



Review Article

Opera across the Alps: Habsburg Vienna and Transalpine Networks in Claudio Vellutini's *Entangled Histories*

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Abstract: This review article examines Claudio Vellutini's monograph *Entangled Histories: Opera and Cultural Exchange between Vienna and the Italian States after Napoleon* (Oxford University Press, 2025), which investigates the intersection of opera and Habsburg cultural politics in nineteenth-century Vienna and Italy. Moving beyond traditional nationalist frameworks and the "Paris-centric" view of nineteenth-century music, the study positions Vienna as the centre of a dense transalpine network of operatic circulation. Vellutini highlights how the Habsburg Empire utilised operatic performances to consolidate a supranational imperial identity and a shared imperial community in the aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars and the establishment of the Austrian Empire. Central to this narrative is the role of impresarios—such as Domenico Barbaja, Bartolomeo Merelli, and Carlo Balocchino—whose business strategies aligned with Austrian cultural policy to facilitate a steady exchange of artists and repertoire across the Alps, thereby bridging Italian and German artistic traditions.

The review expands on Vellutini's research through a case study of the tenor Antonio Poggi (1806–1875). It demonstrates how Poggi's artistic identity was not merely exported from Italy but was forged and consolidated in Vienna, eventually projecting his fame back onto the Italian operatic market. Ultimately, the article highlights how Vellutini's "entangled" approach reconfigures the geography of nineteenth-century opera, presenting Italian opera as a cosmopolitan cultural project actively promoted by the Habsburg administration.

Keywords: 19th Century; Habsburg Empire; Italian Opera; Opera studies; Vienna

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In April 1822, Klemens von Metternich attended rehearsals of Gioacchino Rossini's *Zelmira* at the Kärntnertortheater in Vienna, directed by the composer himself. Enraptured by the ease with which the tenor Giovanni David delivered high Cs in the exhilarating cabaletta of his cavatina ("Terra amica!"), Metternich

could find no better words than to write to his wife: "What a good episode in my life is Italian opera, which I finally managed to establish here! It is a great and real victory of mine." He added: "One can understand what ecstasy this is for a melomaniac like myself. In moments such as these, sunbeams penetrate the darkness of my prison."¹ Rossini's presence in Vienna was made possible by the impresario Domenico Barbaja, whose direction of the court theatre strengthened the presence of Italian opera in the imperial capital, earning praise not only from the "melomaniac" state chancellor but also from Viennese audiences.

Twenty years later, Gaetano Donizetti achieved comparable success. In May 1842, under the impresarios Bartolomeo Merelli and Carlo Balocchino, he premiered *Linda di Chamounix* at the same theatre. Writing to a friend, Donizetti noted the difficulty of pleasing Viennese audiences, whose tastes, he claimed, favored refined compositional technique over the immediate appeal of Italian melody.² Contemporary critics confirmed this impression, observing that "some moments ... show a deeper conception, approaching the tendencies of German music,"³ and identifying in the opera "an element of German intimacy and deeper feeling."⁴ This time, Vienna's encounter with Italian opera went beyond mere acclaim: Donizetti's work challenged national stereotypes without fully conforming to them, becoming emblematic of the cosmopolitan cultural discourse that shaped Vienna in these years.

In 1844, Donizetti, by then *Kammerkapellmeister* at the Viennese court, supervised preparation for the premiere of Giuseppe Verdi's *Ernani* at the Kärntnertortheater, only a few months after its debut at the Teatro La Fenice in Venice. There, the act III finale—set in the imperial crypt at Aachen and depicting a conspiracy against the future Holy Roman Emperor Charles V—had raised censorship concerns. The theatre's management required the scene to be "as short as possible," forbade the unsheathing of swords, and stipulated that, after the failed plot, the sovereign should appear "great and generous" and be addressed in suitably respectful terms.⁵ When the opera reached Vienna, however, these constraints were reconfigured into a powerful moment of dynastic representation—celebrating the Habsburg dynasty—that proved highly popular with audiences.

These examples, drawn from Claudio Vellutini's monograph *Entangled Histories: Opera and Cultural Exchange between Vienna and the Italian States after Napoleon*, form a coherent pattern that reveals how Italian opera was embedded in the

cultural and political life of Habsburg Vienna. Although Rossini, Donizetti, and Verdi never met in Vienna, their names became closely intertwined in its press and theatrical life, their works appearing in succession on the capital's stages. As Vellutini shows, they were not simply "Italian" composers received abroad but figures mobilized within Habsburg cultural politics: Rossini as a symbol of post-Congress harmony under Metternich, Donizetti as a cosmopolitan court composer navigating—and reshaping—Viennese expectations, and Verdi as the so-called "bard of the Risorgimento," whose works could nonetheless be reframed within Habsburg dynastic representation. Together, these case studies demonstrate how Italian opera functioned as a privileged site of negotiation between aesthetic, political, and cultural agendas within the Habsburg Empire.

Rather than treating these figures through the lens of a fixed national identity, Vellutini focuses on the meanings generated by their interaction with Vienna's vibrant cultural life and, above all, with the empire's political aspirations and cultural projects. In doing so, *Entangled Histories* opens new perspectives by foregrounding transalpine networks of exchange. Moving beyond the traditional focus on Paris as the nineteenth century's cultural capital, Vellutini places Vienna at the centre of a dense network of operatic circulation, sustained by political ties with the Kingdom of Lombardy-Venetia. In this way, the book reconfigures the geography of operatic exchange.

