

## THE FIRST NEAPOLITAN COMIC INTERMEZZO

by *Dinko Fabris*

In the history of opera, the chapter about comic intermezzi generally begins with early 18th-century Venetian theatres, where it had become systematic to have a couple of buffo singers whose parts, extrapolated from the main plot of a serious opera, entertained the public between acts. The comic intermezzi's theatrical tradition, however, is much older: it begins with the religious dramas of the 16th century, where they amused the audiences with spectacular interludes and music, and then followed the adventurous paths of the itinerant companies of Commedia dell'Arte (Naples had had at least one head-comedian of international renown, Silvio Fiorillo, who became famous as "Capitan Matamoros" but especially for interpreting the first Pulcinella). Throughout the 1600s, indeed, spoken comic sketches with the addition of songs and dances had filled the intervals between acts of comedies and tragedies. After the introduction, in Venice in 1637, of public opera with *Andromeda*, staged by Manelli and Ferrari, some of these companies had specialised in performing entire musical operas, in which heroic characters and situations alternated with comic sketches within the same plot. Gradually, however, as they travelled around Italy and Europe, itinerant companies began once again to use the intervals between acts to entertain the public with comic sketches.

"Venetian" opera arrived late in Naples: only from 1650, when, for the grandiose festivities he organised in the city to celebrate the defeat of Masaniello, the Spanish viceroy Duke of Oñate called to Naples a company of actors specialised in musical opera, the Febi Armonici. That year they staged, in a theatre set in the gardens of the Royal Palace, Francesco Cavalli's *Didone* (represented in Venice in 1641) and, the following year, a version of Claudio Monteverdi's *L'incoronazione di Poppea*, under the title of *Il Nerone*. The great success reaped with those two operas led, in the ten years that followed, to the organisation of several other performances, almost all Venetian operas adapted to Neapolitan taste by local young musicians such as Francesco Cirillo and, especially, Francesco Provenzale, who had specialised in that sort of task and would then try their own hand at operatic composing. In the wake of the public's growing enthusiasm for these productions, from 1654 a theatre used for spoken comedies, the San Bartolomeo, was adapted and turned into the first stable operatic theatre of the city: its stalls were relatively small, compared to today's standards, but it developed in height with several orders of boxes and had a deep stage equipped with modern machinery. Yearly seasons consisting of no fewer than four works began to be staged, although companies were still hired from outside Naples and some management problems could be experienced. Often operas were first performed for the viceroy at the Royal Palace, or in aristocratic residences (during the summer) and only then staged publicly at the San Bartolomeo's. A turning point in the city's operatic production happened in 1671, when for the first time a woman was designated as the San Bartolomeo's impresario. This was Roman singer Cecilia Siri Chigi, who went on to engage controversial Neapolitan singer Giulia De Caro, deemed a prostitute and nicknamed "Ciulla dalla Pignasecca". In 1673 Giulia succeeded Chigi as the theatre's impresario, and she got romantically involved with the above-mentioned Francesco Provenzale, then on the rise as music professor in two of the four Neapolitan Conservatories.

For De Caro Provenzale composed two operas – *Lo schiavo di sua moglie* (Royal Palace, 1672) on a libretto by Francesco Antonio Paoella, and, two years later, *Stellidaura vendicante* (1674, repeated in 1675) on a text by Andrea Perrucci – both with comic parts: in the former those of the Neapolitan “Sciarra the gardener” and “Armillo the page”, in the latter that of “Giampietro the Calabrian”. In between these two operas, in the year Giulia De Caro became the San Bartolomeo’s impresario, another opera was staged at the theatre, *Il Disperato innocente* by (today unknown) Francesco Antonio Boero on a libretto by Baldassarre Pisani, in which we find the characters of “Masaro the Neapolitan” (a slack jailer who lets his prisoner escape) and “Rosmillo the page”. In the years around 1673 we often find these same comic characters (the Neapolitan, the Calabrian, the Boy), as well as others, in secular works but also in “sacred operas” – in all similar to the former but based on religious or edifying subjects more suited to ecclesiastical places or the Lent period. The best example of “sacred opera” is *La colomba ferita*, which tells the story of St. Rosalia, a masterpiece by Francesco Provenzale in which the comic parts are, once again, those of a Neapolitan and a Calabrian, pestered by a Boy; but “tramezzi” (intermezzi) with similar comic characters are also found in other “sacred operas” from those years.

The manuscript score of Boerio’s *Il disperato innocente*, an opera set in ancient Thebes, staged, as we mentioned, at the San Bartolomeo in 1673, has survived among the treasures of the library of the San Pietro a Majella Conservatory in Naples under the title of *La Lisaura*, from the name of the protagonist.<sup>1</sup> The manuscript immediately appears of some importance because in its final part it includes a *Prologo* for two characters (“Micco con Calascione” and “Cuosmo con violini”) followed by an *Intermedio* for four: a Calabrian, a Neapolitan, a Boy and a Spaniard. These parts were to integrate the opera at the beginning and in between acts, but their unusual placement at the end of the manuscript indicates that the same had been conceived for collection and not for practical use. The uniqueness of this document is that it includes the oldest Neapolitan comic intermezzo we know of, and probably one of the earliest of all 17<sup>th</sup>-century musical theatre (in the few outstanding manuscript sources of 17<sup>th</sup>-century operas there are almost never any prologues or intermezzi). The style of both text and music, in these *Prologo* and *Intermedio*, however, do not seem the work of the authors of the opera in which they are found, that is to say Boerio (a composer only known, beside this work, for some chamber cantatas, sacred music and a few organ pieces) and the librettist Pisani, a jurist who wrote a few books of *Poesie liriche* and some librettos for heroic operas, starting with *Il disperato innocente*. Probably, to win over the public, the two debutants had those parts prepared by specialised authors, for we know of other cases where this was done; for example, in the libretto of *Il Teodosio*, attributed to Filippo Coppola and staged at the Royal Palace during the 1676-77 season, we find the texts of two intermezzi drawn from two earlier sacred dramas by Provenzale, *La Colomba ferita* and *La Fenice d’Avila*: the comic characters in that case were the same as those of the 1673 intermezzo, the Neapolitan, the Calabrian and the Boy, with only the Spaniard missing (probably for “political” reasons, for in 1676 the war of Messina was in progress). And since in the 1670s Provenzale and Perrucci were collaborating with the San Bartolomeo theatre for this sort of task, it is reasonable to think that they were the authors of the prologue and intermezzo inserted in *Il disperato innocente*. We also ought to mention that

