



RESEARCH ARTICLE

# The Magician and the Showgirl: Carlo Lombardo and the Crisis of Italian Operetta, c. 1920–30

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## Abstract

This article examines the 'operetta crisis' that blighted the Italian operetta industry in the 1920s. Little has been written about the *crisi dell'operetta* in scholarship on Italian operetta to date, despite extensive coverage in contemporary sources. I attribute this neglect to the contested legacy of the composer, impresario and publisher Carlo Lombardo, at the height of his influence in the 1920s and responsible for most of the best-known Italian operettas today. Lombardo's works embodied critical anxieties about operetta's perceived artistic degradation, thanks to their overt sexuality and embrace of popular music (i.e. jazz). However, as I argue with reference to the 1925 operetta *Cin-ci-là*, narratives of artistic decline may miss the true significance of the crisis. Operetta, striving to be a 'light' form of opera but never fully accepted as such by the Italian establishment, was ultimately ill-equipped to survive in an entertainment landscape reshaping itself around popular music.

**Keywords:** Italian operetta; Popular music; Crisis; Fascism; Italy

The 1920s were a time of crisis for Italy's entertainment sector. That's the word that was used at the time – *crisi* – and it was attached to several prized culture industries. Opera scholars are familiar with the narrative that the Italian opera tradition 'died' in the 1920s along with Puccini; but at the time, opera's travails were described as *la crisi della lirica*, often subsumed under a broader *crisi dei teatri* that encompassed spoken theatre as well.<sup>1</sup> In the popular arena, Italian cinema fared only slightly better. Film exhibition flourished over the course of the decade, but film production went into a nosedive (*la crisi dei cinematografi*) from which it only recovered in the 1930s.<sup>2</sup> And despite special inquiries and government commissions and much handwringing, by 1929 the Fascist government was convening representatives from across the entire entertainment landscape to discuss what was, by then, a general *crisi dello spettacolo*.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, crisis-themed headlines in broadsheets such as *Il corriere della sera*, 'Organizzazioni, capocomici e impresari si alleano di fronte alla crisi teatrale' (4 June 1921) and 'La crisi dell'arte lirica italiana' (20 February 1923); and *La stampa*, 'La crisi teatrale' (4 September 1921), 'La crisi della lirica' (16 March 1923) and 'La crisi dei Teatro lirico e i mezzi per risolverla' (5 April 1928). Examples of such coverage in periodicals include 'La crisi del libretto', *Musica e scena* 1/1 (1924), 6–7; 'La crisi del teatro', *Kines* (14 October 1926), 2; and many more besides.

<sup>2</sup> For a concise summary of the film crisis and its causes, see Gian Piero Brunetta, *Il cinema muto italiano: Da 'La presa di Roma' a 'Sole', 1905–1929* (Bari, 2008), 267–98.

<sup>3</sup> 'Un'adunanza per la crisi dell'industria dello spettacolo', *Corriere della sera* (10 May 1929).

Hidden in the midst of this gloomy picture was yet another crisis, one rather less familiar: the operetta crisis. Throughout the 1920s, a constant stream of commentary used the concept of crisis to grapple with the complex set of problems blighting Italy's operetta industry, among them a lack of enduring success for new works, the straitened conditions of much of the workforce, and stiff competition from rival media such as the cinema. And in one sense the existence of a *crisi dell'operetta* should come as no surprise. After all, 'little opera' was a form of theatre; as such it was subject to the same pressures afflicting its more serious relatives, not least economic ones. The brutal reality is that the Italian public became less and less taken with operetta as the decade wore on, and in these conditions performers and theatres alike struggled to stay solvent. Yet the operetta crisis was about more than just economics. In the perception of the many, many critics who wrote about the issue, it was more precisely *Italian* operetta that was in crisis. As one editorial in the film magazine *Kines* asked pointedly in 1926, 'what exactly is Italian operetta?'<sup>4</sup> For the most pessimistic observers, there had never been a specifically Italian form of the genre – merely uninspired imitation of Viennese or Parisian models. For others, Italian operetta was perishing before its time; these voices awaited a fabled rebirth of the genre along more properly Italian lines. In the words of the renowned operetta actor and impresario Guido Riccioli, 'Italian operetta must be *Italian* in the fullest, most magnificent sense of the word: *Italian* in its conception and its intentions.'<sup>5</sup>

Operetta occupies such a marginal place in today's entertainment landscape that it can seem odd – when confronted with the gallons of critical ink that were spilled over the crisis a century ago – to see the genre treated as a matter of significant artistic, even national import. Strikingly, the *crisi dell'operetta* was a talking point in publications across the political and cultural spectrum: from elite broadsheets, generally with little good to say about the genre, to a proliferation of specialist music and theatre periodicals issuing a cacophony of contradictory opinions, to union newspapers advocating for operetta artists and industry workers. Yet little of this critical conversation has been captured in the limited scholarship on Italian operetta to date.<sup>6</sup> Partly, this neglect is explained by the fact that operetta scholars write with knowledge that the historical actors of the 1920s lacked, which is that Italian operetta ceased to function as an active composing tradition around 1930; what would have once seemed pressing (the *crisi*) with time became less salient than the end of the tradition itself. Partly it is a consequence of the genre's neglect by scholars in a field historically indifferent (or actively hostile) towards 'light' music. Even the *Enciclopedia dello spettacolo* of 1959, a landmark publication in the study of the performing arts notable for its attempt to encompass all forms of spectacle, notes simply that Italian operetta 'knew its greatest success between c. 1910 and 1926'; the crisis is not mentioned.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>4</sup> [Kines], 'Ma che cos'è l'operetta italiana?' *Kines* (13 August 1927), 1 (italics added). All translations in this article are my own.

<sup>5</sup> Giuseppe Lega, 'Guido Riccioli e l'operetta italiana', in *L'argante* (16 April 1923), 1 (italics in source).

<sup>6</sup> Traditional accounts of the crisis of the Italian opera tradition barely mention operetta at all, let alone its having a crisis of its own. For instance, despite passing comments on the appeal of operetta, Alan Mallach's account devotes significantly more space to cinema as an emerging rival to opera: see *The Autumn of Italian Opera: From Verismo to Modernism, 1890–1915* (Boston, 2007), 337–62, esp. 356. Valeria De Lucca's recent overview of Italian operetta notes its 'decline' but not the crisis; see 'Operetta in Italy', in *The Cambridge Companion to Operetta*, ed. Anastasia Belina and Derek B. Scott (Cambridge, 2019), 220–31, at 230. However, Matteo Paoletti has briefly situated operetta within 'the general crisis of theatre at a time of tremendous change'; see his *A Huge Revolution of Theatrical Commerce: Walter Mocchi and the Italian Musical Theatre Business in South America* (Cambridge, 2020), 63–73, at 69–70.

<sup>7</sup> See entry 'Operetta', in *Enciclopedia dello spettacolo*, 12 vols. (Rome, 1954), vol. 7, 1363–71; subsection 'Italia' 1367–8.

Perhaps the only account of Italian operetta that preserves some of the heat of the century-old debates around the crisis, without using the term exactly, is that of Bruno Traversetti, whose 1985 *L'operetta* dismisses out of hand 'the sickly, ingenuous and artificial miasmas of the vulgar and derivative "1920s style" [of operetta]'.<sup>8</sup> These biting remarks, of a piece with Traversetti's general characterisation of Italian operetta as an abortive offshoot of the Continental tradition, highlight a notable discrepancy (and further absence) at the heart of operetta scholarship. Virtually all the Italian operettas of any renown today – including Giuseppe Pietri's *L'acqua cheta* (1920), Mario Costa's *Scugnizza* (1922), and above all Virgilio Ranzato's *Il paese dei campanelli* (1923) and *Cin-ci-là* (1925) – were written in the 1920s. And all of these works bar one (Pietri's) came into being through the efforts of a man now acknowledged as the 'father' or even the 'emperor' of Italian operetta: the composer, librettist, arranger, impresario and publisher Carlo Lombardo, whose career peaked in the 1920s with a string of works that achieved considerable success, even as works by other Italian authors floundered.

At the time, Lombardo's critical role in sustaining the Italian operetta industry during this crisis-stricken decade was widely acknowledged, friends and foes alike dubbing him *il mago*, 'the magician' (with all the ambiguity this word entails). Yet his presence in subsequent writing on operetta is curiously insubstantial. In Dino Falconi and Angelo Frattini's *Guida alla rivista (e all'operetta)*, published in 1953, the authors note cryptically that 'Lombardo deserves an entire chapter to himself, in so far as his character evades all efforts at categorisation'; in actuality, the few pages dedicated to the (still-living) Lombardo are curiously reticent about his achievements.<sup>9</sup> The brief discussion of operetta in Italy in the *Enciclopedia dello spettacolo*, meanwhile, makes no mention of Lombardo whatsoever.<sup>10</sup> Even in Valeria De Lucca's recent survey of Italian operetta history for the *Cambridge Companion* to the genre, he is mentioned only in passing, his 1920s heyday treated briefly as the period when operetta passed the baton to other, more popular live theatre genres – especially the *rivista*, or revue – and cheaper forms of mass entertainment, principally the cinema.<sup>11</sup> Once again, it is Traversetti who breaks the *omertà* with a brutal dissection of 'the presumption and utilitarian "philosophy of success" of this frivolous "maître a penser" [i.e. Lombardo], in whose voracious pragmatism were combined, in an utterly unique mixture, both mediocrity and talent'.<sup>12</sup>

Such antipathy towards the man whose works, for better or worse, have largely come to define the Italian operetta phenomenon for later generations prompts a number of questions. The first is historical: given Lombardo's notable and visible success during the 1920s, why were critics in Italy's specialist musical and broadsheet press so keen to diagnose a crisis of Italian operetta? In what, exactly, did the crisis consist? The second is historiographical: why, given Lombardo's critical role in the latter days of Italian operetta, have later writers been reluctant to confront his legacy head-on? What in Lombardo's 'fortunate and controversial career' (to use De Lucca's phrasing) accounts for his notoriety?<sup>13</sup> In answering these questions, this article argues that Lombardo's dominance of the Italian operetta industry and the rhetoric of crisis that surrounded the genre throughout the 1920s cannot be understood in isolation. The magician and the crisis of Italian operetta, I suggest, are two sides of the same coin; and both are intimately connected to the rise of a popular music

<sup>8</sup> Bruno Traversetti, *L'operetta* (Milan, 1985), 134.

<sup>9</sup> Dino Falconi and Angelo Frattini, *Guida alla rivista (e all'operetta)* (Milan, 1953), 71–9; quotation at 71–2.

<sup>10</sup> There is a separate, concise entry on Lombardo: see 'Lombardo, Carlo' in *Enciclopedia dello spettacolo*, vol. 6, 1607–8.

<sup>11</sup> De Lucca, 'Operetta in Italy', esp. 229–30.

<sup>12</sup> Traversetti, *L'operetta*, 135.

<sup>13</sup> De Lucca, 'Operetta in Italy', 229.

industry whose ambivalent standing in mid-century aesthetics ultimately accounts for their equivocal position in post-war operetta scholarship.

