

# MUSIC AND ‘MUSIC’ IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY META-OPERATIC SCORES

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## ABSTRACT

*‘Meta-operas’, that is, operas portraying the world of opera and its protagonists (such as impresarios, music directors, librettists and virtuosi), became increasingly common during the eighteenth century. Most of the scholarly literature on meta-opera, however, concentrates on the operas’ poetic texts, their librettos. Scholars have dealt with these operas about operas almost as though they were spoken dramas, without taking into account the many ways in which metatheatrical practices and conventions are made more complex by the presence of music.*

*What do meta-operatic scores look like? Are they similar to other ‘ordinary’ scores of the same time, or do their metatheatrical techniques set them aside as special? Considering a number of eighteenth-century works, this article points out how specific musical means can contribute to the overall effect of meta-operatic plots: the stratified nature of meta-narratives is, in fact, mirrored in the scores when realistic music is performed on stage. On these occasions, the presence of more than one layer of musical performance (of music and ‘music’) can be detected in the score. Furthermore, the presence of realistic music allows for a highly flexible treatment of standard operatic practices, and a number of passages work across conventional oppositions such as recitative/closed number, ‘real-life’/‘performed’ and ‘spoken’/‘sung’. Meta-operas, therefore, offer a special perspective on the presence of realistic music in opera.*

During the eighteenth century a particular kind of subject became increasingly common in the world of opera: works would focus more or less exclusively on the mechanisms by which operas themselves were created and staged. This kind of ‘opera about opera’ or ‘meta-opera’ was extremely popular. From Metastasio’s *L’impresario delle Canarie* (1724) to Palomba’s *Orazio* (1737), Goldoni’s *Le virtuose ridicole* (1752), Calzabigi’s *L’opera seria* (1769), Casti’s *Prima la musica poi le parole* (1786) and Diodati’s *L’impresario in angustie* (1789) – to cite only the most famous ones – hundreds of librettos staged the world of opera with its stereotypical characters such as illiterate tenors, competitive sopranos, ridiculous castrati and greedy impresarios.

The characters of meta-operas are often shown in the act of rehearsing or performing passages from other (real or fictional) operas, so that what they sing is realistic music, that is, music that they too hear as ‘music’.<sup>1</sup> In early eighteenth-century meta-operatic intermezzos, the characters are represented singing short operatic

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1 Various terms have been used to distinguish these two types of music. Edward T. Cone uses ‘realistic singing’ to indicate that the characters are singing within their fictional world, and ‘operatic singing’ to refer to the rest of the music; see Cone, ‘The World of Opera and Its Inhabitants’, in *Music: A View from Delft*, ed. Robert P. Morgan (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 126. Carolyn Abbate calls ‘phenomenal’ the music that the characters on stage hear as music; see Abbate, *Unsung Voices: Opera and Musical Narrative in the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 5. The terms ‘diegetic’ and ‘extradiegetic’ have also been used to define the music within the narrated world (realistic music) and the music outside it.



scenes that mostly consist of accompanied recitatives and arias.<sup>2</sup> Later in the century, embedded performances become more elaborate (they go hand in hand with the evolution of opera buffa in general), growing in size and importance from discontinuous rehearsals to continuous performances of entire embedded works (some occupying whole acts of their framing operas).<sup>3</sup>

The presence of embedded operatic scenes (especially longer ones) complicates the overall structure of the opera that contains them: when characters enact a separate dramatic narrative, they duplicate the fictional levels of the work they inhabit. In spoken theatre, this technique is called the ‘play within a play’. A well-known example is in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*: the insertion of *The Murder of Gonzago* (Act 3 Scene 2), the show enacted in front of Hamlet’s uncle and his court, deepens the theatrical narrative, creating a fiction of second degree, which, in this particular case, significantly influences the course of the principal action. The framing drama (*Hamlet*) corresponds to a first level of fiction – reality for the characters of *Hamlet* – while the embedded drama (*The Murder of Gonzago*) corresponds to a second-level fiction, considered fictional by those characters. For the real-life audience, both levels are fictional, with the inset performance somehow more fictional than the framing one.

Because what is embedded within meta-opera is usually another opera, however, the duplication of representational levels is here accompanied by realistic music played and sung on stage at key points in the plot, when the dramatic structure is complicated by the presence of a play within a play.<sup>4</sup>

#### ‘PERFORMED’ MUSIC WITHIN META-OPERA

While Italian opera of the eighteenth century is set to music throughout, only a fraction of it is heard as music by the characters on stage: when the characters hear music, however, what we as spectators hear is its representation. For instance, in the second act of *Le nozze di Figaro*, when Cherubino sings a song and Susanna accompanies him on her guitar, Cherubino, Susanna and the Countess hear a guitar; we hear its orchestral representation (Act 2 Scene 2). Realistic songs like that of Cherubino are heard and recognized as such also because their textual and musical form sets them apart from the rest of the music. (Realistic songs often have strophic texts and settings with harp, mandolin or guitar accompaniment, although, of course, not all realistic singing is strophic, nor all strophic singing realistic.)

What happens in meta-opera is rather different: what is sung and performed by the characters within a meta-opera are not songs but operatic arias and recitatives, which do not differ substantially from the other numbers of the opera. This formal similarity can more easily spawn ambiguities as to whether, in a particular moment, a character on stage is ‘singing’ or ‘speaking’. This confusion obviously plays on the basic convention of the operatic genre, on the lack of distinction between speech and song to the spectators’ ears. That ambiguity, potential in all opera, is exploited by meta-opera as a metatheatrical device that contributes to the confusion of fictional levels: not knowing whether characters are speaking or singing in their world

2 See, for example, Girolamo Gigli and Domenico Scarlatti’s *La Dirindina*, intermezzo for *Ambleto* (Rome, Teatro Capranica, Carnival 1715), or Pietro Metastasio and Domenico Sarro’s *L’impresario delle Canarie*, intermezzo for *Didone abbandonata* (Naples, Teatro San Bartolomeo, 1724).

3 In *L’opera in prova alla moda* (Giovanni Fiorini/Gaetano Latilla; Venice, Teatro San Moisè, 1751), the *virtuosi* first rehearse (Acts 1 and 2) and then perform (Act 3) the opera seria *Urganostocor*, *tragedia tragicchissima ma di lieto fine* (Urganostocor, very tragic tragedy but with a happy end), whereas the *farsa L’italiano a Parigi* occupies the whole second act of the opera buffa *La novità* (Giovanni Bertati/Felice Alessandri; Venice, Teatro San Moisè, 1775). An interesting case is that of *Le tre commedie in una* (Pasquale Mililotti/Francesco Buonanni; Naples, Teatro de’ Fiorentini, 1768), an opera buffa in which not one but two pieces are embedded: in the second act of the framing opera, characters are shown performing the first act of the inset opera buffa *La finta contessa* (Act 2 Scenes 5–13); in the third act, they stage the intermezzo *La giardiniera* (Act 3 Scenes 3–14).