At the same time, Vellutini advances a significant rethinking of temporality. Cultural exchange no longer appears as a linear process of "transfer" between discrete and stable national identities but as an ongoing, negotiated dynamic that reshapes identities over time. As operatic works and practices move across contexts such as Vienna, Milan, Venice, and Naples, they are continuously reinterpreted, acquiring new meanings in response to changing political and cultural conditions. By foregrounding these processes, Vellutini proposes a more flexible understanding of entanglement—one that operates both within the Habsburg Monarchy and across its borders, and that emphasizes transformation rather than transmission.

Mapping *Entangled Histories*

Entangled Histories brings to light a wealth of archival material drawn from institutions such as the Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchiv in Vienna and the Archivio di Stato in Milan, Venice, and Naples, as well as musical sources preserved in the Österreichische Nationalbibliothek and in the conservatory libraries of

Milan and Naples. One of its major strengths lies precisely in the way it brings these materials into dialogue: Vellutini combines the documentation from the Habsburg administration with close attention to musical sources, achieving a rare balance between the history of cultural policy and that of operatic practice. The volume also stands out for the richness of its bibliographical references, which are generously provided and make it a valuable resource for further research.

The study centres primarily—though not exclusively—on case studies devoted to Rossini, Donizetti, and Verdi, complemented by original insights into the prolific activity of impresarios such as Domenico Barbaja, Bartolomeo Merelli, and Carlo Balocchino. The trajectories of these figures and their works are woven into a coherent and illuminating synthesis that serves the book's broader argument.

Inspired by Friedrich Overbeck's painting *Italia und Germania* (1828), in which two women holding hands personify Italy and Germany, Vellutini seeks to "reconsider assumptions about early nineteenth-century Italian and German cultural relationships," presenting "the two traditions as being both distinct and ... intertwined."⁶ He situates his study within the Habsburg Empire in the first half of the nineteenth century, emphasizing Vienna and the empire's Italian territories as ideal contexts for examining the mediation of these traditions. According to Vellutini, in this setting, "mediation between the two traditions [German and Italian] was key to shaping a sense of belonging to a shared imperial community."⁷

The emphasis on the construction of a "shared imperial community" points to a crucial turning point in Habsburg history. Francis II, anticipating the dissolution of the Holy Roman Empire in 1806, had already founded the Austrian Empire two years earlier, seeking to secure dynastic continuity in the face of Napoleonic expansion. As Robert J.W. Evans has argued, this reconfiguration relied on both dynastic legitimacy and on the construction of a supranational Austrian identity.⁸ Vellutini identifies this moment as a "phase of radical rethinking of the collective identity, mutual relations, and shared values of the diverse peoples living within imperial borders."⁹ Within this framework, opera emerged as one of the Habsburgs' key instruments for consolidating the new imperial order, and Vellutini convincingly shows how it lay at the heart of cultural policies aimed at promoting a supranational identity.

The book's methodological framework draws on Michael Werner and Bénédicte Zimmermann's concept of *histoire croisée*. As Vellutini emphasizes, this approach does not treat communities as self-contained entities or as opposing poles of unidirectional processes. Rather, it foregrounds dynamic interactions through which "communities influence one another, engaging in mutually fruitful dialogues."¹⁰ In this sense, the study aligns with recent scholarship that understands mobility as constitutive of cultural practice. It engages, in particular, with Francesca Vella's work on operatic networks around the time of Italian unification and Austin Glatthorn's study of music theatre networks in the final decade of the Holy Roman Empire.¹¹

Building on this methodological framework, Vellutini turns at the close of the introduction to a central historiographical issue: the role of opera in the years leading to Italian unification. Did opera contribute to the Risorgimento?¹² After outlining both sides of this long-standing debate, he adopts a balanced position, refusing to supplant national narratives with exclusively imperial ones. Instead, he argues that during the Risorgimento, "discourses and cultural strategies informed by Austrian imperial ideology coexisted with national ones, each presenting different options for how imperial and national communities should be imagined and shaped."¹³ In this respect, the book offers a valuable alternative to a debate that has, in recent decades, become increasingly polarized. At the same time, Vellutini leans toward an imperial—and thus transnational—perspective, which moves beyond nationalist frameworks and provides a methodologically rigorous reassessment of the Metternich era, revealing how Austrian cultural policies often intersected with the aspirations of Italian civil society.

The book is organized in seven chapters that proceed broadly chronologically. The core of the volume (chapters 2–6) focuses on the period between two key moments: the Congress of Vienna (1814–15) and the revolutions of 1848. The opening and closing sections extend beyond these chronological boundaries: chapter 1 looks back to the eighteenth century, laying the groundwork for the subsequent discussion, while an epilogue offers a brief perspective on "1848 and Beyond."

