

“OPERA MEETS NEW MEDIA – PUCCINI, RICORDI AND THE RISE OF THE MODERN ENTERTAINMENT INDUSTRY” April 18 – May 16, 2024, daily 11 a.m. – 6 p.m. in Berlin



Interview with curator Gabriele Dotto

Gabriele Dotto, Director of Research Initiatives at the Archivio Storico Ricordi, had a long career in music publishing (as Editor-in-Chief, later Publisher, of Casa Ricordi, and director of its historical archive) and scholarly book publishing (University of Chicago Press and Michigan State University Press). He has published and lectured extensively on Italian opera and curated opera exhibitions in Milan, Berlin, Brussels, and New York. Co-general editor (with Roger Parker) of the Operas of Donizetti critical edition series and general editor of the Operas of Puccini critical edition, he is currently preparing critical editions of Verdi's Falstaff and Puccini's Madama Butterfly.

Mr. Dotto, this year the opera world is commemorating the 100th anniversary of the death of the Italian composer Giacomo Puccini. What significance does Puccini still have in the opera world today?

Puccini is one of the world's three most performed opera composers, along with Verdi and Mozart. In 2024 over 2,800 performances of his operas, in 970 different productions, are scheduled worldwide. And while the popularity of other composers may go through cycles, Puccini's more popular operas (Bohème, Tosca, Butterfly, Turandot) have remained a constant presence in opera repertory throughout the last one hundred years. As the historian Julian Budden observed, "No composer communicates more directly with an audience than Puccini".

The Archivio Storico Ricordi, which belongs to Bertelsmann, is considered the most important privately owned opera archive in the world. How important is Puccini for the Archivio?

The presence of documentation related to Puccini's operas in the Archivio is significant. While the Archivio houses a larger number of music scores by some more prolific composers (Verdi, for instance), both the nature of Puccini's close interaction with his publisher and the era in which he worked means that the kind of documentation preserved in the Archivio related to Puccini's operas is much broader. His early career coincided with a period in which a major publisher like Ricordi stepped into the role of "theatrical impresario", commissioning sets and costume designs, working closely with the composer in the development of the librettos, even getting involved firsthand in the choice of subjects. Furthermore, the publisher generated many aspects of promotion, like the dedicated articles in its highly regarded and widely read company publications. The Archivio preserves the manuscript scores of all but one of Puccini's operas, as well as drafts of librettos, staging materials, 380 autograph letters from the composer (and another 300 in which he or his work is mentioned) and nearly 1500 letters and telegrams Casa Ricordi sent to him.

And how important was the music publisher Casa Ricordi, the history of which is preserved in the Archivio, for Puccini's success?

It was fundamental to the level of success Puccini achieved. To be sure, Puccini's genius would likely have ensured that his work would eventually meet with success. But music history is littered with the names of composers who did not enjoy popularity during their lifetimes and struggled to get the commissions they might have hoped for. Puccini's first two operas, *Villi* and *Edgar*, displayed his enormous talent but were not a financial success: would another publisher have remained as committed to the young composer after that? Indeed, the Ricordi company's Board of advisors was skeptical, but Giulio Ricordi adamantly continued to support him. Giulio's legendary intuition as a "talent scout" was soon vindicated by the breakout success of Puccini's third opera, *Manon Lescaut*. A string of enduring successes followed (*Bohème*, *Tosca*, *Butterfly* ... which had a disastrous premiere but became a lasting favorite after it was revised).

The title of this exhibition is "Opera Meets New Media. Puccini, Ricordi, and the Rise of the Modern Entertainment Industry." Why this focus?

In the decade in which I was director of the Archivio (when it was still part of Casa Ricordi), and before that, when I used its resources for my research, I was aware it housed an

enormous variety of documents that went well beyond the usual items of interest to music scholars: the scores, librettos, letters, theatrical iconography. There was also an enormous amount of business correspondence, internal documents, production data, meeting minutes of administrators, contractual data, as well as a broad range of material relating to promotion. All this offered significant resources for research that ranged beyond musicology, like business economics and cultural studies. At the same time, as a Puccini scholar, I am intrigued by how his fin-de-siècle career straddled the two very different worlds of the late 19th and the early 20th centuries. And by the remarkable parallels between the “technological revolutions” of his time (with their impact on traditional publishing business models) and our own. The extensive and varied collections in the Archivio Storico Ricordi make it a unique resource for an exploration of these fascinating themes.

When did Ricordi and composers like Puccini recognize the possibilities of the new media of sound and film?