4 I have maintained the label ‘play within a play’ when referring to this metatheatrical device in opera because of its widespread acceptance in writings on spoken theatre, even though there are no ‘plays’ as such to talk about in the operas under consideration.



often corresponds to a more general confusion about whether what is being represented is real or fictitious for them.

Some help in avoiding confusion can come from the dramatic context and/or from verbal clues (for example, 'Let's start the aria', 'To the duet'), or from the presence in the librettos of typographical devices such as italics or inverted commas to mark out the embedded text. In some cases, differences between 'performed' arias and the rest of the arias are signalled by the use of stylistic types: the first are set in *seria* style (with da capo, elaborate coloratura and, at times, a prefatory accompanied recitative), whereas the latter are *arie buffe* (this because the opera performed internally is *seria*, while the framing one is comic).<sup>5</sup> But this is not always the case: first, there are many examples in which the embedded opera is *buffa* too;<sup>6</sup> moreover, the presence of different styles is a characteristic of comic opera in general and does not necessarily constitute a sign of realistic performance.<sup>7</sup>

Countless examples show that operatic characters are usually able to tell the difference between speech and song within their own world. This convention is at the core of the operatic genre and is explained by the paradox intrinsic to all opera: while the singers impersonating operatic characters do sing, the characters themselves (in their fictional world) are only speaking (while Luciano Pavarotti in the role of Idomeneo does sing, the character Idomeneo – in his fictional world – is only speaking).<sup>8</sup> Although passages that blur the distinction between speech and song *can* be found in opera,<sup>9</sup> they represent exceptional cases in which this convention is flouted,<sup>10</sup> and therefore confirm that such a convention does exist in the first place.

Part of the metatheatrical game is the tendency to blur the boundaries between multiple fictional levels, thus creating situations in which it is difficult to distinguish between different degrees of reality: in some cases, in fact, the characters on stage are the victims of this lack of clear-cut distinction, mistaking performance for real life. *La Dirindina*, an intermezzo in two parts by Domenico Scarlatti (text by Girolamo Gigli; Rome, 1715),<sup>11</sup> features the characters of the singer Dirindina, her singing teacher Don Carissimo and Liscione, a castrato singer. In the second part, Dirindina, in order to show her singing and acting qualities, rehearses a passage of recitative in front of Liscione, interpreting the role of Dido and addressing Aeneas–

5 In spoken (meta)theatre a similar device exists: there are examples of comedies in prose functioning as framing dramas for inset plays in verse. See, for example, two plays of the seventeenth century both entitled *La comédie des comédiens*: one is by Gougenot (1633) and displays three acts in prose followed by three acts in alexandrines (corresponding to the embedded *comédie d'intrigue La courtisane*); the other is by Scudéry (1634), with the framing drama in prose and the embedded one (a *tragi-comédie pastorale, L'amour caché par l'amour*) in verse. See Georges Forestier, *Le Théâtre dans le théâtre sur la scène française du XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, second edition (Geneva: Droz, 1996), 351.

6 In the opera buffa *La commediante* (Antonio Palomba/Nicola Conforto; Naples, Teatro de' Fiorentini, 1754), the intermezzo *La cantarina* (Domenico Macchia/Nicola Conforto) is staged in Act 3 Scenes 8–13; the 'burletta' *I bambocci* is performed within *L'opera nuova* (Giovanni Bertati/Matteo Rauzzini; Venice, Teatro San Moisè, 1781).

7 On opera buffa's references to and uses of opera seria see Mary Hunter, 'Some Representations of Opera Seria in Opera Buffa', *Cambridge Opera Journal* 3/2 (1991), 89–108.

8 Of course, in many cases (especially in arias), operatic characters express their thoughts or feelings and are not actually 'speaking'.

9 There are cases in which the use of realistic singing is not consistent throughout. Cone has emphasized the incongruities in the use of this type of singing in Verdi's *La traviata* and *Rigoletto* and in Bizet's *Carmen* ('The World of Opera', 125–138). However, only the spectators of an opera perceive a confusion of 'speaking' and 'singing' in opera, whereas the very characters on stage are faced with it in meta-opera.

10 As Richard Taruskin has suggested, 'if we are operatically literate we do not wonder whether the characters are "aware" of the music they inhabit. That question will normally come to consciousness only when the convention is flouted'; see Taruskin, 'She Do the Ring in Different Voices', Review of Carolyn Abbate, *Unsung Voices*, in *Cambridge Opera Journal* 4/2 (1992), 194, note 1.

11 *La Dirindina* had been scheduled as intermezzo to Scarlatti's *Ambleto* (Rome, Teatro Capranica, 1715), but was eventually cancelled. The earliest known performance took place at the Teatro San Samuele, Venice, in 1725, but it is not certain whether this was with Scarlatti's music; see Malcolm Boyd, 'Dirindina', in *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera*, ed. Stanley Sadie (London: Macmillan, 1992), volume 1, 1181.



Liscione with harsh words.<sup>12</sup> Don Carissimo, who arrives in the middle of the scene, is confronted with a mixture of fiction (Dirindina's singing) and reality (Liscione's spoken comments and suggestions) and seems unable to tell the difference:

- Dir.* *Enea, crudo e mendace...* *(Sopraggiunge Don Carissimo, il quale sta osservando da parte)*
- Lisc.* Mettetevi in più fiera positura.
- Car.* Il congresso ancor dura! *(da sè)*
- Dir.* *Vattene, infido, va...*
- Car.* Che diavolo sarà?  
Vuole ammazzarlo! Via, tiragli là!  
Mi nascondo un po' qui.
- Dir.* *Va, che se il cielo è giusto,  
ti fulmini, fellone...*
- Car.* Sta ancor fermo, il barone! *(Liscione mostra di compiacersi dell'azione e si mette a sedere)*
- Dir.* *E vendichi gli oltraggi  
che facesti, spergiuro, alla mia fede...*
- Car.* Il baron ride e siede!
- Dir.* *Al mio zelo, al mio onore,  
perfido traditore,  
al mio letto macchiato.*
- Car.* Ah, porcon disgraziato!
- Lisc.* Quelle parole del macchiato letto  
voi non avete detto  
così forte che il popolo le intenda.
- Car.* Sfacciataggine orrenda!  
Voler che ancor si pubblici tal fatto!  
Gran briccone, gran matto!
- Dir.* *Così le sante leggi  
del ciel calpesti, e così in me dilleggi  
e rompi i sacri nodi maritali?*
- Car.* Con Liscione sponsali!
- Dir.* *Così da questo seno,  
empio, discior ti puoi, mentre fecondo  
di te lo lasci pieno?*
- Car.* Vo' veder questo e poi la fin del mondo!