In what follows, I first sketch out the contemporary critical discourse around the operetta crisis in the 1920s. As other articles in this special issue have shown, anxieties about the insufficient Italianness of Italian operetta had already accompanied the genre's unfolding in Italy for decades, though the style of music on which such anxieties were now being projected (jazz) was new, as was the political context (Fascism) in which they were restated. I juxtapose this patently elitist conversation with other, less slanted analyses of the crisis that grappled with the fact that operetta was increasingly being treated not as a form of art but as a commercial asset. I then turn specifically to Lombardo, since his particular model of operetta – spectacular, salacious, unashamedly populist – was likely the model that critics had in mind when they attacked Italian operetta's artistic decadence and base commercialism. Mercenary business tactics notwithstanding, so long as Lombardo continued to bring successful new works to fruition his aura remained undimmed among Italy's struggling operetta artists. Yet, as I show in the final section of the article through a case study of the aforementioned *Cin-ci-là* (1925) – perhaps the best-known Italian operetta of all – this success depended on cultivating the synergy between operetta and popular song, even if in so doing Lombardo ultimately strengthened the forces chipping away at the genre's distinct identity. Discursively speaking, the crisis of Italian operetta thus emerges as the expression of an anxiety among Italy's bourgeoisie about the popularity of this new style of 'light' music; but practically speaking the fact that operetta could (and did) serve as a key node in the dissemination of popular music is illustrative of a rapidly changing musical world, one in which the genre could not long survive.

### The crisis

In 1924, the renowned operetta composer Ettore Bellini gave an interview to the conservative broadsheet *il giornale d'Italia*.<sup>14</sup> Bellini was promoting a revival of his operetta *Casta diva*, and the interview is conducted along conventionally flattering lines. What is striking, however, is the faint disagreement the interview records around the notorious question of the *crisi dei teatri*. For Bellini claimed boldly that there was no crisis. Rather, following the immediate post-war years – when a public desperate for diversion threw money at anything and everything – the sector was in a period of readjustment. Theatre-goers were now shunning 'low-quality' works, but they could be won over by companies offering truly, genuinely Italian operetta. Yet – the interviewer demurred – Italian composers had written operettas even before the war, and these had always faltered in the face of foreign competitors. Bellini pressed his point: contemporary Italian operettas, unlike previous efforts in the genre, were genuine 'musical plays' (*commedie musicali*) in which music and libretto were in perfect balance, unlike foreign works that prioritised empty dance numbers and sentimental songs. And he listed several up-and-coming composers and librettists, most now obscure, as evidence for his optimism in this respect.<sup>15</sup>

Curiously, then, Bellini did not dispute one of the principal indicators of the crisis: the steadily declining audience for operetta. Sidestepping the question of whether this trend was causal or consequential, he marshalled it as evidence that *Italian* operetta was on the cusp of fulfilling its promise, throwing off residual foreign influences and transforming into

<sup>14</sup> 'Il M.<sup>o</sup> Ettore Bellini intervistato a Roma dal "Giornale d'Italia"', in *L'opera comica* (1 June 1924), 3; originally published as 'L'operetta italiana trionfa' in *il giornale d'Italia*.

<sup>15</sup> In addition to Virgilio Ranzato, among the composers cited as emerging stars are several important figures in Italian popular song and film music, including Ezio Carabella, Ennio Negri and Dino Rulli.



Figure 1. Double-page spread listing Italian operetta companies active for the theatrical year 1926–7, with Nella Regini and Ines Lidelba's placed in the centre (partially obscured by centre-fold). *L'opera comica* (March 1926). Courtesy of the Biblioteca Braidense, Milan | Su concessione del Ministero della Cultura – Pinacoteca di Brera – Biblioteca Braidense, Milano. Further reproduction prohibited.

a truly national art form. Wishful thinking, perhaps. Yet at that moment, Bellini's rosy view of the situation may not have seemed so far-fetched. Consider Figure 1, taken from the pages of one of the foremost Italian operetta periodicals of the day, *L'opera comica*. The two-page spread highlights the thirty-or-so operetta companies active in Italy during the theatrical year 1926–7, including those headed by the biggest stars in the industry – the soubrettes Nella Regini and Ines Lidelba – who are placed prominently in the centre. That is, in 1926 it was still possible to be optimistic about the vitality of Italian operetta, despite the alarming levels of unemployment in the industry, and notwithstanding the recent failures of several prominent operetta companies (such as the embarrassing collapse of the Compagnia Ivan Darclée, ruined by an accounting and fraud scandal in 1925).<sup>16</sup> Within the space of a few years, however, several of the companies shown in Figure 1 had failed (not least Regini's), and the outlook in pro-operetta circles swiftly became very gloomy indeed.

Why did operetta fall out of favour in Italy in the 1920s? There is no straightforward answer to this question. Much like the Hollywood film musical in the 1960s, Italian operetta was the victim of changing public taste; yet this change was itself the result of a congeries of factors. What is striking about coverage of the Italian operetta crisis, however, and what Bellini's interview helpfully reveals, is the way contemporary observers tended to simplify matters by moving the debate onto one key battlefield: the question of whether operetta

<sup>16</sup> On the collapse of the Darclée company – the company's second failure in three years – see Ottorino Fossi, 'Dalla formazione allo scioglimento della Compagnia Ivan Darclée', in *L'argante operettistico* (1 February 1926), 1.

counted as art. For Bellini and other proponents of operetta it was of paramount importance both that operetta be recognised as a genuine artform, and that Italian operetta be considered a specific manifestation of said artform, expressing a uniquely Italian national sensibility. Paradoxically, the harshest critics often shared these priorities. The difference was that pro-operetta figures thought that contemporary Italian works reached the necessary thresholds of both artistry and *italianità*, whereas their opponents did not.

Undoubtedly, the pro-operetta camp faced an uphill struggle. The fact that the genre's origins in Italy ultimately lay in French operetta, together with the immense popularity of Viennese operetta after the Italian debut of *Die lustige Witwe* in 1907, had been used as sticks to beat Italian operetta companies for years. Indeed, this perception was partly responsible for the concerted efforts to cultivate a properly Italian form of operetta in the years before the First World War. Proponents of the genre were in a bind when the crisis began to bite after 1918, though, because these homegrown alternatives were indisputably a recent phenomenon. One striking column in *L'opera comica* from 1919 tried to make a virtue of this fact through personification: Italian operetta could be compared to a young girl reaching key rites of passage, such as First Communion, thereby implying that a genre entering a promising young adulthood could finally be taken as seriously as a form of art comparable to opera and theatre.<sup>17</sup> But as Bellini's mildly sceptical interviewer demonstrates, such claims were not convincing to large portions of the commentariat. It was a perpetual source of frustration within the Italian operetta world that broadsheets rarely employed a dedicated operetta critic, and that high-minded music or theatre critics sent to evaluate new operettas therefore felt pressure 'to judge a libretto as though it were an opera by Wagner', as another column in *L'opera comica* had it in 1926, lest they be accused of relaxing their artistic standards.<sup>18</sup>

Opponents of operetta had a much easier task. For them the crisis was easily explained: the problem with Italian operetta was simply that it wasn't very good. Often, this meant not as good as the operettas produced abroad; Viennese and Parisian operetta were constantly invoked as yardsticks against which Italian works supposedly fell short, especially the works of Franz Lehár and Emmerich Kálmán.<sup>19</sup> For others, the 'badness' of Italian operetta was not simply relative: it was both inherent and moral in nature. In this view, Italian operetta was overly sexualised, even pornographic in its reliance on production numbers featuring scantily clad dancers and crass, suggestive lyrics. The watchword for this line of criticism is the verb *sgambettare*, to kick one's legs, with sexualised *sgambetti* repeatedly singled out as an execrable characteristic of modern operetta. Such conservative voices could also point to another feature of the genre that was undoubtedly different in the 1920s from what it had been in the 1910s: its music.

Music had always served as a unifying symbol through which a range of reactionary and not always complementary ideas about operetta were channelled: jingoistic praise of Italian traditions, prudish distaste for sexualised choreography, and xenophobic anxiety about foreign influence. Already in the 1910s, operettas were criticised for consisting simply of strings of French *couplets* with *refrains* rather than *ritornelli*, stuffed full of trendy foreign dances. As one satirical column in the theatre periodical *Le quinte* opined in 1918, the key ingredients for a successful operetta were 'at least three German waltzes, several duets with leg kicks and lots of pornography spread through the dialogue and the plot of the libretto'.<sup>20</sup> By the mid-1920s, many elements of this critique remained, but the waltzes had been replaced as a figure of abuse by jazz-influenced American popular dances: Charlestons,

<sup>17</sup> 'L'operetta italiana all'età del giudizio', *L'opera comica* (1 October 1919), 1–2.

<sup>18</sup> Mario Nordio, 'Operetta ... o Divina Commedia?' *L'opera comica* (March 1926), 1.

<sup>19</sup> See discussion of these critiques in [Kines], 'Ma che cos'è l'operetta italiana?'

<sup>20</sup> 'L'operetta ossia La capanna dello Zio Tom', in *Le quinte: Giornale del teatro* (16 May 1918), 3.

black-bottoms, one-steps, shimmies and above all the foxtrot. For many critics, this shift seems to have stymied their ability to formulate critical judgments. Countless reviews of new operettas fall back on bland terminology such as *orecchiabile* ('listenable' or 'tuneful') to describe music written in modern dance genres. In recompense, however, conservative writers pivoted easily to racist (and often misogynistic) diatribes emphasising jazz's association with Black Americans: what for some were 'banal American rhythms' and 'foxtrots arranged using "jazz-band" methods' (*procedimenti 'jazz-bandistici'*), for others became 'humiliating African dances' and 'the apotheosis of negromusicomania'.<sup>21</sup>

Many of these discursive threads are brought together in an extraordinary, vituperative article about Italian operetta by the journalist Giovanni Tonelli, first published in late 1925 but reprinted shortly thereafter in the broadsheet *Il giornale d'Italia*, which ran two further columns by Tonelli on the subject.<sup>22</sup> The column is uncompromising in its stance on contemporary operetta, 'barely above the level of *caffè-concerto*', whose 'foxtrot-ising (*foxtrotteggiate*) music smells of cocaine a mile off.'<sup>23</sup> But Tonelli's article also gives voice to a complaint widespread in the contemporary historiography of operetta, worth reproducing here at length:

Italian authors, therefore, in defiance of the vulgar whims of publishers, should give our operetta tradition new works in which the point of differentiation from foreign operetta consists not in emphasising the defects of foreign works – popular among the spineless crowds who need the lascivious caress of music from nightclubs [*da abat-jour*] and so-called tea-houses, and phrases and situations drawn straight from a bordello, in order to exhibit signs of life – but rather, going back to the wellspring of our healthy comic instincts, immortalised in works that are the pride of our national literature, consists in repeating the themes of that which was the glorious tradition of Italian opera buffa, itself derived from those old plays in the Italian theatrical tradition which often poked fun at operas shown at the Accademia Reale di Musica – works which in a sense gave rise to Opéra Comique.<sup>24</sup>

Crucially, Tonelli interprets the recent history of Italian operetta as an aberrant deviation from a longer history of Italian comic music theatre whose origins ultimately lay in *opera buffa*. Historically dubious though this genealogy undoubtedly was, as Elena Oliva and Ditlev Rindom discuss in their contributions to this special issue, it provided the anchor for a coherent explanation of the operetta crisis that was evidently widely shared, for many composers, impresarios, politicians and other irate readers wrote to the newspaper expressing their agreement with Tonelli. The opera composer Giuseppe Mulè, for instance, wrote scathingly that 'the operetta currently popular [in Italy] is a defective industrial product, which has nothing to do with art. An Italian variety of operetta – and it's about time that one was born – should reattach itself, through modern and personal expressive means – to our healthy, sincere, and brilliant *opera buffa* tradition.'<sup>25</sup>

<sup>21</sup> 'For some': see Alberto Ostali, letter published in *Il giornale d'Italia* (7 February 1926), 6; 'For others': see M. Incagliati, letter published under heading 'Polemica sull'operetta italiana', *Il giornale d'Italia* (6 January 1926), 3.