The significant growth in popularity of these technologies in the 20th century, and their rapid evolution once they became a commercial success, was a double-edged sword. As with any period of competing technological novelties, there was the risk (for a publisher) of pouring investments into areas that would not, ultimately, prove lucrative. For instance, in the early 20th century the market for player-piano rolls seemed to compete on par with that of records, and Ricordi set aside a considerable sum for potential investment in that field. Piano rolls soon proved to be a commercial dead-end, however, and Ricordi was fortunate to have abandoned the idea before making a costly commitment. On the other hand, records of famous singers — which the publisher initially saw as a threat to its core business — proved instead to be an unexpectedly effective promotional tool that attracted new audiences to the opera repertory.

Did the possibilities opened up by the new media have an effect on Puccini’s work as a composer as well?

The influence, in the beginning, flowed in the other direction: early cinema was attracted to the staging techniques of opera because it (more than prose theater) offered models for choreographing large and complex crowd-scene movements. Puccini, unlike some of his contemporaries, did not write music specifically for films and on only one occasion was he commissioned to write a song for a recording. However, the growing influence of cinema was certainly an attraction to artists of his generation: one of his librettists would proudly list “screenwriter” among his occupations, and Puccini himself would incorporate, for instance,

“street sounds” (complete with an automobile horn) in the score to Tabarro, perhaps reflecting the influence of the “live sound effects” often used in cinema theaters before the advent of synchronized soundtracks.

Did the new media also entail risks for publishers and artists back then?

Certainly, and on more than one level. The loss of potential income was the most obvious: cinema and recordings could offer inexpensive alternatives to attendance of live opera performances, whose “box office” revenue was a fundamental component of Ricordi’s business model. The absence of well-defined legal protection (or of effective ways to control unauthorized use) of the “infinitely repeatable” performances of these new technologies posed a distinct threat as well. It was important to establish guidelines and ways to monitor the use of the intellectual property the publisher controlled, and then as now, legislation lagged behind rapid technological developments.

What role did matters of copyright play in connection with the new media?

Laws respecting intellectual property differed widely internationally, and since the new media of recordings and movies were more economically significant in North America, the differences between the protections offered to Puccini (and his publisher) in Europe with respect to those offered in the US were dramatic. Through most of the 19th century, for instance, the insular copyright policy of the US permitted its publishers to freely copy foreign books (to the frustration of European authors). In Europe, from the early part of Puccini’s career, public performance or any kind was protected and compensated, and national collecting societies were founded to collect those royalties. Such protection in the US wasn’t granted until later in the 20th century. A chance discussion between Puccini and an American operetta composer in New York revealed the disparity, leading to the founding of an equivalent American collecting society. Some years earlier, Puccini had published a letter in a US newspaper complaining that while singers earned generous fees and even royalties from their recordings of his arias, the composer received nothing. The legal recognition of such intellectual property rights, and fair compensation for their use, was opposed by the producers of new media. Gaining such protection was a long, hard-fought process on the part of music publishers. Even in Italy, a society for the tutelage of so-called “Mechanical Reproduction Rights” didn’t come about until after Puccini’s’ death.

The “Avalon case” is given special attention in the exhibition. What was that all about?

Piracy was always a problem in publishing, but in earlier times it was mostly about copying of music to avoid paying royalties or fees to the artist or the publisher, whether for live performance or in print, thus impacting the livelihood of both. Also, while third-party transcriptions or adaptations of opera themes had always been commonly published, these were often of a high artistic level (think of the piano “Fantasies” by Franz Liszt on themes from Donizetti operas). The turn of the 20th century brought the new phenomenon of “pop” music that had become extremely lucrative (in 1892 one song sold 2 million copies in its first year: a sales figure unheard of in classical music). Plagiarism of opera themes to create pop melodies thus represented significant economic competition (as with the song Avalon). And in the case of “pop” adaptations not authorized by the composer (as with the song Cho-Cho-San, also discussed in the exhibit), the composer might protest that there was reputational damage, raising the issue of an artist’s “moral rights”.

Casa Ricordi was already an international company in the 1920s. What significance did this have for the distribution of Puccini’s work?

By the late 19th century Ricordi had become a powerhouse among publishers worldwide — even The New York Times sang the praises of its commercial acumen — and the main repertory it represented, Italian opera, had dominated theater seasons worldwide for decades. Ricordi’s reach and promotional skills helped ensure that Puccini not only became one of the most performed opera composers, but also one of the wealthiest classical-music composers of his day.

How long did it take from initial idea to finished exhibition?

I first proposed the germ of the idea, as “Twentieth Century Puccini”, in November 2019 during a lunch meeting at the Morgan Library in New York following the successful opening of our Enterprise of Opera exhibit there. After discussions with my colleagues at the Archivio Storico and Bertelsmann, a preliminary structure was proposed in December 2021. A range of themes as complex as this can branch out in many ways and we evaluated (and discarded) several possible sub-topics through 2022. The final concept was in place by the spring of 2023, after which we began writing and commissioning texts, collecting materials, evaluating design proposals, and so forth. Thus, the definitive process toward completing what we see today took about a year of intense work by a number of expert creative talents.