*Dir.* *Cruel and deceitful Aeneas...* (*Don Carissimo arrives and spies on them from a distance*) | *Lisc.* Take up a more defiant stance. | *Car.* So they're still at it! (*to himself*) | *Dir.* Go hence, traitor, go... | *Car.* What the hell is up? She wants to kill him! Go, have at him! I'll hide here just for a bit. | *Dir.* Go, for if Heaven is just, may lightning strike you down, villain... | *Car.* He's still there, the rascal! (*Liscione shows that he is pleased with the acting and sits down*) | *Dir.* And avenge the insults with which you falsely repaid my trust... | *Car.* The rogue is laughing and still sitting! | *Dir.* My zeal, my honour, perfidious traitor, my stained bed. | *Car.* Ah, dirty pig! | *Lisc.* You didn't speak those words about a stained bed loudly enough for people to hear. | *Car.* Astounding effrontery! To want to

12 In the fiction, Dido is depicted with a dagger in her hand; Dirindina uses Liscione's sword instead.



broadcast such things aloud! What a knave, what a madman! | *Dir.* Do you trample upon the holy laws of Heaven in the same way that you mock and break the holy vows of marriage? | *Car.* Marriage to Liscione! | *Dir.* Can you so easily tear yourself away from this breast, scoundrel, while you leave me fecund and replete by you? | *Car.* I'll see this first, and then the end of the world!<sup>13</sup>

At the end, Don Carissimo, never realizing his mistake, tries to persuade Dirindina not to kill herself, but instead to marry Liscione in order to avoid dishonour.

Carissimo's misunderstanding, however egregious and unrealistic it may be, is the result of his mixing up the two levels of fiction (or reality and fiction from his point of view). His confusion is made even more paradoxical because he does not seem to hear Dirindina's singing. Since the *virtuosa* is rehearsing an operatic scene, we must assume that she is actually singing, even though the audience of *La Dirindina* is, of course, unable to tell the difference. Don Carissimo, on the other hand, should hear her lines for what they are: passages from a (sung) operatic scene. That Don Carissimo seems to hear Dirindina's performance as spoken, however, contradicts the very basic convention according to which speech and song sound clearly different to the characters inhabiting the world of opera – and an experienced operatic audience is likely to get the paradox of this situation.<sup>14</sup> The presence of music realistically performed on stage can therefore be used in meta-opera as a metatheatrical device that, by contravening a basic operatic convention, contributes to the confusion between different levels of fiction.

Realistic music can also underline the double function of accompanimental music embedded within meta-opera. In the one-act *divertimento teatrale Prima la musica e poi le parole* (libretto by Giovanni Battista Casti and music by Antonio Salieri; Vienna, Schönbrunn Palace, Orangery, 1786) Poeta and Maestro have been requested to put on an opera in four days. The music already exists, but the poet has to compose a new libretto for it, and (because of pressures from influential figures) two women, one *seria* and one *buffa*, have to be accommodated in the cast. In Scene 2 Poeta and Maestro audition the *virtuosa seria* Donna Eleonora, who, in order to prove her singing abilities, performs a few pieces from *Giulio Sabino* (an opera seria by Sarti turned into a pasticcio).<sup>15</sup> The *virtuosa* begins by singing the cavatina 'Pensieri funesti', and Maestro accompanies her at the harpsichord. At the end of her audition Eleonora chooses the *rondò* 'Cari oggetti del mio core' and asks Poeta and Maestro to help her with the action; if Maestro is acting, however, nobody can accompany the performance at the harpsichord:

*Ele.* Voi due farete i figli.  
[...]  
Maestro, anche voi qua.  
*Mae.* E chi accompagnerà?

13 Extract from the libretto, with English translation by Michael Talbot, in *La Dirindina: Musical Farce in Two Parts* by Girolamo Gigli/Domenico Scarlatti, ed. Francesco Degrada, Intermezzi del Settecento (Milan: Ricordi, 1985), xlv–xlix.

14 In setting this passage to music, Domenico Scarlatti did not underline the difference between Dirindina's performance and Liscione and Carissimo's comments (for instance by setting the former in obbligato recitative and the latter in secco). On the contrary, the composer blended fiction and reality by resorting to simple recitative for the entire passage. Another version of the same text, with music by Giovanni Battista Martini (Bologna, 1737), adopts the same solution.

15 *Giulio Sabino, dramma per musica* by Giuseppe Sarti to a libretto by Pietro Giovannini (Venice, Teatro San Benedetto, 1781). Sarti's opera was so successful that the full score was published in Vienna in 1781 (a fact rather unusual for the time). *Giulio Sabino* was revived in Vienna in 1785, with the famous castrato Luigi Marchesi in the title role. In this production, however, several numbers were replaced by those of other composers (Salieri among them), to the point that *Giulio Sabino* became a pasticcio. See John A. Rice, *Antonio Salieri and the Viennese Opera* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 379.



*Ele.* No, no, lasciate stare: in questa scena  
Molto più necessaria è l'azione.  
*Poe.* E l'accompagnamento si suppone.<sup>16</sup>

*Ele.* The two of you will act as the children. [...] *Maestro:* you, too, come here. | *Mae.* But who will accompany? | *Ele.* Never mind: in this scene action is the most important thing. | *Poe.* The accompaniment will be imagined.

In order not to give up the accompaniment altogether, especially during those bars in which the voice is silent and the orchestra alone would play, Maestro supplies the accompaniment by singing the violin part in falsetto (Example 1). By filling the gap, Maestro avoids an even more paradoxical solution: the real-life audience would have to imagine complete silence on stage when the *virtuosa* is not singing, and yet hear the orchestra play those 'silent' bars – perhaps something too implausible even for experienced opera-goers.

Adagio

Ele. *Ca-ri og-get-ti del mio co-re, io mai più non vi ve-*

Poe. - - - -

Mae. - - - -

*pp*

5

Ele. - - - -

Poe. *drò...*

Mae. *Falsetto mancando*  
*La, la, la, la, la, la, la, la, la, la, la, la, la, la*

*f mancando p*

*Ele.* Dear objects of my love, I will never see you again. | *Mae.* La, la, la ...

Example 1 'Cari oggetti del mio core', bars 1–7, from Antonio Salieri, *Prima la musica, poi le parole: Divertimento teatrale in einem Akt von Giambattista Casti*, vocal score by Friedrich Wanek, German translation by Josef Heinzelmann (Mainz: Schotts Söhne, 1972), 56. Used by permission

<sup>16</sup> Giambattista Casti, 'Prima la musica poi le parole', in *La cantante e l'impresario e altri metamelodrammi*, ed. Francesca Savoia (Genoa: Costa & Nolan, 1988), 246. Translations are mine unless otherwise specified.