<sup>22</sup> See Giovanni Tonelli, 'Un ritorno all'italianità', in *Il giornale d'Italia* (2 January 1926), 3, first published in *Rivista nazionale di musica* (18 December 1925), 1154–6. For Tonelli's subsequent pieces see 'L'operetta in Italia: L'interpretazione e la "mise en scène"' in *Il giornale d'Italia* (17 January 1926), 3; and 'L'operetta italiana' (7 February 1926), 6. Tonelli's first article was subsequently reprinted in *L'argante operettistico* (16 July 1927), 2.

<sup>23</sup> Tonelli, 'Un ritorno all'italianità'.

<sup>24</sup> Tonelli, 'Un ritorno all'italianità'.

<sup>25</sup> See Giuseppe Mulè, letter to the editor published under the heading 'Polemica sull'operetta italiana', *Il giornale d'Italia* (6 January 1926), 3.

This notion of *opera buffa* as a ‘healthy’, ‘natural’ root stock of Italian culture – juxtaposed with the degenerate, machine-tooled modernity celebrated in contemporary operetta – would seem to speak to several features of Fascist cultural policy identified by Ruth Ben-Ghiat, from the aggressive pursuit of Italian primacy in the cultural arena to the notion of *bonifica*, cultural ‘hygiene’ or ‘cleansing’.<sup>26</sup> Certainly, the rhetoric of artistic crisis inhibiting the blossoming of a native operetta tradition resonates with the rhetoric of political and cultural crisis in Italian society that Mussolini exploited ruthlessly in his rise to power – and it must be noted that Mulè and Tonelli were both committed fascists.<sup>27</sup> Yet the chauvinist, prudish and racist attitudes towards popular entertainment expressed by Tonelli and his correspondents were hardly the preserve of totalitarianism: they were common coin in conservative discourse across the West and had been applied to operetta long before fascism came along. In practice, then, the exaggerated hostility of critics like Tonelli may obscure more than it illuminates the complexity of the transactions taking place between Fascism and the operetta stage.

Among other things, it obscures the fact that many prominent figures in the operetta industry were themselves linked to Fascism. For instance, the journalist and poet Carlo Ravasio, who versified many of Lombardo’s operetta libretti, was also a prominent Black-shirt who participated in the March on Rome and later became vice-secretary of the National Fascist Party; the star soubrette Ines Lidelba dedicated a chapter of her post-retirement autobiography to a star-struck meeting with Il Duce.<sup>28</sup> What is more, many of the features of Italian operetta singled out as deplorable by critics – such as the much-maligned *sgambetti* – were often precisely those deemed indispensable by its advocates, fascist or otherwise. For every writer complaining that ‘nowadays all you need are twelve or sixteen bare legs and the show is done and dusted’,<sup>29</sup> someone like Lidelba, clearly no opponent of the genre, could counter:

this is what the audience desires; at least they say that the audience for operettas and revues demands that the actresses and dancers are dressed... as little as possible. Legs, legs everywhere, nothing but exposure and frenzy of legs. If the spectators at a show of this nature weren’t to see many bare legs they would simply leave because... there would be nothing to see.<sup>30</sup>

Lidelba’s cheerful artistic *realpolitik* shows the extent to which the pearl-clutching conservatives and the pearl-clad denizens of the operettistic demi-monde were often remarkably in agreement. In fact, producers and performers of Italian operetta deployed precisely the same critical tropes as the genre’s attackers, simply to different ends. For example, the impresario or *capocomico* Guido Riccioli made the unique selling point of his company the fact that it only performed Italian works – quite cynically, in the eyes of some, given that Riccioli cast himself as the ‘perfect philanthropist [and] protector of Italian Art’ but was as hard-nosed as anybody, ‘the costs of [his] productions shouldered by the composer and 50% of the royalties in his name’.<sup>31</sup> Yet no less than *L’argante*, the official newspaper of the

<sup>26</sup> Ruth Ben-Ghiat, *Fascist Modernities: Italy, 1922–1945* (Berkeley, 2001), 1–11, esp. 4–6.

<sup>27</sup> Mulè was a bureaucrat in the fascist Musicians’ Union, while Tonelli was later involved in the founding of the Movimento Sociale Italiano, Italy’s foremost neo-fascist party after the Second World War.

<sup>28</sup> See Ines Lidelba, *La mia vita nell’operetta* (Rome, 1930), 81–94. On Ravasio, see Giulia Albanese, ‘Ravasio, Carlo’, entry in *Dizionario biografico degli italiani*, vol. 86 (2016), published online at [https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/carlo-ravasio\\_\(Dizionario-Biografico\)/](https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/carlo-ravasio_(Dizionario-Biografico)/).

<sup>29</sup> Mauro Saporetto, ‘L’operetta e la crisi’, *L’argante operettistico* (1 November 1926), 2.

<sup>30</sup> Lidelba, *La mia vita*, 61–2; ellipses in source.

<sup>31</sup> [Kines], ‘Ma che cos’è l’operetta italiana?’



Italian actors' union, could also be found evangelising in Ricciolian terms: 'Let [operetta composers] take as their subject our habits and folklore, our landscapes, our seas; let the latter be framed by melodies as cheerful, fresh and toothsome as ... good wine from the hills of Tuscany; and so our Operetta will succeed because it will have, finally, its own identity.'<sup>32</sup> In other words, the narrative of artistic crisis made for great marketing spin (and column inches), which may partially explain the trend, in the 1920s, for critics to periodically seize upon a new work by an Italian composer as the harbinger of truly Italian operetta and the solution to the crisis, even if these works almost invariably drew (at least in part) on the same new jazz-influenced musical resources as any of the others.

Of course, not all writing on the crisis was focused on questions of art. For the union paper *L'argante*, and the operetta-specific spin-off *L'argante operettistico*, the chief culprits were (unsurprisingly) the irresponsible impresarios and predatory publishers gambling with the livelihoods of others and plunging struggling workers into unemployment.<sup>33</sup> Others argued that there were simply too many companies, many of no great talent, trying to profit off a decreasing share of the theatre-going public.<sup>34</sup> Operetta companies had long pursued potentially lucrative but financially risky tours overseas, especially to the emigrant heartlands of South America – but now some Italian critics interpreted foreign touring itself as a culprit, a kind of 'brain drain' depriving Italy of many talented performers and thus worsening the situation back home.<sup>35</sup> A further commonly identified factor was Italian operetta's entanglement with external competitors, Viennese operetta above all. Italian writers remarked enviously on operetta's centrality in Austrian musical culture, while observing ruefully that Viennese works sold more tickets in Italian theatres than Italian ones.<sup>36</sup> Similarly, the *rivista* was increasingly encroaching on the operetta audience in Italy and elsewhere. Until the late 1920s, writers could convince themselves that a (good) operetta, with its musical unfolding structured by a narrative framework, was inevitably more appealing than the comparatively structureless *rivista*.<sup>37</sup> As *rivista* began to outcompete operetta not just in Italy but also in Vienna, however, Italian operetta companies increasingly sought to imitate the spectacular production values of Parisian revue; and this, in turn, drove up the already considerable expense of mounting an operetta, putting many new works beyond the means of smaller, provincial companies that were formerly the lifeblood of the industry.

The spiralling costs of operetta production were the result of a tendency – crucial for our purposes here – that several writers grasped but weren't quite able to accept: leading figures in the operetta industry were increasingly apt to treat the genre with an industrial mindset, as an asset to be exploited for financial return. Music publishers, one article in *L'opera comica* noted with dismay, were now founding operetta companies to perform their works (rather than relying on royalties alone); likewise operetta companies were launching publishing ventures (rather than relying on ticket sales), with the same ultimate goal – to capture as

<sup>32</sup> See editorial comment appended to Lega, 'Guido Riccioli e l'operetta italiana'. Note that *L'argante operettistico* (representing the Italian operetta artists' union) was a separate publication to *L'argante* (representing the Italian actors' union); the former split from the latter in October 1923.

<sup>33</sup> See, in this vein, Ottorino Fossi, 'Si gioca con la pelle altrui?' in *L'argante* (1 August 1923), 2.

<sup>34</sup> [Kines], 'Ma che cos'è l'operetta italiana?'

<sup>35</sup> See, for instance, 'Artisti, boicottate il suolo americano', *L'argante* (2 February 1922), 3; 'Grido d'allarme: L'America', *L'opera comica* (1 January 1926), 1. On the circulation of Italian music theatre in South America, see Paoletti, *A Huge Revolution of Theatrical Commerce*, esp. 63–73 for comments on the 'collapse' of this market by the mid-1920s.

<sup>36</sup> 'L'operetta viennese', *L'argante* (16 April 1923), 4.

<sup>37</sup> See paired articles by G. Franceschinis and Beniamino Miozzi published under the heading 'I problemi del momento: Dall'operetta alla rivista ... è dalla rivista all'operetta!' *L'opera comica* (20 October 1926), 4.

much of the revenue stream from individual operettas as possible.<sup>38</sup> What this article was registering, in other words, was a tendency towards vertical integration, concentrating the capital locked up in operetta in the hands of ever fewer individuals. The unsavoury reality was that the forces driving operetta forward were nakedly commercial rather than artistic in nature.

This conflict of ideals gets to the very heart of the operetta crisis. As we have seen, both proponents and opponents of operetta wanted, in their own way, for the genre to reside in the sphere of art, not 'mere' entertainment, like variety shows and revues, and certainly not the world of industry. Yet operetta in the early decades of the 1900s was a global genre: as Derek Scott has pointed out, it sat at the intersection of a range of industrial and commercial enterprises, of transnational flows of people and capital.<sup>39</sup> Above all, global operetta was increasingly put together using a shared, transnational language of popular music that made claims of Italian operetta's essential Italianness or its supposed roots in *opera buffa* untenable. In these circumstances, the cultural forces that were pushing operetta towards the most popular version of itself were bound to become objects of suspicion. And in an Italian context there was one individual who, more than any other, embodied the vision of operetta as commerce, not as art: Carlo Lombardo.

### The magician

Carlo Lombardo cuts a fascinating trail through the history of Italian operetta.<sup>40</sup> A contemporary of Puccini and Mascagni, he was born to an aristocratic family (the Baroni Lombardo di San Chirico) that was musically gifted: Carlo's brothers Costantino and Domenico would both make careers in the operetta industry, Costantino in particular becoming an esteemed conductor, composer and company leader. Though Carlo's first professional engagements were as an opera conductor, he pivoted towards operetta in the 1890s, launching his first original works with the company headed by Luigi Maresca.<sup>41</sup> Eventually launching himself as a *capocomico*, Lombardo's self-named company became the primary vehicle for promoting his works in the early 1900s and marked the beginning of his vertiginous ascent to the very top of the Italian operetta industry.<sup>42</sup>

We can get a good sense of Lombardo's character, or at least the persona he affected, by jumping forward in time to the mid-1920s – the apex of both the crisis and of his fame and influence – to consider a striking pen-portrait from 1927, printed in a vanity publication in honour of Ines Lidelba:

Lombardo (those who know him will confirm) is the busiest man in the world. He has buildings, theatres, villas (for himself, naturally) to put up; libretti to write for other

<sup>38</sup> Guido Manneschi, 'La crisi del repertorio', *L'opera comica* (1 March 1925), 3.

