *Diario del Teatro Ducale di Parma dell'anno 1844*, Parma, Giuseppe Rossetti, 1845, pp. 2-3.

³⁹ *Ibid.* p. 41.

⁴⁰ See A. STOCCHI, *Diario del Teatro Ducale di Parma dell'anno 1843*, Parma, Giuseppe Rossetti, 1844, pp. 2-3.

⁴¹ “Capitolato per l'appalto degli spettacoli nel Ducale Teatro di Parma dal 1.° dicembre 1846 a tutto il novembre 1846”, quoted in A. STOCCHI, *Diario del Teatro Ducale di Parma dell'anno 1845*.

Comunitativo of Piacenza, where the contract applying from December 1845 to November 1848 stipulated that for the Carnival and Spring seasons there would be no fewer than 12 men and 6 women in the chorus.⁴²

In the first half of the century the situation changed radically only at exceptional events: such as during the performance of Rossini's *Stabat mater* in Parma in Summer 1842, when a special chorus of 72 singers was formed ("amateurs, professors and choristers of both sexes").⁴³ One gets the sensation, however, that these exceptional cases constitute the model of reference for an ideal chorus, also and above all on account of the comparison with the choral societies which a few decades later were to begin to spread, and which, being voluntary and unburdened with financial worries, could certainly count on much larger forces than those of the theatres.⁴⁴ Nonetheless, when the publisher Edoardo Sonzogno planned the 1888/89 programme at the Teatro Costanzi of Rome with the aim of presenting memorable productions that might act as a "lure" to the operas and composers belonging to his firm, he also boasted the deployment of huge masses, and signally a chorus of 70.⁴⁵ But by that time it was no longer exceptional to deploy double the number of singers used a few decades earlier: for that same Carnival season the Teatro Regio of Parma used 70 singers, as is specifically pointed out on the playbill.⁴⁶ The programme included challenging operas from the choral point of view, such as *Lohengrin*, *Faust* and *La gioconda*: a circumstance that perfectly matched the French or French-influenced operatic taste that dominated the second half of the century and, for this reason, played a decisive role in the development of choral masses, at least in quantitative terms.

However, we are forced conclude that the general situation, naturally with due exceptions, cannot have definitively changed for the better, if still in 1883 another Neapolitan journal – the *Archivio musicale*, a journal that by this date had adopted a musicological approach – complains of the usual deficiencies regarding both the size of the choruses and their standard, which still remained purely amateurish:

⁴² Parma, Archivio storico del Teatro Regio di Parma, *Capitolati e regolamenti: 1812-52*, Quaderno dei patti e delle condizioni per rinnovamento dell'appalto per un triennio degli spettacoli soliti darsi ogni anno nel Teatro Comunitativo di Piacenza", p. 3, art. 14.

⁴³ See A. STOCCHI, *Diario del Teatro Ducale di Parma dell'anno 1842*, Parma, Giuseppe Rossetti, 1843, p. 45.

⁴⁴ See M. G. SITÀ, "L'associazionismo a Milano".

⁴⁵ See MARCO CAPRA, "Casa Sonzogno tra giornalismo e impresariato", in *Casa musicale Sonzogno*, a cura di Mario Morini, Nandi Ostali, Piero Ostali, Milano, Sonzogno, 1995, vol. I, pp. 243-90: 265.

⁴⁶ Parma, Archivio storico del Teatro Regio di Parma, *Avvisi teatrali: 1860-1913*.

We cannot pretend that, with all good will and every possible effort, one can be expected to organize large – perhaps even small – choral masses. Often we have found ourselves in the position of having to remain silent and not give our readers a more general account of certain concerts or performances; because, exactly as happens in the present case regarding choruses, we would instead have liked to speak of other things altogether, of an original cause for these ills, of a school, or rather non-school. In short, we would have liked to say that art cannot be created because the elements our conservatories supply (and I refer not only to that of Naples only, but of Italy a whole) are spoilt, irredeemable elements, even though these institutions provide certain elements of quality, as indeed occurs with choruses, for which a school, neither within nor without our conservatory, does not exist.⁴⁷

In the meantime the way of writing for the chorus and the functions it was assigned had changed. The old idea of the chorus as a single voice representing a people (the “nation-chorus”) had gradually made way for a conception that responded to criteria of greater differentiation and social characterization, even in cases when the national character was formally maintained. An example – to remain with Verdi, who better than anyone else represents the evolution of the chorus during the 19th century – is the Triumph scene of *Aida* (II/2). Here the Egyptian people, even in a situation where one would expect the greatest social cohesion, is dismembered and articulated into its various components: women, priests, the indistinct mass. With the tribute to a more naturalistic definition of a people and to the fashion for *local colour*, the chorus loses its connotation as a *character* that it had assumed a few decades earlier, when defining “Va, pensiero” as an “aria for chorus” was a completely plausible idea. Instead it adapted itself to representing a more defined and more realistic, yet certainly more anonymous, mass. Little by little polyphony reasserted its due role and the choral body found itself having to cope with performing problems that lay outside its more recent tradition. With its polyphonic texture the choral mass was divided and thinned, while the orchestra played its own part, by then almost completely released from its former task of acting as the chorus’s “guardian”. “Throughout the piece the orchestra is *descriptive* and never simply *accompanying*, as in the choruses of a former time and an irrevocable art”,⁴⁸ writes Amintore Galli⁴⁹ referring to the chorus “Fuoco di gioja” of *Otello* (I/1), in a fine analysis at the time of its premiere in February 1887. And yet the choruses

⁴⁷ “Cronaca. Napoli 10 Giugno 1883” *Archivio musicale*, II/7, giugno 1883, pp. 231-33: 232.

⁴⁸ AMINTORE GALLI, “L’*Otello* di Verdi alla Scala di Milano”, *Il teatro illustrato*, VII/74, febbraio 1887, pp. 19-26: 20.

⁴⁹ Amintore Galli (Talamello, Rimini, 1845 – Rimini, 1919) was music critic, composer and teacher. From 1874 to 1904 he was musical director of the publishing firm of Sonzogno.

always seem to be the same: “Concerning the choral masses, for the most part consisting of ear-singers coached with a stoic patience that verges on heroism, [...] no praise is enough”,⁵⁰ remarked a critic after the first performance of the opera in Brescia.

Quite apart from the results, therefore, the divide between compositional requirements and the singers’ competence remained the same, latent and always unchanging. With *Falstaff*, six years later, the contradiction was resolved, and this particular historical season of the chorus comes to a close simply with its annihilation. In this masterpiece of chamber theatre, the mass, even the splintered and almost dissolved mass of *Otello*, no longer had a *raison d’être*: it is the soloists themselves that take over its functions and give a face to the individuals that constitute it. Above all, it is to them that is entrusted the final apotheosis: the great comic fugue that takes its cue – paradoxically, we feel – from Falstaff’s invitation “Un coro e terminiam la scena” (A chorus and then let us end the scene).

⁵⁰ From Giovan Battista Nappi’s review in *Perseveranza* of Milan, quoted in the *Gazzetta musicale di Milano*, XLII/33, 13 agosto 1887, pp. 249-51: 251.