What is interesting in this example is that, whereas during the cavatina ‘Pensieri funesti’ the orchestra played music that represented Maestro’s harpsichord accompaniment (heard by the characters), in the second number (the *rondò* ‘Cari oggetti’, in which no realistic accompaniment is played) the orchestra *we* hear represents the ‘real’ music that is absent (or, perhaps, the music that the characters hear with their minds’ ears). In similar cases, the presence of the orchestra underlines the simultaneous existence of two different realities: ‘Cari oggetti’ is *at the same time* the rehearsed aria of *Giulio Sabino* (and as such has no instrumental accompaniment at all at this point of the fictional rehearsal) *and* a real (performed on stage) aria of *Prima la musica* (where at this point it does have an orchestral accompaniment).

As we begin to see, the duality peculiar to spoken metadrama – the more or less extended presence of different degrees of fiction – is reflected in meta-opera in the complex nature of the musical scores.

### IDEAL VERSUS PERFORMANCE SCORE

Most of the realistic singing in meta-opera takes place during fictional rehearsals or auditions. On these occasions, the *virtuosi* exhibit their abilities by performing in front of a small audience (the other characters on stage), but very often they do not manage to finish their pieces, as they are interrupted by their spectators’ comments, laughter, requests and so on. In these cases, an important distinction is to be drawn between the piece’s ‘original’ or ‘ideal’ form – the piece as we would find it in its imaginary score (that is, in its entirety) – and the form in which it is recorded in the only score we have, the actual score of the meta-opera (with its interruptions, repetitions and incompleteness). In order to analyse the latter, we need first to reconstitute the former in our imaginations.

In the intermezzo *L’impresario delle Canarie* (libretto by Pietro Metastasio and music by Domenico Sarro; Naples, Teatro San Bartolomeo, 1724) the *virtuosa* Dorina, after having listed the usual excuses for not singing (a cold, the spinet out of tune and so on), finally agrees to perform an aria to Nibbio (the impresario) while accompanying herself at the spinet. While she sings her number, however, Nibbio continuously butts in with comments on the performance:

Dor. *Amor prepara...*  
 Nib.                    Oh cara!  
 Dor. *Le mie catene...*  
 Nib.                    Oh bene!  
 Dor. *Ch’io voglio perdere*  
       *La libertà...*  
 Nib. Bel trillo in verità!  
       Che dolce appoggiatura!  
       È un miracolo, è un mostro di natura.  
 Dor. *Tu m’imprigiona...*  
 Nib.                    Oh buona!  
 Dor. *Di lacci priva...*  
 Nib.                    Evviva!  
 Dor. *No, che più vivere*  
       *L’alma non sa.*  
 Nib. Da capo, in verità.<sup>17</sup>

*Dor. Come, love, prepare... | Nib. O dear! | Dor. Thy chains divine... | Nib. O fine! | Dor. To thee my freedom I resign... | Nib. How round a shake; how sweet a beat was there! A wonder! Prodigy of*

17 In the score it is ‘Da capo in carità’ (*‘da capo, please’*). Pietro Metastasio, ‘L’impresario delle Canarie: intermezzi per la Didone’, in *Tutte le opere di Pietro Metastasio*, ed. Bruno Brunelli (Milan: Mondadori, 1953), volume 1, 58.





nature! | *Dor.* You still possess me... | *Nib.* O bless me! | *Dor.* Tho' from my fetters freed... | *Nib.* That's fine indeed! | *Dor.* Nor can I end, but with my life, my pain. | *Nib.* Ah! For heaven's sake! That! That again! Dear creature.<sup>18</sup>

The text of the ideal represented aria can be extracted from that of its performance as we have it, and is composed of two quatrains of *quinari*:

*Amor prepara  
Le mie catene,  
Ch'io voglio perdere  
La libertà*

*Tu m'imprigiona,  
Di lacci priva,  
No, che più vivere  
L'alma non sa.*

The addition of Nibbio's comments dismantles this original text and inserts it into a new text of a different metrical structure. The ideal lyrical passage (two quatrains of *quinari*) is thus embedded into what could be seen as a passage in recitative verse (with a bit of stretching, it can fit both *settenari* and *endecasillabi*). Despite the impresario's interjections, however, both text and music of the aria sung by Dorina are still clearly recognizable within the resulting number (Example 2).<sup>19</sup>

At this point in the score of *L'impresario delle Canarie*, we can discern two different numbers, or, better, a number containing another number from the framed work: 'Amor prepara... – Oh cara!' includes, broken into pieces, the aria 'Amor prepara'. The continuous conflict between Dorina's aria in 6/4 and Nibbio's interjections in 3/4 shows the tension between the embedded aria and the number that results from the aria and the interjections combined.<sup>20</sup>

As hinted above, we need to bear in mind the double nature of these meta-representations. When a drama is performed within another framing one, the latter does not disappear. Rather, a continuous dialectic is established between the two: the inset narrative may be brought to the foreground while the framing one is left in the background or vice versa. Meta-operatic scores mirror this narrative process: when realistic music is performed, the music that supports the entire opera is still there – it may be confined to the background for a while, but does not go away. The conflict arises when the two levels of fiction (and of music) are brought to the foreground at the same time, and fixed (or recorded) within the same closed number, with occasionally paradoxical results (such as the metrical shifts mentioned above).

The fact that meta-operatic scores often represent the fictional performance of a piece rather than presenting the piece itself can also be seen by variations between one performance and the next of a given passage. For example, in Act 2 Scene 6 of the opera buffa *L'opera seria* (libretto by Ranieri de' Calzabigi and music by Florian Leopold Gassmann; Vienna, Burgtheater, 1769) all characters gather at the impresario's residence to rehearse the third act of the fictional opera seria *L'Oranzebe*. Although there is no mention in the libretto of the presence of an orchestra on site (which would be unlikely anyway), all of a sudden the *maestro di musica* Sospiro addresses the orchestral musicians directly, explaining to them how to perform the

18 English translation from the libretto: Pietro Metastasio, *The Master of the Opera: An Interlude*. Performed by Sig. Anna Maria Faini, and Signor Antonio Lottini, at the King's Theatre in the Hay-Market. The Musick Is Composed by Sig. Domenico Sarri (London: J. Chrichley, 1737).

19 Transcribed from the manuscript score held at the Conservatorio San Pietro a Majella in Naples. The parts copied are voice and continuo only. In the transcription, I have kept the incongruities found in the score (the time signature and all time changes throughout) because they are linked to the way in which the score has been created: they underline a continuous conflict between Dorina's aria in 6/4 and Nibbio's interjections in 3/4.

20 The words uttered by Nibbio at the end of Dorina's B section ('Da capo in verità') provide an interesting meta-reference to the actual form of the da capo aria.





Dor. Nib.