<sup>39</sup> Derek B. Scott comments extensively on operetta's commercial and cosmopolitan entanglements in *German Operetta on Broadway and in the West End, 1900–1940* (Cambridge, 2019), esp. 89–124, 252–76. See also Tobias Becker, 'Globalizing Operetta before the First World War', *The Opera Quarterly* 33/1 (2017), 7–27.

<sup>40</sup> A reliable biography of Lombardo, drawing on his profile in the *Enciclopedia dello spettacolo*, can be found in Simone Ciolfi, 'Lombardo, Carlo', entry in *Dizionario biografico degli italiani*, vol. 65 (2005), published online at [https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/carlo-lombardo\\_\(Dizionario-Biografico\)/](https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/carlo-lombardo_(Dizionario-Biografico)/). For a more hagiographic account, albeit enriched with details possibly informed by first-hand information from Lombardo's descendants, see Waldimaro Fiorentino, *L'operetta italiana: Storia, analisi critica, aneddoti* (Bolzano, 2006), 180–9.

<sup>41</sup> Ciolfi, 'Lombardo, Carlo'. See Ditlev Rindom's article in this issue for a further contextualisation of Lombardo's activity in the 1890s.

<sup>42</sup> According to some sources Lombardo launched the Compagnia Carlo Lombardo *ex novo*; see Sandro Massimini and Pino Nugnes, *Storia dell'operetta* (Milan, 1984), 188–9. According to Ciolfi, however, in the mid-1890s he took a controlling stake in the company headed by soprano Pina Calligaris, eventually changing its name.

people's music; music to write for other people's libretti; popular songs to write for composers who will then attach their names to them; trips to make abroad, to replenish his reserves of inspiration; automobiles to take into the city, for other kinds of 'inspiration' with which he is always well supplied; projects to invest in; careers to launch, preferably for artists of the female sex; furniture and cars to buy; children to baptise; ideas to follow up; secretaries of the [Fascist] Artistic Unions to confront; collaborators to attract; proofs to correct; drafts to create; female friends to flee; male friends to put up with; scripts to not read; marginalia to check; advice to ignore; volumes to peruse for settings and costumes to be incorporated into his next operetta; appointments to make; appointments to miss; blows to parry; opponents to crush; honorary positions to accept; meetings to chair; conferences to attend; battle plans to improvise; sure, precise, habitual and ritual good luck gestures to perform; agreements to make; disagreements to not give a shit about [*da fregarsene*] ... And then some still ask how he finds time to eat and time to dress and undress with that frequency required by certain habits that he cultivates, as a man of the world of ... rare talents.<sup>43</sup>

The author of this description, Enrico Pancani, was himself the leader of an operetta company, 'La Lombardiana' (Figure 1), possibly subsidised by Lombardo (given its name). His portrait is both flattering and highly conventionalised: Lombardo emerges as the embodiment of the Fascist New Man, assertive to a fault, impatient with time-wasting officialdom, and exceedingly virile (as multiple euphemistic references to extramarital liaisons attest). Yet no amount of flattery can disguise certain barely submerged anxieties. We get a sense of how strong Lombardo's grip on the industry really was ('careers to launch'), and how ruthlessly he prosecuted his advantages over his competitors ('opponents to crush'). Above all, Pancani's description of Lombardo's 'collaborative' authorial tendencies – writing 'music for other people's libretti' and 'libretti for other people's music', bestowing popular songs on other composers like papal dispensations – can be read as evidence of profound misgivings.

These misgivings had accompanied Lombardo ever since he had embarked on his career as an impresario. From the 1900s onwards, responding to the enormous popularity of Viennese operetta on the peninsula, Lombardo began to approach little-known foreign (typically German or Austrian) composers for permission to arrange their music into 'new' operettas interspersed with a handful of original musical numbers.<sup>44</sup> Commercially, it was a winning strategy: *Amor di principi* (1910), written to a libretto by Carlo Vizzotto and adapting music from Edmund Eysler's *Pufferl* (1905), held the Italian stage for nearly three years.<sup>45</sup> Even at this early stage, though, Lombardo's willingness to put his name to works he had only in a loose sense written raised eyebrows. Consider the following description from a promotional fold-out publicising his own Compagnia Lombardo, published in *L'opera comica* in 1907 (the first year of the magazine's existence): 'These days, Carlo Lombardo dedicates himself more to administratively lucrative "scores" [*partiture amminstrativamente proficue*] than to musical scores: but who can forget that he once was – rather, he is – one of our most gifted composers and conductors?'<sup>46</sup> The hesitation as to Lombardo's current role (in advertising copy intended to be openly flattering, no less) is highly telling.

As Lombardo's profile grew throughout the 1910s, concerns around his calculated blurring of authorship would only increase. Many of his biggest hits during the war years (facilitated by the impossibility of enforcing copyright across national borders) were

<sup>43</sup> Enrico Pancani, *Ines Lidelba: Nell'arte e nella vita* (Turin, 1927), 15 (ellipses in source).

<sup>44</sup> Massimini and Nugnes, *Storia dell'operetta*, 188–90.

<sup>45</sup> Ciolfi, 'Lombardo, Carlo'.

<sup>46</sup> See 'Il personale artistico della Compagnia C. Lombardo', promotional fold-out, *L'opera comica* (28 February 1907).

'remixes' of foreign operettas. To cite just two examples, *La duchessa del Bal Tabarin* (1915), published under Lombardo's pseudonym Leon Bard, was based on Bruno Granichstädten's *Majestät Mimi* (1911); *Madama di Tebe* (1918) drew heavily on Józef Szulc's *Flup!* (premiered 1920, after Lombardo's 'adaptation').<sup>47</sup> Controversially in a wartime context in which popular works by Teutonic composers were shunned, Lombardo sneaked Viennese-style operetta in through the back door, to critical dismay. The satirical column from *Le quinte* quoted above, for example, is based around an extended metaphor that casts the rapacious purveyors of operetta in Italy as 'Ostrogoths': this is in all likelihood a reference to Lombardo, who shared his surname with one of the Germanic peoples (the Lombards) that, like the Ostrogoths, made their home in Italy after the fall of the Western Roman Empire.<sup>48</sup> The resulting critique of Lombardo as a representative of foreign hordes overwhelming a fragile Italian polity would have been easy to read between the lines, for all that it was completely ineffectual.

No amount of critical disdain, in fact, could stop the public bestowing their favour on Lombardo's works. 'What of the Lombardo phenomenon?' asked an article in *L'opera comica* on promising developments in Italian operetta in 1919. 'Like medieval *chansons de geste*', it continued,

his cheerful, impetuous, irresistible operettas are the product of a curious artistic cooperative that takes (as is only right) his name. Don't ask, now, what infernal chemistry brought forth the scores to *Il cavaliere della luna* and *La signorina del cinematografo*, *La duchessa del Bal Tabarin* and *Madama di Tebe*: for these are all made in the image of their creator, who remains, for both words and music, Carlo Lombardo, whose works remain, in their own way, Italian operettas ...<sup>49</sup>

The tension in this quote – again, intended to be laudatory – is striking. On the one hand, the attempt to reposition Lombardo's creative process as a reinvention of pre-modern modes of artistic production only serves to reinforce the fact that he was contravening unwritten norms of creative practice, based around a strong concept of the author whose works were an emanation of individual, non-replicable artistic impulses; the admission that Lombardo's operettas are 'in their own way' Italian highlights a sense that he was not producing authentically native work. On the other, the popularity of Lombardo's operettas with the public shows how little these constructions mattered when it came to commercial success, which the author cannot help but mystify with references to 'infernal chemistry'. It is the same tension at the heart of the soubriquet Lombardo acquired by the 1920s, *il mago*, which enclosed within it both perceptions of Lombardo as someone who could work wonders – single-handedly keeping the crisis at bay – and as a charlatan, a purveyor of cheap tricks and stolen ideas.

Regardless, from the post-war period onwards Lombardo's fame, wealth and influence increased dramatically. The year 1919 saw two major works with Italian collaborators, including *Si!* – Mascagni's only operetta – for which Lombardo wrote the libretto; and *Il re di Chez Maxim*, a 'jukebox' operetta riffing on *Die lustige Witwe* and based on pre-existing songs by the Neapolitan composer Mario Costa. These prepared the ground for a long streak of popular operettas in the 1920s, starting with Costa's *Scugnizza* in 1922. Capitalising on his success, in 1923 Lombardo founded his own publishing house, the Casa musicale Carlo Lombardo: this move, which meant he combined in a single enterprise three of the most critical roles in the operetta industry (author, publisher and impresario), gave him ever greater control of the commercial exploitation of his operettas, whether by dictating the

<sup>47</sup> Ciolfi, 'Lombardo, Carlo'.

<sup>48</sup> 'L'operetta ossia La capanna dello Zio Tom'.

<sup>49</sup> See 'L'operetta italiana all'età del giudizio', 2.

terms for rental of his works to companies he did not directly control or by easily issuing sheet music for popular *pezzi staccati*. He compounded this advantage by acquiring the rights to stage operettas by other Italian and foreign composers, and acquiring stakes in operetta companies for which he was not the *capocomico* – up to fifty-seven of them by some accounts (which he apparently called his ‘lovers’).<sup>50</sup>

Of course, Lombardo’s success was not without precedent. The Sonzogno music publishing house, as Alessandra Palidda shows elsewhere in this issue, provided one model for the commercial domination of light music theatre; Lombardo surely also benefitted from the misfortune of competitors like Casa Sonzogno, which collapsed into disarray after the war. Either way, the lucrative combination of artistic collaborations, business ventures and strategic acquisitions put Lombardo in pole position within the operetta industry, exerting enormous influence not just on its industrial practices but also the form and content of Italian operettas. As Pancani’s description hints, this is partly because Lombardo was officially or unofficially the co-author of so many works of the period: ‘I have seen them all go to the Magician’s studio’, he wrote elsewhere in the same publication, ‘to request from him a success “à la Lombardo”’. Because the secret of Carlo Lombardo does not lie in writing operettas, it lies in making people like them.<sup>51</sup> Ironically, this is exactly what Lombardo’s fiercest critics maintained. As the journalist Alberto Ghislanzoni noted bitterly in a polemical 1929 pamphlet on the theatre crisis and its causes, Lombardo’s ‘thick network of relationships with theatre suppliers and agents’ and his ‘perfect knowledge of the tastes of our vulgar public’ meant that composers and librettists alike flocked to him as a kind of operetta consultant: in Ghislanzoni’s words, they ‘love to have a scene or a duet or two manipulated by the magician, who then gets the right to add his own name alongside the composer’s on the playbill, and appreciates the composer parting with a goodly share of the copyright’.<sup>52</sup>

What, then, was the winning formula that Lombardo’s many supplicants so ardently desired? Unsurprisingly, it was strongly influenced by Viennese operetta, from which Lombardo derived the standardised quartet of lead characters at the heart of most of his works: a sentimental–romantic couple featuring a soprano and a light tenor, and a comic second couple featuring a brilliant soubrette and a singing comic actor, both supported by various spoken roles in addition to a chorus and dancing corps. But where in Viennese operetta the two-couple structure was clearly hierarchical, in Lombardo’s works the soubrette and the comic actor were elevated to key roles; his libretti, meanwhile, significantly expanded the role of spoken dialogue compared to Viennese models, necessitating performers who were able to act convincingly with good comic timing.<sup>53</sup> In fact, for Pancani the critical importance of the soubrette in Italian operettas of the 1920s – star figures like Regini and Lidelba, who wore the most fashionable clothes, led extravagant and luxurious lifestyles, but could also really sing and act and whose characters received top billing in a cast list – was itself an ‘invention’ of Lombardo’s.<sup>54</sup> The balance between sentimentality and humour in a successful operetta (itself a key characteristic of Silver Age Viennese operetta) was thus built into the ensemble; and as Lombardo’s works became ever more embedded in the repertoire, Italian operetta companies increasingly reshaped themselves in their image, ensuring they had the requisite personnel to perform the works.<sup>55</sup>

<sup>50</sup> This claim is made by Fiorentino in *L’operetta italiana*, 186.