The first chapter ("Opera and the Habsburgs") foregrounds the role of Italian opera in eighteenth-century Habsburg strategies of dynastic representation. It also traces the gradual divergence of Italian and German genres into distinct aesthetic spheres, linking this process to language politics and the growing

didactic function of the theatre. The chapter addresses the crisis of Italian opera in Vienna following the loss of Italian territories to Napoleon. The ways in which the Habsburgs overcame this rupture and reestablished Italian opera as a prestigious expression of imperial culture are examined in the second chapter ("The Politics of Theatre Administration"). Drawing on documents from the *Generalintendanz der Hoftheater* (General Management of the Court Theatres), preserved at the Haus- Hof- und Staatsarchiv in Vienna, Vellutini shows how theatre administration functioned as an active tool of state modernization. On the one hand, operatic networks between the Kärntnertortheater and Italian opera houses responded to administrative and financial needs. On the other hand, after the Congress of Vienna, these networks reinforced the supranational vision underpinning the monarchy's new configuration. These dynamics are explored in the following two chapters through case studies, which approach them from both a northern (Vienna) and a southern (Milan) perspective.

The third chapter ("Beyond Boundaries: Rossini's Operas in Post-Napoleonic Vienna") examines Vienna's encounter with Rossini's music. By the time of his arrival in 1822, Viennese audiences were already familiar with his works. As early as 1816, the Venetian impresario Antonio Cera had introduced *Tancredi* to Vienna, marking the beginning of local discourses on Rossini, which Vellutini reconstructs through an extensive survey of musical periodicals. Moving beyond Carl Dahlhaus's concept of *Stildualismus* and building on the work of Nicholas Mathew and Benjamin Walton,¹⁴ Vellutini emphasizes the permeability between Italian opera and Viennese musical culture. As he writes, "the dissemination of Rossini's operas ... accompanied a transnational reconfiguration of ideas about the aesthetic of opera and its performance."¹⁵ A German-language performance of *Otello*—analysed on the basis of surviving performance material at the Österreichische Nationalbibliothek—demonstrates how Rossini's style was adapted to different performance contexts. By tracing the shifting discourses surrounding Rossini in Vienna, Vellutini shows how Rossinian repertoire transcended boundaries, functioning as a lingua franca of the empire—a supranational language that resonated with the empire's supranational aspirations.

The fourth chapter ("Crossing Paths in Milan"), turns to the other side of this exchange. As a counterpoint to Italian opera in Vienna, it underscores the strong presence of Austrian, German, and Bohemian composers at the Teatro alla Scala in the years following the Congress of Vienna. Between 1814 and 1822,

much of the repertoire performed (in Italian) consisted of works by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Johann Simon Mayr, Joseph Weigl, Peter von Winter, and Hartmann Stuntz. As in Vienna with Rossini, their presence sparked lively debates among Milanese critics. Vellutini connects these debates to Madame de Staël's influential essay "On the Manner and Usefulness of Translations," published in the first issue of the journal *Biblioteca Italiana* (1816). Acting as a cultural mediator, de Staël advocated for the dissemination of German and Anglo-Saxon literature south of the Alps. Despite her reservations about opera, Vellutini extends this debate into the operatic sphere through a compelling case study: Saverio Mercadante's *Amleto* (Teatro alla Scala, 1823), on a libretto by Felice Romani. Through close analysis of selected musical numbers, Vellutini shows how the composer and librettist pursued "Nordic" colours, applying a proto-Romantic aesthetic that anticipated later works at the turn of the 1830s. In this way, Milanese operatic life during the early Restoration emerges as a site of intense cultural hybridity, closely aligned with the Austrian regime's broader efforts to promote exchange across cultural traditions.

The fifth chapter ("Barbaja's Networks and Legacy") examines Domenico Barbaja's activity across Naples, Milan, and Vienna. In doing so, Vellutini succeeds where few scholars have ventured since the pioneering study of John Rosselli,¹⁶ offering a rigorous account of an impresario's activity. Particularly noteworthy is the author's use of a wide range of archival material held at the Haus-, Hof-, und Staatsarchiv in Vienna, especially the "Pachtakten" (lease documents), which shed new light on Barbaja's tenure at the Kärntnertortheater. These sources are effectively complemented by material from state archives in Milan, Venice, and Naples, allowing Vellutini to reconstruct Barbaja's activities with remarkable precision. Unlike the previous two chapters, which focus primarily on Vienna and Milan, this chapter convincingly foregrounds the multi-directionality of transalpine networks. By reconstructing the conditions of Barbaja's appointment in Vienna, Vellutini demonstrates how the impresario's entrepreneurial strategies aligned closely with Austrian cultural policy. Barbaja proved so successful in the eyes of the Habsburg administration that authorities were prepared as early as 1821—while the terms of his first appointment were still under negotiation—to entrust him with control not only of the Viennese theatres but also of those in Venice and Milan. One of the chapter's most original contributions lies in its reassessment of Barbaja's role in promoting German opera. Vellutini shows that, contrary to expectations, Barbaja's contractual obligations emphasized

the presentation of German repertoire rather than Italian opera. He fulfilled this role by engaging composers such as Louis Spohr, Conradin Kreutzer, Franz Schoberlechner, Joseph Weigl, Philip Jakob Riotte, and Carl Maria von Weber. The latter was invited to Italy and commissioned to compose an opera for the Teatro San Carlo at a time when Barbaja, deprived of his principal asset after Rossini's departure for Paris, was seeking to reinforce the prestige of his enterprise. When this project failed to materialize, Barbaja instead arranged to produce an Italian version of *Der Freischütz*. Although the opera, translated as *Il franco arciero*, never reached the stage, the impresario achieved success in another respect. By tracing the careers of Amalia Schütz-Oldosi and Karoline Unger, Vellutini demonstrates how Barbaja's networks facilitated the circulation of German singers within the Italian peninsula. This section is particularly effective in showing how performance practices, rather than repertoire alone, contributed to the process of cultural exchange. Schütz-Oldosi and Unger's "Germanic" style—marked by an intense dramatic temperament—offered new models to composers such as Vincenzo Bellini and Gaetano Donizetti in shaping their female operatic protagonists.