*A - mor pre - pa - ra... Oh*

4 Dor. Nib. Dor.

*ca - ra! le mi - e ca - te - ne... Oh be - ne! ch'io vo - glio per - de - re la*

7 *li - ber - tà,*

9 *—ch'io vo - glio per - de - re la li - ber - tà, a - mor pre pa - ra le —*

12 *—mie ca - te - ne ch'io vo - glio per - de - re la li - ber - tà, —*

15 *—ch'io vo - glio per - de - re la li - ber - tà, la —*

Example 2 'Amor prepara - Oh cara', from Domenico Sarro, *Dorina e Nibbio (L'impresario delle Canarie)* (1724), Naples, Biblioteca del Conservatorio San Pietro a Majella, Ms. 31.3.19, 71v-72



18 **[Fine]** *tr* Nib.

li - ber - tà. Bel tril-lo in-ve ri-tà! Che dol-ce ap-pog-gia-tu- ra! È un mi

21

ra-co-lo, è un mo-stro di na - tu - ra.

26 *Dor.* Nib. *Dor.* *3* Nib. *Dor.*

Tu m'im pri - gio - na... Oh buo na! di lac - ci pri- va... Ev - vi va! no che più

31

vi-ve-re l'al - - - ma non sa, no che più

34

vi - ve - re l'al - - - ma non

36 Nib. **D.C. [al Fine]**

sa, l'al - - ma non sa. Da ca-po in ca - ri - tà.

Example 2 continued



number that is about to be rehearsed (a duet). Delirio (the poet) and Stonatrilla (the prima donna) find Sospiro’s instructions excessive:

Sosp.	Al duo. Vi raccomando	( <i>all’orchestra</i> )
	Nella prima battuta	
	Quel forte. L’andamento	
	Va con arco legato.	
Del.	(Che impostura!)	( <i>a Sto.</i> )
Sto.	(Per due note fecciose	
	Quante vane parole	
	Dice.)	( <i>a Del.</i> )
Sosp.	Voglio sentir quelle viole. <sup>21</sup>	

*Sosp.* And now to the duet. Please (*to the orchestra*), in the first bar mind that *forte*. You have to play with legato bows. | *Del.* (What a fraud!) (*to Sto.*) | *Sto.* (For two stupid notes he says so many useless words!) (*to Del.*) | *Sosp.* I want to hear those violas.

After these few lines, the duet begins. What in the libretto appears as a brief remark (‘in the first bar mind that *forte*. You have to play with legato bows’) is in the score transformed into a lesson on phrasing: after Sospiro has asked the strings to play with ‘arco legato’, the violins begin the instrumental introduction to the duet playing ‘negligentement’ (carelessly); Sospiro, dissatisfied with this execution, interrupts them (‘No, no, no...’) and sings the passage as he would like it to be played (Example 3, bars 1–4).<sup>22</sup> Delirio and Stonatrilla intervene with their comments in recitative; the strings play the first two bars of the introduction again, with the violins following Sospiro’s directions (bars 7–8); but the *maestro* is still not fully satisfied (‘I want to hear those violas’).

The duet is finally performed from the beginning. This time, the violins carefully follow Sospiro’s directions and the violas play *fortissimo* (Sospiro wanted to ‘hear’ them), but the passage differs substantially from the two heard before (see Example 4). The differences are not a matter of phrasing, but involve a complete rewriting: in the second bar the semiquavers have passed from the violas to the second violins, while the violas (and the bass) join the rhythm of the horns.

What score do the fictional instrumentalists addressed by Sospiro have in front of them? Have they ignored a (written) opening acciaccatura because they play ‘negligentement’ (Example 3, bar 1), or is it an expressive touch added by the maestro during the rehearsal (Example 3, bar 3)? The same question could be asked of the reverse-dotted rhythm: is it notated but not played the first time round because of negligence, or is it added by Sospiro as a performance indication? Should this passage be taken as a document of some eighteenth-century performance practice?

Be that as it may, the violins get both right (acciaccatura and rhythm) at once. As for the *forte* in the first bar, we *know* they had it in their score from the beginning (‘Nella prima battuta *quel forte*’), and its absence in their first reading (Example 3, bar 1) is no doubt a result of their ‘negligenza’ and a further confirmation of the difference between what we see and what the fictional performers of *L’Oranzebe* have in front of them on their stands. What we see here is in fact the representation of a performance: those details suggest to the (real-life) spectators that the fictional performance becomes less negligent, more accurate and more

21 Ranieri de’ Calzabigi, ‘L’opera seria, comedia per musica’, facsimile of the 1769 libretto in *Italian Opera Librettos, 1640–1770*, volume 15, *Italian Opera, 1640–1770*, volume 96 (New York: Garland, 1984).

22 It is quite amusing that, in the bit added by Gassmann’s setting, Sospiro uses typical musician’s syllables, moving from ‘ta’ to ‘tra’ on the emphatic *e*<sup>2</sup> that marks the passage from *dolce* to *forte* – a syllable that the violins will ‘interpret’ as an emphatic chord. All music examples of *L’opera seria* are transcribed from the facsimile of the manuscript score published in Florian Leopold Gassmann, *L’opera seria*, Introduction by Eric Weimer, *Italian Opera, 1640–1770*, volume 89 (New York: Garland, 1982). In examples 6, 7 and 8, only the voice and the continuo parts are given.



The image displays three systems of musical notation for a vocal and instrumental ensemble. The first system (bars 1-3) features a Soprano (Sos.) line with lyrics 'No, no, no, no. Ta ta ta trai ta'. The vocal line includes dynamic markings *dolce* and *f*. The instrumental parts include Violin I and II (Vln. I, II) and Viola (Vla.), with the instruction *Negligentemente* for the violins. The second system (bars 4-6) shows the vocal line with lyrics 'ta. (Che im-po-stu ra!) (Per due no - te fec-cio-se quan-te va-ne pa-ro-le di-ce.)'. The instrumental parts are mostly rests. The third system (bars 7-10) shows the vocal line with lyrics 'Vo-glio sen-tirquel-le vi - o - le.' and a *p* dynamic marking for the Viola part.

Example 3 'No, no, no', bars 1–10, from Florian Leopold Gassmann, *L'opera seria*, Introduction by Eric Weimer, Italian Opera, 1640–1770, volume 89 (New York: Garland, 1982), transcribed from the facsimile edition of the manuscript score held at the Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Vienna, Ms. 17775, 275–276

expressive as the rehearsal goes on. Once again, the stratified nature of meta-opera is not confined to its dramatic plot, but is also reflected in its musical dimension: in the score we have, two 'realities' (the imaginary score and its fictional performance) cohabit and at times overlap in complex ways.

#### MUSICO-DRAMATIC FORMS

Meta-opera also achieves both wit and critical sharpness by undermining the musico-dramatic forms of conventional eighteenth-century Italian opera seria and buffa, such as the normal succession of recitatives and closed numbers. This is especially the case when metatheatrical procedures lead to the overlapping of different levels of the operatic discourse, levels that are usually kept strictly separate in terms of their technical features and their musico-dramatic function.