<sup>51</sup> Pancani, *Ines Lidelba*, 16.

<sup>52</sup> Alberto Ghislanzoni, *Teatro e fascismo* (Mantua, 1929), 37–8.

<sup>53</sup> Pancani suggests that it was Lombardo who ‘canonized the brilliant quartet’, and that this innovation distinguished contemporary operetta from its precursors: see *Ines Lidelba*, 14.

<sup>54</sup> *Ines Lidelba*, 14.

<sup>55</sup> On sentimentality in Silver Age Viennese operetta, see Micaela Baranello, *The Operetta Empire: Music Theater in Early Twentieth-Century Vienna* (Berkeley, 2021), 44–72.

Beyond these fundamentals, some of the key characteristics of Lombardo's works of the 1920s are ably captured in a tongue-in-cheek checklist penned by Falconi and Frattini:

1. Character names had to seem inherently funny, and so [Lombardo] chose baptismal names to which no saint ever answered [*assolutamente ignorati dai calendari*]: 'Bouquet', 'Piper', 'Pommery', 'Cin-ci-là', 'Petit-Gris', 'Gratin', etc., giving a certain precedence to sparkling wines and types of fur.
2. The racy comic duet and the sentimental love duet from Act I had to be repeated in Act III, because the audience, who had received the latter enthusiastically at 9:15 or 9:50 pm would greet them just as enthusiastically at 11:30 or 11:45.
3. In the Act II finale there needed to be a surprise lighting effect, designed by the most brilliant electricians, that could elicit from the audience a gasp of surprise and a storm of applause: amusement parks that lit up, pergolas that filled up with enormous green and red fireflies, skyscrapers whose uncountable windows shone all at once, and even transparent staircases, on each step of which one could read in large characters a line from the *finalissimo* sung by the chorus. And that wasn't all: simultaneously, from the top of the proscenium, an enormous sign descended that reproduced the complete text for the finale, while the cast exhorted the audience: 'Sing with us' ... Today, the whole theatre; tomorrow, the whole city; the day after, the whole world.<sup>56</sup>

Though undoubtedly written for comic effect, this list illustrates how thoroughly Lombardo had learned the lessons from his foreign models. Amusing character names were pervasive in Viennese operettas, for instance, as was the general principle of reprising key numbers intended to catch the public's ear (and therefore sell sheet music and gramophone records afterwards). Likewise, the use of advanced technical means in his staging is identified in several contemporary sources as a key characteristic of his works, often attributed to the influence of Parisian revue.<sup>57</sup> Spectacular lighting effects, in particular, seem to have been Lombardo's favoured embellishment of the Viennese formula that required the Act II finale of an operetta to be the site of a melodramatic plot reversal; and what Falconi and Frattini's account makes clear is how carefully such effects were integrated into an overall theatrical conception that engaged spectators visually, aurally and even physically.

The 1923 work *Il paese dei campanelli*, Lombardo's first collaboration with Virgilio Ranzato (1882–1937), neatly encapsulates all these tendencies. Set in Holland, the operetta unfolds in a village where all the houses are equipped with a special bell tower that only rings if one of the resident spouses commits adultery. But the bucolic setting is perturbed by the arrival of naval cadets, who proceed – like typical sailors – to seduce the town's married women: Nela (soprano) has her heart broken by captain Hans (tenor), while Bombon (soubrette) enjoys herself with LaGaffe (comic actor). The concept alone is evocative of the 'risqué style' (*gusto peccaminoso*) of Italian operetta at this time and typical of Lombardo's instincts as a librettist, in so far as it enables titillating moments of technological display: both the Act I and Act II finales culminate in an adulterous cacophony of ringing belltowers. Musically, the operetta features several prominent pieces in modern dance genres, including the 'Foxtrot dei

<sup>56</sup> Falconi and Frattini, *Guida alla rivista*, 76–7. Traversetti also reproduces this list wholesale in his (largely disparaging) account of Lombardo's influence on Italian operetta: see *L'operetta*, 134–5.

<sup>57</sup> For example, rival impresario Alberto Ostali wrote to Giovanni Tonelli to decry the 'spectacular sets, multicolour lights, and illuminated screen with the "refrain" introduced by a certain competitor of mine who imported them from Parisian cabarets'. See *Il giornale d'Italia* (7 February 1926), 6. Pancani, in contrast, comments favourably on Lombardo's 'modernisation' of Italian operetta through the use of Francophile lighting effects; see *Ines Lidelba*, 14.

campanelli' and 'Foxtrot della luna' – a tendency addressed metatheatrically in a chorus of the sailors' wives, who take revenge on their husbands by posing as a troupe of cabaret singers who love 'to dance *il jazz, il Foxtrot, il Shimmy* / with passion all night long'.<sup>58</sup>

When critics like Tonelli decried the immorality of contemporary Italian operetta, then, they were implicitly attacking Lombardo and his 'risqué' style of operetta. And when impresarios like Riccioli made a point of only performing Italian works, they were positioning themselves against Lombardo's overt foreign influence. Strikingly, even Lombardo's most high-profile collaborators publicly bit the hand that fed them in a bid to maintain artistic credibility. In 1928, for instance, the leading composer Giuseppe Pietri gave an interview in which he decried the tendency of 'bringing on stage, at whatever cost, a troupe of young men and women – *pardon*, of "boys" and "girls" kicking their legs [*di 'boys' e di 'girls' sgambettanti*] in useless and ludicrously expensive costumes'.<sup>59</sup> Yet the work Pietri had written just a year earlier, *Primarosa* (1927), was an extravagant Lombardian confection showcasing precisely these tendencies: beyond the impeccably named heroine, Fluffy Cock-Bell, the cast list for the operetta literally specifies *dandys* and *girls* in addition to the Sardinian peasants required in Acts I and III, and the chorus of mannequins in Act II, set in a fashionable urban department store.<sup>60</sup>

The fact is that Lombardo could easily shrug off accusations of artistic impropriety, given that even his more material infractions barely dented his reputation or his bottom line. This was not for lack of trying. For instance, Lombardo's lax observance of copyright landed him in court with some regularity. Ghislanzoni's *Teatro e fascismo* gleefully rakes up a case arising from the immensely popular *La danza delle libellule* (1922), adapted from music by Franz Lehár: Lombardo was accused of plagiarising the libretto from plays by Victorien Sardou and Maurice Hennequin, successfully sued by the French Society of Authors, and eventually forced to pay 110,000 Fr. to the authors' estates.<sup>61</sup> He had previously been charged with other kinds of unprincipled behaviour, too. In 1911 he was successfully sued for breach of contract by a soprano formerly employed by his company after he replaced her with another singer without notice; he was fined 2,000 Lit.<sup>62</sup> And in 1918, Antonio Gramsci penned a ferocious article for the Turin edition of the Socialist Party newspaper *Avanti!*, decrying Lombardo's practice of summarily dismissing impoverished chorus members in his companies for minor infractions – something Gramsci found utterly contemptible from 'a man who makes 100,000 Lit. a year'.<sup>63</sup>

By the 1920s, however, even Lombardo's detractors could not deny that he was the leading figure of Italian operetta; and so long as *il mago* could work his magic, the operetta industry at large – even the operetta artists' union – was willing to forgive his many breaches of contract, his infractions of copyright law, and his poor treatment of artists and workers. Even after being reincarnated as a Fascist worker syndicate, theoretically with government oversight, the union was in practice toothless when confronted with such a commercially dominant figure. When, in 1926, the Casa musicale Lombardo gained the rights to manage the back-catalogue of the faltering Sonzogno firm for a contracted period of nine years, *L'argante operettistico* cautiously reported that it was 'undeniable that in

<sup>58</sup> *Il paese dei campanelli: Operetta in tre atti di Carlo Lombardo e Virgilio Ranzato. Adattamento ritmico di Giovanni Maria Sala*, published libretto (Milan, 1923), 17.

<sup>59</sup> Corrado Rossi, 'L'operetta italiana (Il pensiero del maestro Pietri)', in *L'argante operettistico* (16 May 1928), 2.

<sup>60</sup> See *Primarosa: Operetta in tre atti di Carlo Lombardo e Renato Simoni. Musica di Giuseppe Pietri*, piano-vocal score (Milan, 1926), xii.

<sup>61</sup> Ghislanzoni, *Teatro e fascismo*, 37.

<sup>62</sup> 'Notiziario', *L'opera comica* (11 April 1911), 4.

<sup>63</sup> Antonio Gramsci, 'Il caro-viveri e gli artisti teatrali', *Avanti!* (9 April 1918); reproduced in *Concerti e sconcerti: Cronache musicali (1915–1919)*, ed. Fabio Francione and Maria Luisa Righi (Milan, 2022), 139–40.

Lombardo's hands the vast Sonzogno repertoire, much of which had been mouldering in the archives, will be given a new lease of life [*sarà valorizzato*]. From a strictly editorial point of view the deal represents an artistic step forward and could even be commercially advantageous to our operetta companies who will see the repertoire enriched; *so long as the agreement goes no further*.<sup>64</sup> Yet despite Lombardo, in effect, building a monopoly in plain sight, the paper could only declare ineffectually that it would 'keep an eye' on him and his plans.

Lombardo, in this analysis, was the embodiment of anxieties around the commercialisation of what – in the view of many – ought to have been considered art. His controversial handling of authorship, in particular, has continued to shape his reputation from the 1910s onwards. The discomfort of Pancani and Ghislanzoni is the same as that expressed in Falconi and Frattini's *Guida alla rivista* thirty years later, when the co-authors write breezily that 'Lombardo manufactured operettas much like one manufactures clocks, furniture, and cars'; and it arguably accounts for Traversetti's especially negative assessment of his works and influence. When trying to understand Lombardo's role in the operetta crisis, however, his authorial tendencies are only one piece of the puzzle. His ability to extract capital from across the entertainment industry was certainly aided by his willingness to dispense with ethical niceties around plagiarism and copyright infringement, but his success cannot be attributed to these factors alone. Only by focusing on a broader context for Lombardo's model of operetta can we gain an insight into why he succeeded for as long as he did – and why, ultimately, even he ran out of rope. Let us therefore turn to Lombardo's other great success of the 1920s, in which warring artistic and economic forces are revealed especially clearly.