The final two chapters return to Vienna and examine Bartolomeo Merelli and Carlo Balocchino as heirs to Barbaja's model of the impresario at the Kärntnertortheater. Through two compelling case studies—devoted to productions of operas by Donizetti and Verdi, already introduced earlier—Vellutini moves decisively beyond national frameworks. He convincingly demonstrates how the works of these composers contributed to the construction and celebration of Austria's imperial identity.

The sixth chapter offers an analysis of the music of Donizetti's *Linda di Chamounix* (1842) alongside an examination of its critical reception in Vienna. By probing Donizetti's musical dramaturgy, Vellutini identifies the features that contemporary critics perceived as "German," particularly in the treatment of the cabaletta melody in the Act I duet ("A consolarsi affrettisi"). He shows how Donizetti reuses this melody in later moments of the opera as a reminiscence motif, a technique associated—by Viennese audiences—with German compositional practices. As Vellutini aptly summarizes, "Donizetti wove a typical Italian opera melody into the French fabric of the opera through what, to Viennese ears, may have sounded like a quintessentially German compositional technique."¹⁷ This reading is particularly persuasive in illustrating how the opera's cosmopolitan idiom intersected with contemporary Viennese discourses, challenging rigid national categorizations.

The seventh chapter turns to the production of Verdi's *Ernani* at the same theatre in 1844. In contrast to the reception of Donizetti, Viennese critics perceived Verdi's opera as steeped in the very Italian stereotypes that *Linda di Chamounix* had seemed to transcend. Yet Vellutini's analysis of the Act III finale reveals a more complex dynamic. Drawing on Friedrich Schlegel's *Über die neuere Geschichte* (1811), he situates the Austrian Empire within narratives rooted in the legacy of the Holy Roman Empire, emphasizing the Habsburgs' role in sustaining continuity between the two. Within this framework, Vellutini compellingly argues that the Act III finale—set in the imperial crypt at Aachen and possibly evoking the Viennese *Kapuzinergruft*—resonated strongly with official strategies of imperial representation, particularly through its choral praise of Charles V and its implicit parallel with Charlemagne. Particularly insightful is his observation that this finale, later adapted into choruses celebrating figures such as Pope Pius IX or Ferdinand's constitutional regime in the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, could be reinterpreted across different political contexts. In Vienna, however, it acquired a specific ideological charge, echoing contemporary commemorative practices and, through the figure of Charles V, functioning as an effective vehicle for imperial self-representation.

The epilogue, "1848 and Beyond," extends the book's chronological scope, tracing the resilience—and eventual breakdown—of opera's role in Habsburg cultural policies amid the 1848 revolutions. While the preceding chapters explore the supranational networks forged between Vienna and Italian centres up to 1848, the epilogue reveals how these entanglements persisted in altered forms, even as nationalist movements challenged imperial unity.

Moreover, this forward glance reinforces the monograph's methodological strength, applying *histoire croisée* to a moment of rupture without forcing later national narratives onto the past. By briefly discussing post-revolutionary repertoires and changes in theatre administration, Vellutini underscores opera's enduring capacity to support cultural exchange, even as political divisions grew. At the same time, the epilogue's brevity—understandably so in a volume focused on the Restoration—invites further exploration.

As Vellutini demonstrates, the transalpine networks inaugurated by Barbaja and later developed by Merelli and Balocchino had a significant impact on Italian opera. Their influence extended from singers to composers, helping to redirect artistic trajectories across the peninsula and beyond. In the second part of this review, I build on the paths opened by *Entangled Histories* by

adopting a transnational perspective on the circulation of artists between Italy and Vienna. My interest lies in two key aspects of Vellutini's research. First, this circulation was not unidirectional: cultural agents—impresarios, composers, and singers—moved regularly north and south across the Alps. Second, such mobility actively shaped their artistic careers.

In what follows, I examine the career of the tenor Antonio Poggi (1806–75), showing how his artistic development was decisively shaped by his participation in the Italian opera seasons at Vienna's Kärntnertortheater between 1835 and 1839 under Bartolomeo Merelli. By tracing his engagements between Milan and Vienna, I argue that it was in the imperial capital that his reputation was consolidated and subsequently projected back onto the Italian operatic market. Furthermore, Vienna enabled him to tie his name indissolubly to roles by Donizetti and Bellini, whose interpretations also marked the peak of his success.