Example 4 shows a musical score for the second version of Gassmann's *L'opera seria*, bars 1–3. The score is in G major and 3/4 time, marked 'Larghetto'. It features six staves: Oboe (Ob.), French Horn in G (Fr. Hn. in G), Trombone (Sto.), Trumpet (Rit.), Violin I & II (Vln. I, II), and Viola (Vla.). The Oboe and Violin I & II parts have a prominent melodic line with a circled section. The Viola part has a strong bass line starting with *ff*. Dynamic markings include *f*, *p*, and *ff*.

Example 4 Gassmann, *L'opera seria*, 276, bars 1–3 (second version)

The first variation on standard practices prompted by the presence of realistic music can be observed within closed numbers. One interesting example is in the opera buffa *L'amore in musica* (music by Antonio Boroni to a text by an unknown librettist; Venice, Teatro San Moisè, 1763). In Act 1 Scene 4 Calandra, mother of the *virtuosa* Reginella, in praising her daughter's singing skills, 'quotes' (mangling all the words) from one aria by Metastasio (or 'Metanasio', as the fictional maestro di cappella later calls him), receiving the compliments of another character, Anselmo:<sup>23</sup>

Cal. È la fede degli amanti  
 Come l'ebora pernice,  
 Che ci sia, nessun lo dice,  
 Dove stia ciascun lo sa.<sup>24</sup>  
 Quest'aria la mia figlia  
 La canta a meraviglia,  
 Ed è la verità.

Ans. Brava, brava davvero.<sup>25</sup>

23 Cromatico (maestro di cappella): 'Quel poeta famoso... Metanasio' ('That famous poet... Metanasio') (Act 1 Scene 8).

24 The original aria is in Metastasio's *Demetrio* (1731), and the 'real' first quatrain reads: 'È la fede degli amanti | Come l'araba fenice: | Che vi sia, ciascun lo dice; | Dove sia, nessun lo sa' (Act 2 Scene 3) ('True faith, in love, we may compare, to that Arabian Phoenix rare, said to exist, tho' none knows where.'). Pietro Metastasio, *Demetrius: An Opera. As Perform'd at the Theatre Royal in the Hay-Market* (London: J. Chrichley, 1737). Italics are added here to distinguish the *ottonari* from the *settenari*.

25 *L'amore in musica, dramma giocoso da rappresentarsi nel teatro Giustiniani di San Moisè* (Venice: Francesco Valvasense, 1763), 10.



*Cal. Faith in love is like the Eborian Partridge: no-one claims that it exists, though everyone knows where it is found. My daughter sings this aria wonderfully, it's the truth. | Ans. Good, very good.*

This aria text contains two parts. The *ottonari* represent a fictional aria text, the *settenari* Calandra's comments on it. From looking at the text alone, however, it is impossible to know whether Calandra will imitate her daughter by singing (that is, 'performing' the fictional aria), or will simply quote from its text (therefore 'speaking' throughout). Only the score indicates what will happen on stage: see Example 5.<sup>26</sup>

As the musical setting clearly indicates, Calandra sings the first stanza (with a parody of *seria* style, especially in the long, farcical cadenza on the vowel 'u', ridiculously awkward to sing), and then she speaks in the second part, where the music continues in *secco recitativo*.<sup>27</sup> The setting in simple recitative of the second stanza of the aria is quite unexpected because it takes place within a set piece, to a text in *versi lirici*. (It is important to note, however, that *settenari* are a hybrid type of verse, at home both in *versi sciolti* and in *versi lirici*: many examples of *versi lirici* set as *secco recitativo* appear in correspondence with *settenari*, exploiting precisely this ambivalence.) The choice of setting the second stanza of Calandra's aria as recitative is quite unconventional, a sign of the increased flexibility in the treatment of set pieces prompted by dramaturgical motivations – in this case the presence of a performance within a performance and the consequent need to differentiate musically the two moments, that of 'fiction' and that of 'real life'.

Various examples of unusual solutions in the musical setting when realistic music is present are found in *L'opera seria*. The character Ritornello (*primo musico*) makes his first appearance in Act 1 Scene 7, entering the impresario's house while singing the aria 'Benché da te lontano' to himself. Before the end of the aria he notices the presence of two other characters, Smorfiosa and Porporina, and greets them. Ritornello's aria represents his performance of most of a song addressed to 'Clori' (the pastoral name of a nymph who is the protagonist of many cantatas) by a faraway lover. Interestingly, the last two lines of the aria's second stanza do not belong in the song for Clori, but express Ritornello's real-life surprise in realizing that he is not alone in the house:

*Rit. Benché da te lontano  
Clori mio dolce amor;  
La tua leggiadra imagine  
Impressa nel mio cor,  
Fedel conservo.*

*Invan paventi, invano,  
Ch'un altro affetto un di...  
Bellezze! Oh siete qui!  
Vostro umil servo.*<sup>28</sup>

*Rit. Although far away from you, Clori, my sweet love, I faithfully keep your graceful image engraved in my heart. In vain do you fear that one day another love... Beauties! Ah, you are here! I'm your humble servant.*

In terms of content, these last two lines take us back to (and represent) ordinary speech. In terms of versification, however, they still belong to the text of Ritornello's aria, as they are a *settenario* and a *quinario*

<sup>26</sup> This music example is my transcription from a manuscript copy of the score held at the Conservatorio San Pietro a Majella in Naples. I have transcribed only the voice line and the continuo, not the string parts.

<sup>27</sup> It is interesting to compare this setting with that of a later (and more famous) misquotation of the same Metastasian quatrain, near the beginning of Mozart's *Così fan tutte* (Vienna, Burgtheater, 1790). There, the original text is only slightly altered (Don Alfonso provocatively says 'femine' – women – instead of 'amanti') and the situation suggests that Don Alfonso is speaking or, better, declaiming those words, not singing them. (This is a rare case in which the characters on stage *perceive* the words as spoken *verse*.)

<sup>28</sup> Calzabigi, 'L'opera seria'.



**Larghetto**

Cal.

È la fe-de de - gli a - man-ti co-me l'e - bo - ra per - ni-ce, co - me l'e - bo - ra per

7

- ni - ce: che vi si-a nes - sun lo di-ce, do-ve stia cia-scun lo sa, \_\_\_\_\_ cia - scun, cia - scun lo

13

sa. È la fe-de de - gli a-man-ti co-me l'e - bo - ra per - ni-ce, co-me

19

l'e - bo - ra per - ni - ce: che vi sia nes - sun lo di-ce, do-ve stia cia scun lo sa, \_\_\_\_\_

25

\_\_\_\_\_ cia - scun \_\_\_\_\_ lo sa. Que-st'a-ria la mia

31

Ans.

fi-glia la can-ta-me-ra - vi-glia ed è la ve-ri - tà Bra-va, bra-va dav-ve - ro.