### The showgirl

*Cin-ci-là*, which premiered on 18 December 1925 at Milan's Teatro Dal Verme, was Lombardo's third collaboration with Ranzato after *Il paese dei campanelli* (1923) and *Luna-Park* (1924). Formerly the first violinist of the La Scala orchestra under Arturo Toscanini, by the 1920s Ranzato was well known as a soloist and also as a composer of operettas (his first work in the genre, *Velivolo*, had premiered in Turin in 1911).<sup>65</sup> Yet it was in collaboration with Lombardo that Ranzato's star burned brightest. The comic duet 'O Cin-ci-là', the centrepiece of *Cin-ci-là*, has come to stand for the entire enterprise of Italian operetta, and its innuendo-laden lyrics and insouciant refrain speak to two strengths powering Ranzato's creative partnership with Lombardo.<sup>66</sup> First and foremost, Ranzato was skilled at writing music that, in Pancani's estimation, was reliably catchy.<sup>67</sup> But it has been suggested that the music for some famous numbers nominally written by Ranzato, including 'O Cin-ci-là', was in fact written by Lombardo himself, indicating that Ranzato was particularly accommodating of Lombardo's 'collaborative' authorship.<sup>68</sup>

The operetta is an Orientalist fantasy set in contemporary Macau, though this geographically precise setting seems to have passed many spectators by (the *Corriere della sera*

<sup>64</sup> 'Il bastone di maresciallo a Carlo Lombardo', *L'argante operettistico* (1 April 1926), 1 (italics in source).

<sup>65</sup> The entry on Ranzato in a music dictionary of 1922 confirms that his reputation as an operetta composer was already established: see 'Ranzato, Virgilio', in Alberto de Angelis, *L'Italia musicale d'oggi: Dizionario dei musicisti* (Rome, 1922), 406–7.

<sup>66</sup> In Fiorentino's typically anecdotal formulation, 'the only aria that everyone, even those who take only an episodic interest in operetta, knows and recognises [is] "Oh, Cin-ci-là"'; see *L'operetta italiana*, 185.

<sup>67</sup> Pancani, *Imes Lidelba*, 17: 'the public immediately "catches" [*orecchia*] his songs, his duets, which become popular to the point of exasperation'.

<sup>68</sup> Fiorentino reports that Felice Lombardo (Carlo's son) maintained his father's authorship of 'O Cin-ci-là' and the popular 'Fox della luna' in *Il paese dei campanelli*: see *L'operetta italiana*, 185.



reported a setting in ‘China of legends’ while for *L’opera comica* it was Korea).<sup>69</sup> Perhaps we should not blame them, for the title of the work strongly suggests that the setting was arrived at somewhat casually. ‘Cincilla’ is the Italian word for the chinchilla, usually stressed as in English on the second syllable but sometimes, French-style, on the third.<sup>70</sup> One speculates that Lombardo realised that the rodent shared its first syllable, ‘cin-’, with ‘Cina’ (China); while the repeating sounds in ‘cin-cil-là’ pronounced *à la française* sounded both like the Francophile names he delighted in elsewhere, and like the mock-Asian names used in contemporary Orientalist operas (e.g. *Madama Butterfly*’s Cio-cio-san). Admittedly this origin story is unprovable, but it is noteworthy that the cover imagery for the published score (Figure 2) features not just an ermine-clad cabaret artist draped over generic Chinoiserie, but also a gold-furred chinchilla.<sup>71</sup>

Certainly in the core idea of a Parisian showgirl in China the kernel of the operetta’s plot can readily be discerned. The opening chorus establishes the work’s chief plot device: under an ‘ancient Chinese custom’ called the *ciun-ki-sin*, when a member of the royal family weds all activity must cease until the marriage is consummated (marked by the new couple ringing a special carillon from the balcony of the royal bedchamber). Unfortunately, both Princess Myosotis (soprano) and her intended husband, Prince Ciclamino of Korea (tenor), have been raised to be completely and utterly ignorant of sexual matters. Enter Cin-ci-là (soubrette), Parisian cabaret artist and film actress, who is, coincidentally, both the Emperor of China’s mistress and the wife of the Emperor’s valet. Together with Petit-Gris (comic actor) – himself one of Cin-ci-là’s ex-lovers – the Westerners are entrusted with the sexual education of the Prince and Princess. Several mistaken identities later, the bells ring out; *ciun-ki-sin* comes to a close, and all ends well – except for Petit-Gris, who is punished for his transgression with the Emperor’s daughter by being made into a eunuch, and who delivers a final *coup-de-théâtre* by speaking the last few lines of the operetta in a squawking falsetto.<sup>72</sup>

As this outline suggests, *Cin-ci-là* is wholly characteristic of Lombardo’s variety of operetta, so much so that some elements of the plot are clearly recycled from his previous hits.<sup>73</sup> In particular, the spectacular device of a bell ringing to mark sexual activity (and more precisely adultery) is an obvious echo of *Il paese dei campanelli*. Yet, as with many operettas, *Cin-ci-là* also burlesques the materials of serious opera. Specifically, Lombardo and Ranzato’s work reads like a burlesqued version of its near-exact contemporary, Puccini’s *Turandot* – for even though Puccini’s famously unfinished last opera wouldn’t receive its first performances until 1926, its source in Carlo Gozzi’s fairytale was common knowledge.<sup>74</sup> *Cin-ci-là* inverts many of the polarities of *Turandot* while leaving others untouched. The character of the Princess passes from one contemporary archetype of East

<sup>69</sup> See ‘Cin-Ci-La: Operetta in 3 atti di C. Lombardo e V. Ranzato al Dal Verme’, *Il corriere della sera* (18 December 1925), 2; and ‘Le prime in Italia: Cin-Ci-La’, *L’opera comica* (1 January 1926), 2.

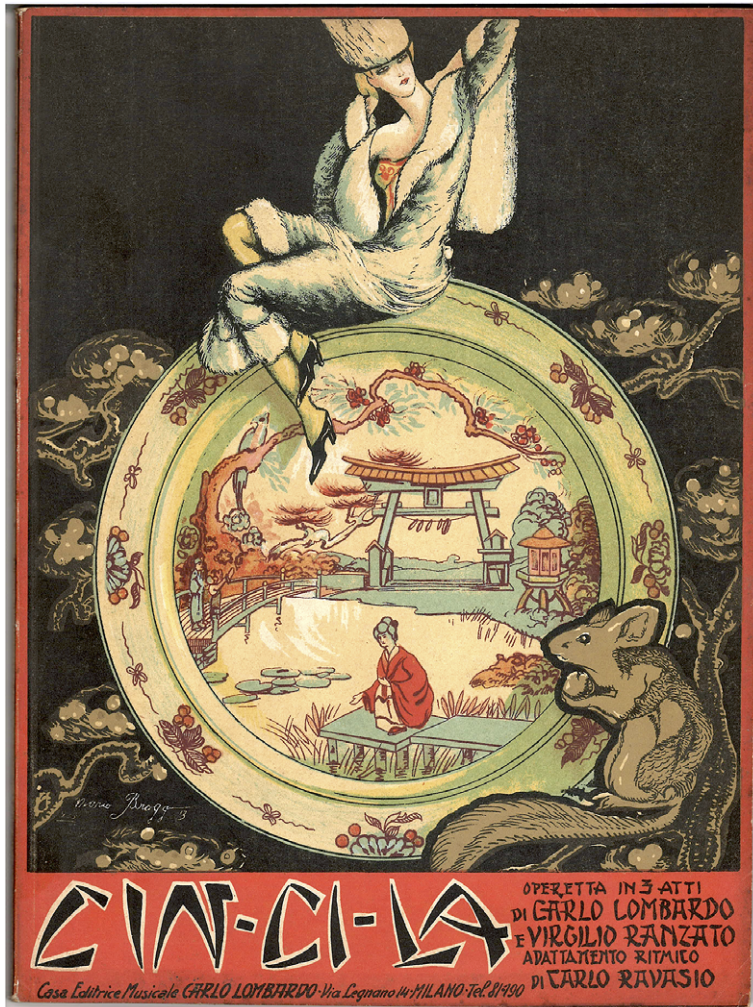
<sup>70</sup> ‘Cincilla’, entry in the Treccani online dictionary: [www.treccani.it/vocabolario/cincilla/](http://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/cincilla/).

<sup>71</sup> Furthermore, the refrain to ‘O Cin-ci-là’ – ‘O Cin-ci-là, o Cin-ci-là / mordi, rosicchia, divora’ (nibble, gnaw, devour) – foregrounds the rodent connection, possibly strengthening the suggestion that Lombardo not only wrote the piece, but wrote it before conceiving of the operetta.

<sup>72</sup> See stage direction in *Cin-ci-là: Operetta in tre atti di Carlo Lombardo e Virgilio Ranzato. Adattamento ritmico di Carlo Ravasio*, published script (Milan, 1939), 104.

<sup>73</sup> Lombardo was likely also drawing on operettas with exotic settings that were popular in Italy, such as Sidney Jones’s *The Geisha*. On exoticist tendencies in contemporary Viennese operetta, and specifically Lehár’s *Das Land des Lächelns* (1929) – set in China, and a revision of an earlier work that preceded *Cin-ci-là* by a few years – see Baranello, *The Operetta Empire*, 122–57, esp. 145–57.

<sup>74</sup> Fiorentino has even suggested that Lombardo intended to offer the libretti for both *Il paese dei campanelli* and *Cin-ci-là* to Puccini himself, who would have recycled ‘leftover’ music from *Madama Butterfly* for the purpose had he not been preoccupied with his final opera: see *L’operetta italiana*, 264–79.



**Figure 2.** Front cover of the piano score of *Cin-ci-là* (Milan, 1926). This cover imagery was replicated (in a simplified colour palette) across all *pezzi staccati* issued from the operetta. Image courtesy of the Casa di riposo per musicisti – Fondazione Giuseppe Verdi, Milan. Reproduced with permission of the Casa editrice musicale Lombardo. Further reproduction prohibited.

Asian femininity identified by Michela Niccolai – the cruel, man-eating Turandot – to its infantilised opposite, the naïve, doll-hugging Myosotis; while the Emperor is no longer an enfeebled old man but a virile man of the world, complete with Parisian mistress.<sup>75</sup> But the underlying story is the same. A sexually rapacious outsider – Calaf in one case, *Cin-ci-là* in another – is introduced to the closed citadel of Chinese cultural mores, and whether by force or by choice, instructs the previously sexless Chinese characters in the pleasures of the flesh.

<sup>75</sup> See Michela Niccolai, “‘Oh Fior di the, t’amo, credi a me!’: Aspetti della ricezione del mito-*Butterfly* nella canzone e nell’operetta fino agli anni trenta”, in *Madama Butterfly: L’orientalismo di fine secolo, l’approccio pucciniano, la ricezione*, ed. Arthur Groos and Virgilio Bernardoni (Florence, 2008), 373–92.