An Italian Tenor in Vienna: The Making of Antonio Poggi

The music critic and editor Francesco Regli (1802–66) could hardly have hoped for greater success for his periodical *Il pirata*.¹⁸ Founded in Milan in 1835, it became one of the key actors in the rapid expansion of music journalism in the 1830s. On the one hand, the proliferation of operatic seasons across the peninsula and the decline of the Rossinian era generated increased attention to the premiere of new works. On the other, the growing circulation of artists fostered interest in performers' careers and in the emergence of new talent. These publications functioned both as a promotional tool for singers—advertising their availability for contracts—and as resources for impresarios seeking new talent. They also represented a profitable outlet for editors, as the later success of the *Gazzetta Musicale di Milano* (founded in 1842) would demonstrate. In 1838, Regli recognized the rapid expansion of the European operatic market, driven by the increasing circulation of works and performers across the continent. That same year, he launched the first issue of the annual supplement *Strenna Teatrale Europea*. As the title indicates, the publication aimed to report to Milanese readers on operatic activity in all European centres where Italian opera flourished, including Paris, London, and—of course—Vienna. Alongside concise reports, the *Strenna* capitalized on the growing phenomenon of domestic music-making by publishing musical scores of successful arias, thereby enabling amateurs to perform them in private settings.¹⁹

In its first issue, while reviewing operatic activity in the Lombard-Venetian theatres, Regli dwelt in particular on the tenor Antonio Poggi. By that year, Poggi's career had developed to the point where, according to Regli, "his fame [had] become colossal."²⁰ Yet only four years earlier, his reputation had been far more modest.

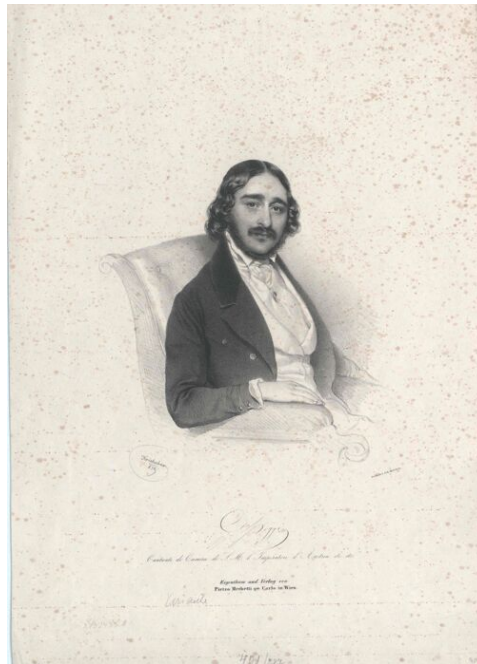


Figure 1: Portrait of Antonio Poggi. By courtesy of the Austrian National Library. Signature: [PORT_00156047_01](#) POR MAG

In 1834, Poggi struggled to establish himself in Italian opera theatres. After achieving moderate success with his participation in the premiere of Donizetti's *Torquato Tasso* (Teatro Valle, Rome, 1833), he secured engagements in modest seasons in Genoa and Rome, which brought him only limited recognition. His career, however, was soon to change when, that autumn, he obtained an engagement at the Teatro alla Scala in Milan, later confirmed for the following carnival season.

In 1834, La Scala was under the direction of the impresario Duke Carlo Visconti di Modrone, a member of a prominent Milanese noble family and a direct intermediary with the Habsburg court, serving as one of the emperor's chamberlains. Poggi's arrival coincided with a moment destined to leave a lasting mark on the theatre's history. That year, the duke secured the Milanese debut of Maria Malibran; the following year, he brought Giuditta Pasta back

to La Scala's stage. These two events dominated the press, and attention increased further when it became clear that both singers would perform Bellini's *Norma*.²¹

Meanwhile, during these two seasons, Poggi's debut was largely confined to secondary and comic roles in operas by Lauro Rossi (*La casa disabitata*) and Luigi Ricci (*Chiara di Rosenberg* and *Un'avventura di scaramuccia*), as well as in Donizetti's *Olivo e Pasquale*. Notwithstanding the focus on the two divas' performances, the press did comment on the appearance of the new tenor. On the one hand, the critic Luigi Prividali, writing in *Il censore universale dei teatri*, immediately recognized his potential, noting that he was being confined to *mezzo-carattere* roles, while his voice seemed better suited to the *serio* repertoire.²² On the other hand, the journal *Glissons, n'appuyon pas* observed that the tenor still required further study.²³

For the role of Pollione in *Norma*, alongside Malibran and Pasta, the duke cast the more experienced *primo tenore* Domenico Reina. Meanwhile, Poggi had the opportunity to appear in Bellini's *La sonnambula* with the former and in Donizetti's *Anna Bolena* with the latter. Although this might have offered, as Prividali had anticipated, an opportunity for Poggi to move beyond *mezzo-carattere* roles, the circumstances proved far from ideal. At the end of the autumn season, the critic published an article reviewing all Malibran performances without mentioning any other singer, effectively reducing the rest of the cast to mere accessories and leaving no account of Poggi's performance.²⁴

During the carnival season, Pasta made her debut with an opera never before heard in Milan: Saverio Mercadante's *Emma di Antiochia*. Although the opera failed to convince Milanese audiences, critics—once again—focused primarily on Pasta's performance. Poggi's interpretation alongside her was nonetheless appreciated, raising expectations for his appearance in *Anna Bolena*.²⁵ This, however, never took place, as the death of Emperor Francis I on 2 March 1835 led to the premature closure of the season. At the end of his first engagement in La Scala, it was clear that the theatre had failed to provide Poggi with roles better suited to his voice, as the press itself had already recognized. Moreover, the presence of Malibran and Pasta undoubtedly prevented him from obtaining the level of attention needed to spread his fame across the peninsula and beyond. Nevertheless, his arrival in Vienna later that spring proved that the imperial capital could offer what Italian theatres had not.

