

CECILIA LUZZI

*A round table “Myth and mask. The chorus as *dramatis persona*”*
(Arezzo, 28 August 2003)

The 51st Polyphonic Competition was inaugurated with a round table on choral performance practice, co-ordinated by Ivano Cavallini and entitled “Myth and mask. The chorus as *dramatis persona*”. This meeting, held on Thursday 28 August, thus continues what has now become a customary, and indeed integral, part of the Competition since 2000 and an excellent opportunity for exploring and acquiring updated assessments of musicological themes closely related to choral singing. The five papers presented at this year’s round table examined (from different perspectives) the primary roles played by the chorus in certain genres featured in the ‘long-term’ history of the theatre. They extended from the pre-classical origins (in this case the Etruscan world) through certain 16th-century events (Sienese comic theatre and the polyphonic *mascherata*) to the chorus in 18th- and 19th-century opera. These functions ranged from the anthropological (with the chorus providing the ritual expression of collective religious feeling) through both spectacular/ornamental roles and the mimetic function of character (as in classical theatre), right down to the role of acting as the author’s personal voice (as in modern theatre). The talks delved into terrain that is still largely uncultivated and offered valuable points for preliminary reflection while we await more systematic inquiries that can provide a more comprehensive picture of the functions and stylistic features assumed by the chorus in the history of the theatre.

In the introductory paper the Etruscologist Armando Cherici outlined the role of the chorus and choral singing in the Etruscan world (*On the pre-classical origins of mask and myth: the Etruscan world*). His starting point was the anthropological notion that religion and drama initially had parallel lives, with the former explaining reality and the latter interpreting it collectively. As attested by Tertullian in his *De spectaculis*, Etruscan culture also contemplated the presence of dramatic action during its religious rites, within which the chorus acted as protagonist and voice of the community (as in the case of the origins of Greek and Roman theatre). The close relationship between temple and theatre among the Samnites and Etruscans, confirmed by the presence of theatres alongside the temples in the sacred precincts, offers valuable insights into the pre-classical world.

Maria Luisi (“*Cantiamo tutti, e tu canta con noi*”. *Notes on the use of the chorus in Sienese comic theatre*) observed an essentially popular choral presence in the Sienese comic theatre produced during the first thirty or forty

years of the 16th century by that group of actor-playwrights of artisan extraction that historians have chosen to call the “*pre-Rozzi*”. The dramaturgical qualities of this theatre were simple, ludic and quasi-ritual, and they found their most spectacular expression in music. The use of music in this repertory presents at least three typologies: simple classicist reminiscences at the end of the play (final song); the continual recourse to musical interludes within the unfolding of the plot (a sort of primitive *entremets*); and finally the adoption of music as a fundamental part of the whole theatrical action. In all three typologies choral singing can be viewed as a modern application of a classical legacy, responding to a definition given by Angelo Ingegneri only a few years later: that the chorus is a “congregation of persons brought together to sing and dance or for similar pastimes and entertainments” (*Della poesia rappresentativa*, 1598). Within this repertory we find comedies such as Pierantonio Legacci’s *Bernino* (1516) and *Scatizza* (1523), works that feature a genuine *festa* with collective dances and songs, in which the audience is also invited to take part; or works like Francesco Fonsi’s *Veglia villanesca* (1521), entirely based on the play of improvisation, essentially of a musical type and again involving the audience. Finally, there are also forms in which one is hard pressed to draw the line between theatrical event and collective ludic-ritual experience. Examples are the May-time *Egloghe* of Leonardo Maestrelli detto Mescolino, composed around 1510: provided only with a very thin plot, there are essentially pretexts for realizing some very effective spectacular ideas.

Remaining in the 16th-century sphere, Ivano Cavallini’s paper (*The “theatrum mundi” in the polyphonic mascherata*) offered suggestions for a broader inquiry on a musical and theatrical genre – assuming one may speak of a genre – whose origins can be traced to Florence and Siena, but which developed independently in Venice and in the Po plain area in the second half of the 16th century. Its main stylistic features came from other musical genres such as the canto carnascialesco, frottola, villanesca, giustiniana and greghesca. Any plan to conduct a systematic investigation of the mascherata, which Alfred Einstein defined a “parasite” genre, could take any one of three distinct routes: investigating the musical and dramaturgical aspects in specific geographical areas; examining them by self-sufficient musical genres (frottola, canto carnascialesco, villanesca, etc.); and even conducting analyses of single types (“Pantoloni”, “Tedeschi”, etc.).

The following papers recorded the presence and function of the chorus in the opera house. In particular Paolo Russo (*The arias interwoven with choruses: a dramaturgy of “bell’ornamento”*) examined the use of the chorus interwoven with the solo aria in Italian opera in the late 18th and 19th centuries. Within the general redefinition of the expressive aims affecting *opera seria* between the 18th-century reforming ideas and Rossini’s codification of

forms, the chorus moved from being an ingredient required for the musical construction of dynamic dramatic situations to becoming a kind of ceremonial 'crown', designed to give the solo arias further rhetorical emphasis. From the formal point of view the chorus was thus relegated to a subordinate position and sometimes took part only in the final cadenzas as well as the tempi di mezzo, cabaletta bridges and codas. For a dramaturgy of the 19th-century chorus, therefore, scholars must not only study the more tuneful and memorable melodies expounded in the so-called 'lyric forms', but also assess the operatic number in rhetorical-ceremonial terms (also evaluating how the various sections of the number are distributed overall and balanced).

Finally, Marco Capra's paper (*The function of the chorus in 19th-century Italian opera*) turned its attention to the real situation of Italian opera in the 19th century, showing that the chorus seems to have been the only component of opera production that was entirely resistant to the process of artistic qualification that affected every other aspect. The backward state of the chorus was thus in open contradiction with the prominent role that it was then playing in the music and drama of opera. This role grew, both quantitatively and qualitatively in the course of the century: from the grand mass personifications of the 1830s and 1840s, when the chorus is often required to represent a people or homogeneous group, to the more realistic characterizations of the second half of the century, when the mass thins out and dissolves into its component parts and the chorus ceases to be a genuine *character*. And yet, paradoxically, the chorus does not seem to have made comparable progress 'as an instrument'. On the one hand, the great unison choruses of Verdi's earliest operas, with the orchestra taking pains to underpin the melody and guide the performers step by step from start to finish, may have been motivated *also* by the practical need to facilitate the task for the essentially amateurish choristers. On the other, with the evolution (in a polyphonic direction) of the late-19th-century idiom the choruses found themselves facing performing problems that seem to have been solved above all by patient work (of their directors) and innumerable rehearsals.