Though *Cin-ci-là* scored a tremendous success with the public overall (and is remembered as Lombardo and Ranzato's other big hit besides *Il paese dei campanelli*), its initial reception was more complicated than this narrative suggests. For example, the operetta-focused periodical *Musica e scena* (published by Sonzogno, and generally hostile to Lombardo) mocked the apparent failure of the work as it ventured beyond Milan.<sup>76</sup> Perhaps the operetta's difficulties with provincial audiences shouldn't surprise us: compared to *Il paese dei campanelli*, with its picture-postcard Dutch maidens and cheerfully promiscuous sailors, *Cin-ci-là* has more of an edge (as the seam of racist jokes about castration suggests). Yet Lombardo may have deliberately used the operetta to intervene in the contemporary disputes around operetta. Carlo Ravasio (who versified the libretto) openly dedicated the operetta to Mussolini on its creators' behalf, and the telegram from Il Duce's private secretary Alessandro Chiavolini acknowledging the work was reproduced alongside the dedication in the front matter of the published score.<sup>77</sup> Given Lombardo's sure touch with the public it is possible this was little more than a publicity stunt, but some contemporary observers perceived the dedication as a cunning attempt to forestall government censorship of the operetta stage, for which many conservative writers were then advocating.<sup>78</sup> These fears may not have been entirely misplaced: as Fiamma Nicolodi notes, in 1927 Mussolini personally rejected an appeal to have *Cin-ci-là* withdrawn after performances of the work in Crema attracted scandalised complaints.<sup>79</sup> Initial controversies aside, however, *Cin-ci-là* soon became a mainstay of Italian operetta, becoming one of the last works to be folded into the emerging Italian operettistic canon.

Despite evident debts to the Orientalising traditions of Italian opera, *Cin-ci-là* was a thoroughly modern confection, and in fact Ranzato's music employs traditional exotic signifiers quite sparingly. Rather, from the 'Fox delle lanterne' to the 'Blues del carillon', the musical style of the most popular numbers is that of modern American dances, exotic in a different way. *Cin-ci-là*, like *Il paese dei campanelli* before it, thus testifies to the enthusiastic reception of jazz in Italy, as Anna Celenza has discussed, but also its rapid domestication.<sup>80</sup> As in many other European countries, the music that Italian consumers, critics and record companies labelled 'jazz' was typically popular dance music, often in the symphonic arrangements produced by white bandleaders such as Jack Hylton, Paul Whiteman and in an Italian context Armando Di Piramo – quite distant from the music played by Black American musicians that was often fetishised by European listeners as 'hot' jazz.<sup>81</sup> Nevertheless, the musical resources of jazz-influenced dance music rapidly cross-fertilised with the existing modes of popular music consumption in Italy and stimulated demand for popular songs, or *canzonette*, in Italian (supplementing, and

<sup>76</sup> 'Amenità', *Musica e scena* 3/2 (1926), 26–7.

<sup>77</sup> See *Cin-ci-là: Operetta in tre atti di Carlo Lombardo e Virgilio Ranzato. Adattamento ritmico di Carlo Ravasio*, piano-vocal score (Milan, 1926), iii.

<sup>78</sup> Tonelli calls outright for censorship in 'L'operetta in Italia: L'interpretazione e "la mise en scene"'; and his correspondent Ostali suggests that those who know 'how to insinuate themselves in the corridors of power ... have dedicated a "pochade" with a foundation of adultery and much tinkling of "carillons" to the Prime Minister Benito Mussolini'.

<sup>79</sup> Fiamma Nicolodi, 'Opera Production from Italian Unification to the Present', in *The History of Italian Opera*, vol. 4, *Opera Production and its Resources*, ed. Lorenzo Bianconi and Giorgio Pestelli, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Chicago, 1998), 165–228, at 206–7. On Mussolini's role in theatre censorship during the Fascist *ventennio*, see Patricia Gaborik, *Mussolini's Theatre: Fascist Experiments in Art and Politics* (Cambridge, 2021), 153–91.

<sup>80</sup> See Anna Celenza, *Jazz Italian Style: From its Origins in New Orleans to Fascist Italy and Sinatra* (Cambridge, 2017), 41–68.

<sup>81</sup> On Di Piramo see Celenza, *Jazz Italian Style*, 61; and on Italian discussions of 'black' versus 'white' jazz, 86–91, 94–9. For more on European discourses around 'hot' jazz and its authenticity, see Andy Fry, *Paris Blues: African American Music and French Popular Culture, 1920–1960* (Chicago, 2014).

increasingly supplanting, the long-established Neapolitan song tradition).<sup>82</sup> When *Cin-ci-là* was premiered, then, there was a clear link between the style of the most popular numbers from the operetta and the style of the most up-to-date popular music – both, in their own way, scored for large forces, and both employing new rhythmic and melodic resources derived from jazz.

Lombardo was surely aware of this link. In addition to the published score, practically all the musical numbers in *Cin-ci-là* were available for sale separately as individual *pezzi staccati*. In one sense this was nothing new: *pezzi staccati* were a longstanding component of the Italian operatic economy, and like many other operetta entrepreneurs Lombardo issued them through his own publishing house. By 1925 there was a crucial difference, though, in that there was an increasing appetite among the public for songs as songs. If previously *pezzi staccati* were generally understood to relate to a parent work, now the fundamental unit of consumption was the popular song itself – distributed initially via the means of an operetta, but with the understanding that this initial exposure would ‘seed’ songs through the bandstands, cinema orchestras and increasingly the radios and gramophone players across the peninsula. That is, there is a tension here between a given operetta as a coherent work and that same operetta as a container of disaggregated potential hits.

*Cin-ci-là* makes this tension clearly visible, because if Lombardo’s work referred to a longer history of Orientalist stage works, it was also well positioned to exploit an existing market for Orientalist *canzonette*. This was a distinct subgenre of popular songs that, as Niccolai observes, typically narrate fraught encounters with East Asian women: songs like ‘Si chiamava Pi-Ci-Ci’ (1924), a one-step by Dino Rulli, or ‘Madonna bruna’ (1929), a ‘canzone-tango’ by Vittorio Mascheroni, to cite just a few examples.<sup>83</sup> In Italy as elsewhere, though, musical signifiers of the ‘Far East’ were typically less important in such songs than the deployment of relevant visual and textual tropes.<sup>84</sup> Thus it is no coincidence that all of the sheet music for *Cin-ci-là* features the same collection of Orientalist stereotypes, from the conventional iconography of porcelain and pagodas to the faux-calligraphic text design; even the numbers that have little to do with the narrative content of Orientalist *canzonette* appeal to a hypothetical buyer of such products (Figure 2). Equally, it is no coincidence that composers of Italian *canzonette* were also trying to exploit the synergy that currently existed between operetta and popular song: Rulli, for instance, was a noted composer of operettas.<sup>85</sup> Meanwhile, ten years on from *Il re di Chez Maxim* (derived from Neapolitan songs), Lombardo would assemble yet another jukebox operetta, *Mille e un bacio*, from a string of *canzonette* by Mascheroni – highlighting the greatly increased prestige of Italian-language popular songs by this point.

The synergy between operetta and popular song, however, was time-limited, and its precarity is best revealed in a short number for *Cin-ci-là* and the chorus, called ‘Le cinesine europeizzate’ (Europeanised Chinese Girls). The text from the published libretto is reproduced below, while the opening of the number is reproduced in Example 1.<sup>86</sup>

<sup>82</sup> See Jacopo Tomatis’s discussion of what he terms the ‘era dei ritmi’ in *Storia culturale della canzone italiana* (Milan, 2019), esp. 87–93.

<sup>83</sup> Dino Rulli, ‘Si chiamava Pi-Ci-Ci’, piano score (Rome, 1924) and Vittorio Mascheroni, ‘Madonna bruna’, piano score (Milan, 1929). Score images available at the online sheet music archive Images Musicales: <https://www.ima.gesmusicales.be/>.

<sup>84</sup> See the discussion of similar procedures in exoticist Tin Pan Alley numbers in W. Anthony Sheppard’s *Extreme Exoticism: Japan in the American Musical Imagination* (New York, 2019), 54–104, esp. 65–77.

<sup>85</sup> On Rulli’s own use of jazz in his operettas, see Giovanni Recupido, ‘Un signore senza pace di Dino Rulli: Un esempio della ricezione del jazz nell’operetta italiana negli anni Venti’, in *Musical Theatre in Europe 1830–1945*, ed. Michela Niccolai and Clair Rowden (Turnhout, 2017), 311–24.

<sup>86</sup> The text to ‘Le cinesine europeizzate’ is reproduced as it appears in *Cin-ci-là: Operetta in tre atti di Carlo Lombardo e Virgilio Ranzato. Adattamento ritmico di Carlo Ravasio*, published libretto (Milan, 1926), 19.

CORO: Che smagliante varietà  
di modelli c'è  
nell'Europa che, lontan,  
pare un mondo stran!  
Un vestito assai leggier,  
che traspare un po',  
della donna più sincera  
dice il ver!  
Ah! ah! ah!  
Cina, bada che  
l'Europa un giorno  
ti conquisterà!

CHORUS: What a dazzling variety  
of models there is  
in Europe, which seems  
a strange place from afar!  
A delicate dress  
that's slightly transparent  
reveals the truth  
about even the most honest woman!  
Ah, ah, ah!  
China, watch out;  
one day Europe  
will conquer you!

CIN-CI-LÀ: O cinesine mie, così,  
così si fa  
lo chic nella città;  
le braccia nude, e il collo, e il sen,  
mostrar si deve al mondo, almen!  
Fin qui l'Europa sa  
lanciar la civiltà;  
la voce ingigantita vien,  
per l'etere seren!

CIN-CI-LÀ: Oh my little Chinese girls,  
urban chic  
is done this way  
Your bare arms, neck, and bosom,  
You must show the world, at least!  
Europe can launch  
its civilisation even here.  
Its amplified voice comes  
soaring through the heavens.

CORO: Così, così si fa, ecc... ecc...

CHORUS: Urban chic is done this way, etc.

Danza: Poi, cantando nei megafoni

Dance: Then, singing through megaphones

Fin qui l'Europa sa, ecc... ecc...

Europe knows how, etc.