In the spring of 1835, Poggi made his debut at Vienna's Kärntnertortheater. As reconstructed by Vellutini, this was also the year in which Bartolomeo Merelli arrived in the capital. The impresario's aim was clear: to revive the administrative model inaugurated by Domenico Barbaja—which had deteriorated after he left his position in 1828—and to restore regular Italian opera seasons to the city. The pilot season of 1835 proved so successful that, from the following year, in partnership with Carlo Balocchino, Merelli consolidated Barbaja's system, ensuring, as Vellutini puts it, "regular Italian opera seasons in Vienna and a steady circulation of artists and works between the Austrian capital and major Italian operatic centres," uninterrupted until 1848.²⁶

Before his arrival in Vienna, Merelli had previously been involved in the administration of the Teatro alla Scala, and it was there that he first encountered Poggi.²⁷ No direct evidence links Merelli to Poggi's engagement at La Scala in 1834; however, given his role as a singer's agent, he may well have been instrumental in securing it. For Merelli's Viennese debut as an impresario, Poggi represented an ideal asset: still at an early stage in his career—and thus not too expensive to engage—yet already displaying a talent that La Scala had not allowed him fully to develop. Merelli quickly recognized his potential and made him one of the leading singers of his pilot Viennese season, assigning him exclusively Bellinian and Donizettian roles in which he could fully showcase his abilities. Within a single season, Poggi performed Pollione, Elvino, and Arturo in Bellini's *Norma*, *La sonnambula*, and *Il pirata*, respectively. In addition, he had the opportunity to redeem himself in Donizetti's *Anna Bolena*.

Just four days after the opening of the Italian season—delayed due to the mourning period following the emperor's death—Donizetti's opera was staged as a benefit performance for Poggi. Between the two acts, Poggi performed the tenor's final aria from *Il pirata* ("Tu vedrai la sventurata").²⁸ The periodical *Der Wanderer* commented:

The extent to which Mr. Poggi possesses the art of captivating the audience was proven by the full house at the opera, now performed for the fifth time, and by the stormy reception at his entrance. He sang with all the soulful charm of his voice, which penetrates directly to the heart and cannot fail to secure him universal applause in all his vocal pieces. The aria in the second act, "Nel veder la tua costanza," once again transported everyone into rapture, and the passage "Che nessun quaggiù lasciamo/Ne timore, ne desir" cannot possibly be sung more pleasantly, more sweetly, or with greater feeling than by Mr. Poggi.²⁹

This review makes clear that the Kärntnertortheater brought Poggi the success he failed to achieve at La Scala. This was due not only to the absence of Malibran or Pasta but also to his opportunity to appear in roles that had been denied him in Milan. His interpretation of Percy in *Anna Bolena* allowed critics to focus on his expressive rendering of the character's emotions. This, as we will see, would become a recurrent element in the critical reception of Poggi's Viennese performances.

Toward the end of the season, Prividali reported that "Poggi's singing electrified the great capital All our talents ('virtuosi') are appreciated in Vienna ..., but when Poggi's name is mentioned, appreciation turns into exaltation."³⁰ It is noteworthy that, although the critic referred to Poggi as "our talent," it was Vienna that provided the stage on which his abilities could truly shine and gain wide recognition. Echoes of Poggi's Viennese success were reflected in the following autumn (1835) and carnival (1835–36) seasons at La Scala. This time, despite Malibran's presence, the tenor received greater attention and praise. Doubts about his need for further study disappeared. In January 1836, when he was struck by illness, a secondary tenor replaced him alongside Malibran in *La sonnambula*. Whereas the previous year his performance had gone unnoticed, critics now expressed the hope that his indisposition would soon pass and later celebrated his return as Elvino.³¹

Within a year, Poggi rose rapidly from a second-rank tenor to a first-rank artist. In this trajectory, the Viennese theatre provided the decisive springboard, showing that, within the circulation of singers across the Alps, Vienna was not merely a venue for displaying Italy's finest talents (as reported by Prividali) but also played a direct role in promoting artists. This became even clearer in the Viennese Italian seasons of 1837 and 1838.

In 1837, Merelli and Balocchino brought the recent Donizetti opera *Lucia di Lammermoor* to the Kärntnertortheater. For the occasion, they engaged the pair of singers who had performed it few months before in Venice: Fanny

Tacchinardi-Persiani and Antonio Poggi. The capital was ready to welcome once again the tenor who had met with such success two years earlier, and critics did not hesitate to reaffirm the qualities they had already praised in 1835. While in Venice his interpretation had raised some doubts, in Vienna the reception was markedly different. Adolf Bäuerle's *Wiener Theaterzeitung* reported that Poggi had "gained enormously in dramatic expression," particularly in his rendering of detailed moments in the opera, such as the way he pronounced the words "maledetto sia l'istante," in the Act 2 finale, as well as his interpretation of the final aria ("Tu che a Dio spiegasti l'ali").³² Once again, news of his success echoed back to Milan. Francesco Regli, reporting on Poggi's success in *Il pirata*, remarked that his performance of the final aria alone was sufficient "to rank him among the first tenors of Italy," adding that few singers "would be able to fully satisfy an audience as knowledgeable and discerning as the German one."³³

His subsequent performance in Bellini's *Beatrice di Tenda* met with such success that his interpretation of Orombello's suffering was soon immortalized in print by the Viennese publisher Anton Diabelli. Capitalizing on Poggi's acclaim, Diabelli issued a collection entitled *Cantilene gesungen von Hrn. Poggi*, which reproduced the brief cantabile passage in which Orombello, after recalling the torments he has endured, proclaims his innocence ("Io soffrii, soffrii tortura").³⁴

N^o 362.