Example 5 'È la fede degli amanti', from Antonio Boroni, *L'amore in musica* (1764), Naples, Biblioteca del Conservatorio San Pietro a Majella, Ms. 25.6.8–10, 61v–64

perfectly integrated with the preceding text (the *settenario* rhymes with the *settenario* of the previous line, and the *quinario* rhymes with the *quinario* concluding the first stanza). Combined, however, these last two lines can also be read as an *endecasillabo* (that is, as part of a recitative). In other words, the text of the second stanza above could also have appeared this way:





*Invan paventi, invano  
Ch'un altro affetto un di...  
Bellezze! Oh siete qui! Vostro umil servo.*

The beginning of Ritornello's song is given in Example 6. Towards the end of the number, at the words 'Bellezze, Oh! siete qui', the song is interrupted and there is a change in texture (see Example 7). The lyrical form dissolves; the words are set syllabically in a declamatory, broken style that brings this passage closer to simple recitative, setting it apart from the expressivity of the song for Clori.

This change of musical style reflects the dramaturgical passage from the fictional performance of the song to the addressing of the other characters. (The change, therefore, is similar to that found in Example 5, from *L'amore in musica*.) After the moment of surprise, however, Ritornello returns to a sort of (mock-)opera-seria aria style to conclude his performance (Example 8). One wonders whether the other characters hear Ritornello sing throughout, or hear him speak during the last two lines. The setting seems to suggest that

8 Cantabile

Rit.

Ben - ché da te lon - ta - no

12

Rit.

Clo - ri mio dol - ce a - mor, Clo - ri mio dol ce a mor,

Example 6 'Benché da te lontano', bars 8–15, from Gassmann, *L'opera seria*, 105–106

31

Rit.

In van pa - ven - ti, in - va - no, pa - ven - ti, in - va - no, ch'un al - - tro af - fet - to un di, ch'un al - - tro af - fet - to...Bel - lez - ze! Oh, oh sie - te qui! Sie - te qui!

Example 7 'Benché da te lontano', bars 31–38, from Gassmann, *L'opera seria*, 108–110



39

Rit.

43

Rit.

tr

tr

f

ff

Example 8 'Benché da te lontano', bars 39–47, from Gassmann, *L'opera seria*, 110

after the moment of surprise – in which he is more likely to speak – he jokingly sings to his colleagues the words 'I'm your humble servant'.

Thus some confusion of musico-dramatic levels takes place within this number: whereas most of Ritornello's aria is a performance of the original song for Clori (with its static emotional contemplation), its last two lines (and their setting) break the lyrical parenthesis in order to carry on with the dramatic action, as Ritornello returns to (his) real life and directly addresses the other characters on stage. This number, like that from *L'amore in musica*, therefore seems to work across the conventional oppositions recitative/closed number, 'real-life'/'performed' and 'spoken'/'sung': the musical settings of texts in *versi lirici* move from lyrical passages to more declamatory ones in order to reflect the distinction between different layers of 'reality' present in the plot.

#### MULTI-SECTIONAL STRUCTURES

The alternation of contrasting musico-dramatic modes we have observed within closed numbers can sometimes extend to occupy longer portions of meta-operas, which display a multi-sectional structure constituted by a sequence of truncated set pieces interspersed with recitative. This usually occurs when the fictional singers rehearse or audition their pieces in front of other characters, who often interrupt the performance.

An interesting example is in *Prima la musica*, in which the whole of Scene 2 is composed of fragments of potentially closed numbers alternating with passages of secco recitative. As we have seen above, Poeta and Maestro are auditioning Donna Eleonora, who sings the cavatina 'Pensieri funesti'. After a few bars, however, she is interrupted by Poeta, who asks her for more expression, singing the passage himself (see Example 9):<sup>29</sup>

- Ele. *Pensieri funesti*  
*Ah no, non tornate!*  
*Per poco lasciate*  
*In pace il mio cor...*
- Poe. Scusi: mi par che si dovia dar qui  
 Maggior espression.

29 Music examples are taken from Antonio Salieri, *Prima la musica, poi le parole: Divertimento teatrale in einem Akt von Giambattista Casti*, vocal score by Friedrich Wanek, German translation by Josef Heinzlmann (Mainz: Schott, 1972).



*Ele.* Come?  
*Poe.* Così:  
*Ah no, non tornate!*  
*Pensieri funesti.*  
*Ele.* Chi è questo sguaiato?<sup>30</sup>

*Ele.* *Ah no, sorrowful thoughts, do not come back, leave for a while my heart in peace.* | *Poe.* Excuse me, but I think that here one should give more expression. | *Ele.* How? | *Poe.* Like this: *Ah, no, sorrowful thoughts do not come back.* | *Ele.* Who is this boisterous man?

The action goes on in simple recitative until Eleonora is requested by Maestro to sing a bravura aria with its opening recitative. She starts by singing the accompanied recitative 'Non dubitar verrò' ('Doubt not, I'll come'). At the end of it, she is interrupted once again by Poeta because he has spotted some nonsense in the text. The poet is shushed by the other two characters and the singer moves on to the aria 'Là tu vedrai chi sono'. A new interference by Poeta leaves the aria incomplete:

*Ele.* *Là tu vedrai chi sono,*  
*No, non ti parlo invano;*  
*Fatale è questa mano;*  
*Forse chi men la teme,*  
*Più ne dovrà tremar.*  
*Poe.* Oibò, oibò!  
*Mae.* Cos'è?  
*Poe.* Ho sentito una brutta alamirè.<sup>31</sup>

*Ele.* *You will see who I am, no, I'm not talking to you in vain; this hand is fatal; perhaps the one who fears it less, will tremble at it more.* | *Poe.* Tut-tut! | *Mae.* What is it? | *Poe.* I've heard a bad alamirè.

The long section of the aria sung before the interruption concludes on the dominant. We never hear the rest of it (with the presumed return to the tonic). Rather, the action goes on in simple recitative.

The audition continues and Donna Eleonora wants to perform a scena in which Sabino, condemned to death, bids his wife and children farewell. In order to perform it properly, she asks Poeta and Maestro to act as the silent children. Two more characters (Epponina and Annio) will be impersonated by two chairs. Eleonora begins to sing the opening adagio of her number (a *rondò*) 'Cari oggetti del mio core', but has to stop in the middle of her very first sentence: the 'children' are too tall and she cannot embrace them (see Example 10):

*Ele.* *Cari oggetti del mio core...*  
*Così non è possibil ch'io v'abbracci.*  
*Voi siete due cosacci,*  
*Ritti come due pali, e lunghi,*  
*lunghi...*<sup>32</sup>

*Ele.* *Dear objects of my love... I cannot embrace you in this position. You are two odd contraptions, standing there like two poles and tall, tall...*

30 Casti, 'Prima la musica poi le parole', 244.

31 'Alamirè' indicates the pitch 'a' in the hexachordal system. Casti, 'Prima la musica poi le parole', 245.