In one sense, the number implicitly narrates the same East–West encounter as the Orientalist *canzonetta*: ‘little’ Chinese women are exhorted to wear more revealing clothing – to Europeanise themselves – in emulation of their Western counterparts, exemplified by Cin-ci-là herself. In so doing a political project is outlined: ‘China, watch out, one day Europe will conquer you ... Europe can launch its civilisation even here.’ The Western chauvinism and casual racism underpinning this sentiment in the operetta is also the stuff of the popular song genre, facilitating the easy traffic between the two. Yet certain features of ‘Le cinesine’ resist being explained away so easily. For one thing, it is not difficult to read the lyrics differently, directly in light of the politics of contemporary operetta. The tendency of Lombardo-sponsored operetta to use sex to sell itself, one of its principal affronts to bourgeois morality, is ably captured by the number’s winking claim that ‘Your bare arms, neck, and bosom / you must show the world at least’. That is, the Chinese characters in *Cin-ci-là* can also be understood as projections of stuffy *Italian* bourgeois mores, mores that the operetta implicitly suggests are just waiting to be seduced by the sensual pleasures of a Cin-ci-là, whose character becomes a stand-in for operetta itself. Given the racist, exoticising lens through which the work’s jazz-inspired musical idiom was frequently regarded at the time, though, the racial politics of this meta-theatrical intervention are far from straightforward.<sup>87</sup>

<sup>87</sup> Nicolai offers a contrasting reading that sees the operetta as a parable about the perils of seeking sensual pleasures far from home: see ‘Aspetti della ricezione’, 391. Metatheatricality of this nature was a typical feature of

More importantly, despite being sold as a *pezzo staccato* (and implicitly, as a potential *canzonetta*), ‘Le cinesine’ does not follow the formal conventions of a typical popular song.<sup>88</sup> Instead of multiple verses with a repeated refrain, the single ‘verse’ of ‘Le cinesine’ is sung by the chorus in two non-identical parts, and dispatched quickly in order to reach a ‘refrain’ sung once by Cin-ci-là, then repeated in expanded form by the whole ensemble (Example 1). This structure is closely linked to its realisation on stage. ‘Le cinesine europeizzate’ is curiously disconnected from the main plot of *Cin-ci-là*: it is a pure production number, addressed as much to the audience as to the characters involved. The stage directions are laden with spectacular value: the *cinesine* are to be ‘dressed strangely in Western garb, with top hats on their heads, a long cigarette holder in their hands, and a golden megaphone around their necks’.<sup>89</sup> Cin-ci-là herself, previously dressed in a kimono, removes this garment during the number to reveal an extravagant cabaret outfit (*vestito eccentrico*) underneath.<sup>90</sup> And in a typically Lombardian technophilic twist, the final *tutti* repetition of the refrain melody – marked ‘Largamente’ in the score, perhaps to accommodate synchronised *sgambetti*, perhaps even the sing-along lyrics falling from the proscenium arch as described by Falconi and Frattini – is to be sung through the golden megaphones.

In other words, ‘Le cinesine’, with its chorus line of extras in extravagant, possibly gender-bending costume, is strongly reminiscent of the style of operetta’s more populist rival: the *rivista*.<sup>91</sup> This intermedial resonance is significant because it confirms that Lombardo’s evolving model of operetta involved not just an embrace of popular music styles, but also, as noted by Lombardo’s champions and critics alike, an overt emulation of rival theatrical traditions where those styles were arguably more deeply rooted. But this strategy could only go so far. The key thing to observe in *Cin-ci-là* is that its fragmentation into marketable song is not quite total; there is still a dramatic structure holding everything together. Poised precariously between its identity as a freestanding artwork and as a showcase for newly composed entertainment music, Lombardo and Ranzato’s work shows how operetta could still, in 1925, straddle two realities: one foot planted in the world of bourgeois theatre, followed closely by elite critics writing in broadsheets (a context where the genre’s contested *italianità* still mattered), the other in the world of cabarets and music-halls (where it largely did not). Within a few years, however, as popular music consumption in Italy continued to grow and develop, the balancing act that animated *Cin-ci-là* would give ever diminishing returns. In hindsight it was predictable that operetta – never genuinely established as a lighter counterpart to opera, but still bound by many opera-derived conventions – would instead dissolve in the face of the threat posed by *rivista*: a genre that really did stitch together disaggregated production numbers without pretence of a plot and could adapt far more flexibly to changing tastes in popular music as a result.

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Viennese operettas, as Baranello has discussed: see her comments on Kálmán’s self-reflexively ‘exotic’ work *Die Bajadere* in *The Operetta Empire*, 134–45.

<sup>88</sup> Tellingly, unlike many other numbers from the operetta – such as the foxtrots ‘Rose! Rose!’ and ‘Fox delle lanterne’, not to mention the title number ‘O Cin-ci-là’ – ‘Le cinesine’ seems not to have been recorded independently.

<sup>89</sup> See *Cin-ci-là*, published script, 75.

<sup>90</sup> *Cin-ci-là*, published script, 75.

<sup>91</sup> The operetta’s *rivista*-like approach is noted in Massimini and Nugnes, *Storia dell’operetta*, 96; and also Fiorentino, *L’operetta italiana*, 277.

**Allegro con spirito** CHORUS

**Allegro con spirito** Che sma-glian-te va-rie-tà di mo-del-li c'è

*ff* *marcatissimo*

9 nell'Eu-ro-pa che lon-tan pa-re un mon-do stran! Un ves-ti-to as-sai leg-ger che tras-

16 pa-re un po' del-la don-na più sin-cer di-ce il ver.

23 *mf* Ah, ah, ah! *più f* ah! ah! ah!

*cresc.* *f*

**Example 1.** Opening of 'Le cinesine europeizzate'. Adapted from *Cin-ci-là*, piano-vocal score (Milan, 1926), 78–80 (minor engraving errors corrected without comment).

31 *f*

Ci - na, ba - da che l'Euro-pa un gior-no ti con-quis - te - rà!

**Un poco meno mosso**  
CIN-CI-LÀ  
*ppp con grazia rit.* *a tempo*

O ci - ne - si - ne mie, co - sì co - sì si fa lo

43

chic nel - la cit - tà Le brac - cia nu - de e il

49 *ppp continues*

col - lo e il sen mos - trar tu de - vi al - men Fin qui

**Example 1. (continued)**

**Finalissimo ultimo**

The demise of Italian operetta in the 1920s was not a sudden occurrence. It was death by a thousand cuts, as yet another company went bankrupt and as the growing pool of unemployed workers increasingly found jobs elsewhere (many no doubt pivoting towards



*rivista*). If there was one turn of events that cut more deeply than most, however, it was the dramatic failure of the Compagnia Regini-Lombardo in June of 1928.

Bankrolled by the Magician himself and showcasing the talents of Nella Regini, the Compagnia Regini was perhaps the most prominent symbol of Italian operetta and its contested Italianness. Its closure – instigated by Lombardo mid-way through the theatrical year – was a profound blow to the confidence of industry observers, and there was an immediate outcry in the operetta-focused press. In an article bearing the one-word title ‘Agony’, *L’opera comica* lashed out indiscriminately at ‘those who have done “business” in the theatre’ and the ‘illegalities that no assembly and no [Fascist] hierarch has been able to stamp out’, while making strenuous efforts to excuse Lombardo himself of any wrongdoing.<sup>92</sup> An anguished editorial in *L’argante operettistico* was, by contrast, much more critical of Lombardo’s role:

Legally, [Lombardo] is in the clear; but the moral fact remains, captains of industry have duties, which cannot be absolved simply by paying a fine. Carlo Lombardo, who is the most important exponent of operetta, should have felt the weight of responsibility on his shoulders in such a critical moment for the theatre industry; he should not have retreated. And if even Carlo Lombardo has retreated, what then for other *capocomici* who lack his deep pockets?<sup>93</sup>

Belatedly, then, some of Lombardo’s former cheerleaders were waking up to the consequences of his dominance of the operetta industry: an industry essentially reliant on one figure for financial support – and new ideas were fundamentally vulnerable if that support was ever withdrawn.

In truth, the writing had been on the wall for a while. Regini had been dabbling in *rivista* and would increasingly pivot towards the latter genre before her retirement from the stage, which took place in 1930 upon her marriage to a leading industrialist.<sup>94</sup> The Compagnia Regini-Lombardo’s pace of activity in the preceding years had struck industry observers as oddly frenetic: in the final three months of the 1926–7 theatrical year, Lombardo’s company had mounted three productions when it had previously been accustomed to staging one work every six months.<sup>95</sup> Not long afterwards, Lombardo made an ominous statement in an interview publicising the upcoming premiere of *La città rosa* – another exotic fantasy, this time set in India, for which he openly co-wrote the music with Ranzato. ‘In these last seven months in Milan’, Lombardo is quoted as saying,

I have mounted no less than three new productions with the Compagnia Regini, each one better than the last, if the reviews are anything to go by, but *economically speaking the public has not responded*. But why? There are many complex reasons. The crisis, high prices and perhaps also because the public for operetta wants above all else to laugh; so I have composed *La città rosa* convinced that if it doesn’t work out this time *it will be everyone’s fault but mine*.<sup>96</sup>

One senses that the Compagnia Regini-Lombardo had been loss-making for many years; but whereas previously this was a trade-off Lombardo was willing (and able) to make, by mid-1928 maintaining an operetta company on such a grand scale was no longer economically viable even for someone as resourceful and as well-resourced as him.

<sup>92</sup> ‘Agonia’, *L’opera comica* (15 June 1928), 6.

<sup>93</sup> ‘Scioglimento della Compagnia Regini-Lombardo’, *L’argante operettistico* (15 July 1928), 1.

<sup>94</sup> See ‘Regini, Nella’, entry in *Enciclopedia dello spettacolo*, vol. 8, 819–20.

<sup>95</sup> ‘Cartello del teatro’, *L’opera comica* (1 March 1927), 1.

<sup>96</sup> ‘Nella Regini, Lombardo, Ranzato e *La città rosa*’, *L’opera comica* (April 1927), 4 (italics in source).

Lombardo did continue issuing new works for several years after the closure of the Regini company, including a few further operettas with Ranzato and even a few works of his own that did even more to hybridise with *rivista*.<sup>97</sup> But these works were increasingly out of step with public taste. As operetta in Italy entered its afterlife – still performed, still recorded, still consumed, but only occasionally composed – Lombardo was gradually forced out of the limelight.<sup>98</sup> For the rest of the industry, meanwhile, the end of the 1920s was when the economic reality of the crisis truly hit home. A grim editorial in *L'opera comica* from December 1928 described the impossibility of taking stock of a year that had seen ‘the ranks of impresarios thinned out, the number of companies diminished and the surviving ones, a few exceptions aside, dragging their miserable existence ... towards a future that, at this moment, presents itself full of disappointment and bitterness’: in sum, ‘the extreme end of the descending arc of the parabola’.<sup>99</sup> The magazine closed the following year.

Yet even in its downward trajectory – precisely because of this trajectory – Italian operetta is an essential witness to the transformations of Italy’s leisure economy under the ever-growing influence of popular music, and the corresponding growth in entertainment genres and media that catered to the desire for popular music. In the end, the widely shared concerns about operetta’s viability, not to mention the angst about its *italianità*, point to rapidly hardening distinctions in public discourse between ‘serious’ or ‘educated’ musics – *musica colta* – and popular musics, increasingly grouped together under the umbrella term *musica leggera*, ‘light music’. Throughout the 1920s, an idealised view of operetta as a special category of *musica colta* was at war with the more prosaic reality of operetta as a key node in the dissemination of *musica leggera*. That is: when Italian critics identified a *crisi del teatro operettistico*, in a sense they were quite right to catastrophise – because the operetta crisis was emblematic of a wider shift in cultural authority towards a growing mass public.

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<sup>97</sup> Among the latter were *Le tre lune* (1931), ostentatiously described not as an operetta but as a ‘Japonesque in three phases’ (*giapponeseria in tre fasi*); *Parigi che dorme* (also 1931), described as ‘nightlife scenes’ (*scene di vita notturna*); and *I mulini di Pit-Lil* (1937).

<sup>98</sup> In the words of Massimini and Nugnes, ‘the atmosphere had decidedly changed’: see *Storia dell’operetta*, 190.

<sup>99</sup> ‘È possibile fare il bilancio dell’anno 1928?’, *L’opera comica* (20 December 1928), 2.

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