CANTILENE gesungen von H^{rn} POGGI *Eigenthum des Verlegers.*

(*Je soffri tortura*) = (Was ich litt, was ich ertragen)

aus der Oper: **Beatrice di Tenda (Das Castell von Ursino)** von V. Bellini.

Wien, bei A. Diabelli und Comp. Graben N^o 1133.

Andante sostenuto assai.

OROMBELLO.

PIANOFORTE.

Do sof = frit soffrit tur-tu = ra cui pen-sie = ro ah non compren-de non po-
 Was ich litt, was ich er-tragen kein Ge-müthe vermag zu fas-sen, kaum noch

Im Einverständnis des Original-Verlegers Joh. Ricordi in Mailand.

D. et C. N^o 6333.

MUSIKSAMMLUNG
OPERA
NACHSCHULUNG

Figure 2: Cantilene gesungen von Hrn Poggi aus der Oper Beatrice di Tenda (Wien, Diabelli, 1837). By courtesy of the Austrian National Library. Signature: [MS8469-qu.4^o/362 MUS MAG.](#)

Poggi's final consecration in Vienna took place in 1838. That year, critics confirmed what had already been noted in previous years and, praising the expressive warmth of his tonal phrasing, celebrated him as "the singer of sentiment" ("Il cantante del sentimento"). Such epithets were typically reserved for artists of the highest rank—Giuditta Pasta, for instance, had been hailed as "the singer of passions" ("la cantante delle passioni"). As Susan Rutherford has shown, the debates surrounding Pasta's interpretations revealed an emerging awareness of performance as an autonomous artwork.³⁵ A similar focus on the expressivity and emotional truth of performances later shaped the reception of Poggi, whose singing was equally celebrated for its vivid depiction of feelings. Later that year, Poggi's Viennese triumphs culminated in a private performance in the apartments of Empress Carolina Augusta, followed by a concert at Schönbrunn Palace. Shortly thereafter, he was awarded the honorary title of *Kammersänger* of the Austrian Emperor.

The trajectory of Poggi's career ultimately brings into focus the central historiographical claim of *Entangled Histories*. What it reveals is not merely the circulation of Italian singers across the Alps but the decisive role of Vienna as a site where artistic identities could be forged and consolidated. His emergence as a leading tenor did not stem from gradual recognition on Italian stages. Rather, it took shape through a marked transformation in the imperial capital. In Milan, he had been largely confined to secondary roles and limited visibility, often overshadowed by figures such as Malibran and Pasta. In Vienna, by contrast, he encountered both a repertoire and a critical environment capable of bringing his talent fully into view. It was there that he refined the expressive qualities that would define his reputation and secured the recognition that allowed him to return to the Italian operatic circuit as an established artist.

Seen in this light, Poggi's career suggests that operatic success cannot be fully understood within the limits of discrete "national" theatrical systems. It was instead forged through transnational networks that strengthened both skills and artistic recognition. In this sense, *Entangled Histories* opens new directions in opera studies by moving beyond increasingly entrenched and unproductive dichotomies between "Italian" and "German" traditions. It offers a framework that not only reconfigures the geography of European operatic networks but also highlights the active role of cultural exchange in shaping the careers and lives of singers, impresarios, and composers alike.

From this perspective, Italian opera appears less as a bounded national tradition than as a cosmopolitan cultural project, one in which the Habsburg Empire functioned as a central institutional promoter.

