

Interview with Thomas Rabe, Chairman & CEO Bertelsmann

(from the Bertelsmann Intranet BENET)

Mr. Rabe, Bertelsmann is showing, for the first time in Germany, the most important collection of original documents from the history of Italian opera, the Ricordi archives in Milan. What's the story behind this?

The Archivio Ricordi contains truly wonderful cultural treasures, and only very few people know that it is part of Bertelsmann. This makes us very proud, but above all we also see it as an obligation to take very good care of these treasures. We want to preserve them according to the highest scientific and technical standards and make them accessible to a wide audience. For example, by taking the Verdi Year as an opportunity to show many unique exhibits pertaining to Verdi's operas *Otello* and *Falstaff* to the public for the first time in Germany.

This is a somewhat unusual commitment for an international media group. How did the archive come to be part of Bertelsmann?

Bertelsmann has been associated with Ricordi since 1994. We took over the music publishing company in 1994, but gave away most of it again twelve years later as part of the sale of then music rights business to Universal. However, we deliberately retained the historical documents in the Ricordi archive and all rights to the Ricordi brand. That was a personal priority for me – you can't just give away something this unique.

What is happening with the documents today?

The Archivio Ricordi contains the testimony to 200 years of Italian opera and music history: original scores for more than 600 operas, correspondence with composers and librettists, drawings of costumes and stage sets, photographs and much more. As the owner, it is our responsibility to preserve and secure these treasures, and to index them. So right now they are being restored, cataloged and digitized in Milan – a task that will take many years.

Bertelsmann wants to set standards for the proper treatment of such cultural and historical archive collections, and make the documents accessible to as many people as possible, not just to academia.

How does this fit with your current business?

I am delighted to be facilitating this project, because for me the commitment to Ricordi closes a circle: we are actively shaping the digital future of music with our music rights company BMG, while making the rich tradition of music visible with the Ricordi archive. In other words, Bertelsmann stands for the lasting value and protection of creativity.

The protection of intellectual property and creativity was a big concern of the Ricordi family as well. What can Bertelsmann learn from the Ricordi story?

I am convinced that we can learn a lot from the history of this unique company. The Ricordis, too, were media entrepreneurs who recognized the value of creativity and protected the rights of the artists they published. This attitude actually formed the basis of their business. In a time when there was no copyright protection, this pioneering work cannot be overestimated; ultimately, we are still benefiting from it.