What do you consider the most important exhibit in the exhibition, and why?

The main topic areas — recordings, films, merchandising, the evolution in protection of intellectual property — all have their own, particular fascination. This exhibition will display material and present concepts that may be new to many visitors, even among Puccini specialists. However, perhaps the most striking single exhibit involves Puccini's compositional craft itself: a selection of his sketches for the unfinished Finale of *Turandot*. They have never been shown in public before which, of itself, makes this quite special. And they are captivating on multiple levels: music scholars will be intrigued by their seemingly unfathomable complexity; composers will smile in recognition at the apparent chaos of these sorts of "private notes to oneself"; but all viewers will, I think, be moved by a glimpse at these very last testimonials of a great composer's compositional process.

"Turandot," Puccini's last opera, plays a special role in the exhibition. Why?

Turandot represents a significant milestone in Ricordi's ongoing dedication to Puccini's legacy, since the publisher made the important decision to commission its completion, rather than present it as an "unfinished" work. It also represents a milestone in the history of opera, although no one at the time could have been aware of that fact. Modern scholars and critics have come to regard *Turandot* as the last masterpiece of the "Great Tradition", which began with Rossini's *Barber of Seville* (1816): a one-hundred-and-ten-year arc during which Italian operas dominated theater repertory throughout Europe and indeed, much of the world.

Does the exhibition also include Puccini the private individual? Can the person and his work even be viewed separately?

Only in glimpses, in a few film clips. Although we do learn much about his artistic and professional opinions. In an exhibit as articulated as this, aimed at examining a multiplicity of information streams about new media and its impact on art and business, we chose not to focus on Puccini the private individual. That comes through in part in the "branding" section where the personality and imagery of the composer "in daily domestic life" is highlighted, even those were created largely as a means toward promoting his music and widening what today we would call his "fan base". The Archivio Storico Ricordi has a great many documents attesting to Puccini's close rapport with his editor (and indeed, father-figure) Giulio Ricordi, as well as letters that touch on many aspects of his personal life, and those will be material for other exhibits, other publications, focused on the composer alone.

Today's discussion about opera productions often revolves around the stereotypical portrayal of characters on stage. How did Puccini and Casa Ricordi handle these stereotypes at the time? Can the stage sets from the period still be shown today?

With hindsight everything can seem clear to us, but did turn-of-the-century Europeans think they were “stereotyping” or disrespecting other cultures though their fascination, for instance, with Japonisme? In *Turandot*, by way of example, Puccini took considerable care to research and incorporate authentic Chinese musical themes — even though the opera is not meant to be a “historical” representation of Chinese culture but rather a fable set in an imaginary “exotic” China, with some characters rooted in the Italian *commedia dell’arte* tradition. In the case of *Butterfly*, Puccini and his librettists removed the offensive “broken English” in which the Japanese characters speak in the original literary models for the opera. It is nonetheless important to acknowledge that there are legitimate concerns with the depiction of Japanese, Chinese, and American indigenous peoples in these works. While the curators of this exhibition are certainly not claiming that the composer or his operas are above this kind of critique, it is worth pointing out that Puccini’s intervention in these debates was almost always in favor of the humanity of all people. The original stagings of these operas may strike modern audiences as culturally insensitive, but modern directors enjoy the freedom to change the visual terms of representation.

Experts have long debated the question of how close Puccini, who died in 1924, was to the Italian fascists. What is the exhibition’s take on this?

Here as well, back-projecting our contemporary attitudes and understanding onto the mindsets of a century ago is a dubious historical exercise. It is important to remember that Puccini himself never asked to join the party: he was given honorary membership. After his death Mussolini claimed otherwise, to gain political capital. Puccini did not immediately refuse it because he was hoping to convince Mussolini to fund a national opera theater. But in fairness to Puccini, we cannot overlook that the fascist party of 1924 was certainly not that of 1925 (months after Puccini died, when Mussolini, assuming dictatorial power, installed a totalitarian regime) and beyond. In its earliest years the Fascist party was seen by many as a political movement promising to bring stability in the chaotic post-war years. Toscanini himself had been an early adherent; later, as the Fascists’ position evolved, he became a staunch antifascist. Indeed, Mussolini did not attend the posthumous 1926 *Turandot*

premiere due to Toscanini's open antipathy. If Puccini had lived a few more years, might he also have adamantly distanced himself, as Toscanini did, from everything the fascists had by then become? That is an exercise we leave to those who enjoy hypothesizing "What if?" scenarios.

About Bertelsmann

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