Notes

1. The letter is reported in *Mémoires, documents et écrits divers laissés par le prince de Metternich, chancelier de cour et d'état*, ed. Richard von Metternich, 2nd. ed. (Paris: Plon, 1881), 3: 540, English translation quoted in Claudio Vellutini, *Entangled Histories: Opera and Cultural Exchange between Vienna and the Italian States after Napoleon* (Oxford University Press, 2025), 78. The exclamation mark appears in the French original.
2. Guido Zavadini, *Donizetti: Vita—Musiche—Epistolario* (Bergamo: Istituto italiano d'arti grafiche, 1948), 606. See also, Vellutini, *Entangled Histories*, 225.
3. Original wording: "Einzelne Momente zeigen ... eine tiefere, den Tendenzen deutscher Musik sich nähernde Auffassungsweise," in *Allgemeine Theater-Zeitung*, 21 May 1842, 535, English translation quoted in Vellutini, *Entangled Histories*, 233.
4. Original wording: "ein Element Deutscher Innigkeit und tieferen Gefühles," in *Oesterreichisch-Kaiserliche privilegierte Wiener Zeitung*, 6 June 1842, 1148, English translation quoted in Vellutini, *Entangled Histories*, 229.
5. Marcello Conati, *La bottega della musica: Verdi e la Fenice* (Milan: Il Saggiatore, 1983), 99, English translation quoted in Vellutini, *Entangled Histories*, 262.
6. Vellutini, *Entangled Histories*, 1.
7. Ibid.
8. Robert J.W. Evans, "Communicating Empire: The Habsburgs and Their Critics, 1700–1919," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 19 (2009): 124.
9. Vellutini, *Entangled Histories*, 4.
10. Ibid.
11. Francesca Vella, *Networking Operatic Italy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021) and Austin Glatthorn, *Music Theatre and the Holy Roman Empire: The German Musical Stage at the Turn of the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022).
12. For further discussion on this historiographical debate, see Fabrizio della Seta, "Opera e Risorgimento: Si può ancora dire qualcosa?," *Verdiperspektiven* 2 (2017): 81–106. For a more recent account, see Carlida Steffan and Luca Zoppelli, *Nei palchi e sulle sedie: Il teatro musicale nella società italiana dell'Ottocento* (Rome: Carocci, 2023), 243–62.
13. Vellutini, *Entangled Histories*, 14–15.
14. Nicolas Mathew and Benjamin Walton, "Introduction: Pleasure in History," in *The Invention of Beethoven and Rossini: Historiography, Analysis, Criticism*, eds. Nicolas Mathew and Benjamin Walton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 1–12.
15. Vellutini, *Entangled Histories*, 81–82.

16. John Rosselli, *The Opera Industry in Italy from Cimarosa to Verdi* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984)
17. Vellutini, *Entangled Histories*, 236.
18. For Regli's biographical account, see Luca Rossetto Casel, "Francesco Regli," in *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, accessed April 27, 2026, [https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/francesco-regli_\(Dizionario-Biografico\)/](https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/francesco-regli_(Dizionario-Biografico)/); see also Claudio Chiancone, "Un 'pirata' dell'Ottocento: Francesco Regli critico e giornalista," *Atti dell'Ateneo di Scienze, Lettere ed Arti di Bergamo* 67 (2003–2004): 485–507.
19. The singers' biographical accounts were later organized in Francesco Regli, *Dizionario biografico dei più celebri poeti ed artisti melodrammatici, tragici e comici, maestri, concertisti, coreografi, mimi, ballerini, scenografi, giornalisti, impresari, ecc. ecc. che fiorirono in Italia dal 1800 al 1860* (Turin: Dalmazzo, 1860).
20. *Strenna Teatrale Europea*, I (1838), 178–79.
21. For an account of the two interpretations, see Susan Rutherford, "'La cantante delle passioni': Giuditta Pasta and the Idea of Operatic Performance," *Cambridge Opera Journal*, vol. 19, no. 2 (July 2007): 107–38.
22. *Il censore universale dei teatri*, no. 68, August 23, 1834, 270, and no. 1, January 3, 1835, 4.
23. *Glissons n'appuyons pas*, no. I/21, August 18, 1834, 84.
24. *Il censore universale dei teatri*, no. 89, November 5, 1834, 353–6.
25. *Il censore universale dei teatri*, no. 3, January 10, 1835, 10–1. See also *Glissons n'appuyons pas*, no. II/1, February 2, 1835, 4.
26. Vellutini, *Entangled Histories*, 206–7. On Merelli's 1835 season, see *Ibid.*, 209–12.
27. Remo Giazotto, *Le carte della Scala: Storie di impresari e appaltatori (1778–1860)* (Pisa: Akademos, 1990), 115–6.
28. Michael Jahn, *Die Wiener Hofoper von 1810 bis 1836: Das Kärntnertortheater als Hofoper* (Vienna: Apfel, 2007), 241.
29. Original wording: "Wie sehr Hr. Poggi die Kunst des Publikums besitzt, bewies das volle Haus bei der schon zum fünften Male gegebenen Oper und der stürmische Empfang bei seinem Auftreten; er sang mit all' dem seelenvollen Zauber seiner zum Herzen dringenden Stimme, der ihm bei allen seinen Gesangsstücken allgemeinen Beifall sichern muß. Die Arie im zweiten Acte: Nel veder la tua costanza, riß wieder Alles zum Entzücken hin, und die Stelle: 'Che nessun quaggiù lasciamo, Ne timore, ne desir' kann man unmöglich angenehmer, lieblicher und gefühlsvoller singen, als Hr. Poggi," *Der Wanderer*, no. 122, May 2, 1835, [4], my translation.
30. *Il censore universale dei teatri*, no. 46, June 10, 1835, 181–2.
31. *Il censore universale dei teatri*, no. 13, February 13, 1836, 49.

32. *Allgemeine Theaterzeitung*, no. 75, April 15, 1837, 302, my translation.
33. *Il pirata*, no. II/93 ("Gazzetta Teatrale"), May 19, 1837, [2], my translation.
34. *Cantilene gesungen von Hrñ Poggi (Jo soffrii tortura) (Was ich litt, was ich ertragen) aus der oper: Beatrice di Tenda (Das Castell von Ursino) von V. Bellini* (Vienna: Diabelli, 1837).
35. Susan Rutherford, "'La cantante delle passioni': Giuditta Pasta and the Idea of Operatic Performance," *Cambridge Opera Journal*, vol. 19, no. 2 (July 2007): 107–38, 133–36.