Andrea Perrucci, in his treatise *Della commedia premeditata, et all'improvviso* (Naples, 1699), describes in detail the comic characters playing in prologues and intermezzi, as well as their language, which was partly invented (especially for the Calabrian and Spaniard).

In this performance, devised by Antonio Florio and staged by Pino De Vittorio, we thought it best not to use the entire prologue from 1673, but a summary made at the beginning by the Neapolitan, and this for a couple of reasons: the performance would have become excessively long; and it had already been recorded by Florio<sup>2</sup>. In the *Prologo* – which, incidentally, has no direct link with the *Intermedio*, two characters play, both speaking Neapolitan: “Micco con calascione” and “Cuosmo con violini”. This is an homage to the old Neapolitan 17<sup>th</sup>-century literary tradition, as we can infer from the incipit “Bello tempo passato” (“Fine old days”), inspired by the classical texts by Basile, Cortese and others, from which many learned quotes found there, the funny dialogues are drawn. Then there is a realistic description of the social dynamics in theatres at the time and of what happened during an operatic performance, with an amusing satirical hint at ignorant journalists. All ends inviting the public to “lose their voice” for three hours, which gives us an idea of the performance’s duration. The story of the *Intermedio*, which is sung by the protagonists in four different idioms (Neapolitan, Calabrian, Italian and Spanish), is very typical of humorous 17<sup>th</sup>-century plots. What is certain is that the moral values of the “Fine old days”, evoked by the Neapolitan comic theatre to the great amusement of 17<sup>th</sup>-century audiences, can entertain us also today, teaching us simple but profound truths.

*\*Translated by Daniela Pilarz*

<sup>1</sup> Naples, Library of the Conservatory, MS Rari 6.7.3 (*olim* 32.3.22). Of the libretto of *Disperato innocente*, printed in Naples in 1673, only one copy exists, which is found at Bologna’s “Museo Internazionale della Musica”, but it contains no mention of the Prologo and Intermedio. The manuscript, with a critical edition of the Prologo, is analysed in Dinko Fabris, “Storie di Comici e di Harmonici: un Prologo anonimo per il San Bartolomeo, in *Commedia dell’arte e spettacolo in musica tra Sei e Settecento*”, Naples, Eitoriale Scientifica, 2003, pp. 329-355.

<sup>2</sup> The 1673 the Prologo was used for the first staging in modern times of Provenzale’s opera *Stellidaura* (Bari, 1996 season of the Petruzzelli theatre) and was recorded in 1995 by Antonio Florio in the CD *Francesco Provenzale. Cantate canzonette e dialoghi. Cantate napoletane dell’età barocca II* (Symphonia SY 94S29).

## **PLOT**

A Calabrian wanders about the dark and treacherous alleys of late 17<sup>th</sup>-century Spanish Naples complaining in his comical and almost incomprehensible dialect about a distant love and the wrongs he has suffered. He is stopped by a Neapolitan, an innkeeper who aims at taking advantage of the stranger’s naïveté and offers him his mouth-watering food to squeeze some money out of him. The better to win him over, he pretends to be an ex-soldier. Just then, they are joined by a Boy, a youth who has long been following the dumb Calabrian to mock him. After throwing him a bucket of water to cool him off, the provoking Boy flees, chased by the Calabrian to the disappointment of the Neapolitan. After a while the Calabrian returns, soaked and dejected, but just as the Neapolitan is about to convince him to eat his food, the Boy

reappears, looking quite pleased with himself. This time the two men succeed in seizing him. After declaring his remorse, the Boy runs off again, leaving the two men alone to familiarize. Suddenly, a worrying presence shows up: a Spanish soldier whose very sight is frightening and who boasts about his courage and sword, through which his name is universally known (a name, however, which is never revealed). After taking refuge under the table out of fear, the two men begin to realise that the Spaniard is not as invincible as he would have them believe, and they start provoking him, running up and down the scene and mispronouncing his words. They seem about to fight, when the Boy shows up; declaring that, like a brave hunter, he does not fear even the biggest prey, he rouses the Spaniard to the point where the man tries to hit him. The Boy, however, proves faster and forces the soldier to a shameful escape. Now that the danger has passed, the Calabrian and Neapolitan happily return to their meal. The Innkeeper, however, now demands to be paid, and he does so quite threateningly. Once again, the Boy intervenes. He sorts out also the arrogant Neapolitan, forcing him to bow to him and... to the public, for the show has come to its end.