32 Casti, 'Prima la musica poi le parole', 247.



7 **[Larghetto]**

Ele. *Ah, no, non tor - na - te! Fu - ne - sti pen -*

Poe. *sie - ri...*

Co-si: *mi par che si do-vria dar qui mag-gior e-spres-si - o - ne.*

11

Ele. *Co-me?*

Poe. *Co-si: Ah no, non tor - na - te fu -*

14

Ele. *Chi è que-sto sgu - ia - to?*

Poe. *ne - sti pen - sie - ri.*

The musical score is presented in three systems. Each system contains three staves: a vocal line for Eleonora (Ele.), a bass line for Poeta (Poe.), and a piano accompaniment. The key signature is three flats (B-flat, E-flat, A-flat) and the time signature is common time (C). The tempo is marked [Larghetto]. The score includes dynamic markings such as *sf* (sforzando) and *p* (piano). The lyrics are written below the vocal lines, with some words split across bar lines. The piano accompaniment features a rhythmic pattern of eighth and sixteenth notes.

Example 9 'Pensieri funesti', bars 7–19, from Salieri, *Prima la musica*, 36–37



Adagio

Ele. 

4 Recitativo

Ele. 

6

Ele. 

Example 10 'Cari oggetti del mio core', bars 1–7, from Salieri, *Prima la musica*, 54

After having repositioned the two 'children', Eleonora starts the piece again from the beginning. Poeta and Maestro intervene in the instrumental coda, complaining about the uncomfortable position they have to hold. This remark obviously interrupts the performance, and the 'number' slips into five bars of secco recitative in which Eleonora orders the two to keep quiet (Example 11).

*Ele.* *io morirò.*  
*Poe./Mae.* Ed io qui mi storpiarò.  
*Ele.* Se non tacete, io più cantar non posso.  
*Mae.* Mi scappa fuori un osso.  
*Poe.* La cintola si strappa.  
*Ele.* Eh non si strappa, no; no, che non scappa!<sup>33</sup>

*Ele.* I will die. | *Poe./Mae.* And I will become crippled. | *Ele.* If you don't shut up, I cannot sing. | *Mae.* A bone is about to come out! | *Poe.* My belt is about to tear! | *Ele.* Don't worry, it won't come out, it won't tear!

The adagio resumes; Poeta and Maestro quickly leave their positions in order to give voice to Annio and Epponina (the two chairs), who briefly reply to Eleonora/Sabino. Then the two resume their role as children. The scene is so comically unrealistic that Eleonora herself breaks into recitative saying: 'Siete per verità due gran buffoni' ('You are two real jesters': bars 26–27, not shown).

33 Casti, 'Prima la musica poi le parole', 247.



Recitativo

10

Ele. *Io mo - ri - rò. Se non ta-cc-te, io più can-tar non pos-so.*

Poe. *Ed io qui mi stor-pie - rò.*

Mae. *Ed io qui mi stor-pie - rò. Mi*

14

Ele. *La cin - to - la si strap - pa.*

Poe. *scap - pa fuo - ri un os - so.*

Mae. *Eh non si strap - pa no, no che non scap - pa.*

16

Ele. *Eh non si strap - pa no, no che non scap - pa.*

Poe. *Eh non si strap - pa no, no che non scap - pa.*

Mae. *Eh non si strap - pa no, no che non scap - pa.*

*f*

Example 11 'Cari oggetti del mio core', bars 10–17, from Salieri, *Prima la musica*, 57

The second part of the *rondò* is an allegro. Eleonora is now too deeply absorbed in her character to care about Poeta's and Maestro's complaints. In this section we do not find any interruption in simple recitative; instead, the first level of fiction (the uncomfortable presence of Poeta and Maestro) is completely integrated into the texture of the *seria* piece. The effect is comic (see Example 12):

Ele. *Qual abisso è questo mai!*

Mae. *Per pietà, finisca omai!*



30 Allegro

Ele. *Qual a - bis - so è que - sto ma - i!*

Mae. *Per pic - tà fi - ni - sca o -*

33

Ele. *Sie - - - te*

Mae. *ma - i!*

35

Ele. *pa - ghi av - ver - si De - i! Sie - te pa - ghi!*

Mae. *Gran sec - ca - ta ch'è co - ste - i.*

Example 12 'Qual abisso è questo mai!', bars 10–17, from Salieri, *Prima la musica*, 60

Ele. *Siete paghi, avversi Dei?*  
 Poe. *Gran seccata ch'è costei!*<sup>34</sup>

*Ele.* What is this abyss!... | *Mae.* For pity's sake, stop now! | *Ele.* Are you satisfied, hostile gods? | *Poe.* What a pain she is!

Later, Maestro and Poeta sing a short melody in response to Eleonora; the expression of their suffering produces a disjunction between the serious style of her piece and the overall situation itself: the libretto

34 Casti, 'Prima la musica poi le parole', 248.





40

Ele. Com - pa - ti - te i ca - si mie - i, com - pian - ge - te il mio do -

Poe. - - - - -

Mac. - - - - -

44

Ele. lor.

Poe. Com - pa - ti - te il no - stro an - cor.

Mac. Com - pa - ti - te il no - stro an - cor.

Example 13 'Compatite i casi miei', bars 40–46, from Salieri, *Prima la musica*, 61

ironically sets the deep sorrow for Sabino, who is going to die, against the pain of these two comic figures, forced to hold an uncomfortable posture (see Example 13):

*Ele.* *Compatite i casi miei,*  
*Compiangete il mio dolor...*  
*Poe./Mae.* *Compiangete il nostro ancor!*<sup>35</sup>

*Ele.* *Pity me in my misery, in my pain.* | *Poe./Mae.* *Pity us in ours, too!*

The comic climax is achieved when the two, not able to hold their postures any longer, fall – one forwards, the other backwards. The number ends with poet and composer singing Sabino's tune 'Compatite i casi miei' ('Pity me in my misery'), begging for compassion for their aching back and nose, thus distorting with their coda the situation depicted in the aria (see Example 14):

*Mae.* *Compiangete il dorso mio,*  
*Che si è fatto un bel tumor.*

35 Casti, 'Prima la musica poi le parole', 248.



Example 14 'Compiangete il dorso mio', bars 89–100, from Salieri, *Prima la musica*, 65–66

Poe. Compiangete il naso mio,  
Che se è intero, è uno stupor.

Mae. Have pity on my back, which now has a nice lump. | Poe. Have pity on my nose: it's a miracle if it's still in one piece.

Once again the overlap of first and second level of fiction no longer determines an interruption of the performance of Eleonora's piece. Rather, the interjections from Poeta and Maestro are completely integrated into the flow of her fictional performance, interwoven with the music of Sabino's *seria* number.

As the long Scene 2 from *Prima la musica* shows, the relatively free alternation of lyrical passages and recitatives observed within closed numbers can be extended to larger portions of meta-operas, thus creating multi-sectional passages that look quite different from the structures found in contemporary opera. These passages fulfil an important function: opera buffa is generally considered to have greater verisimilitude than opera seria, not only for its settings and plots from everyday life, but also for its musical structures – especially the ensemble pieces, which can picture different events and reactions occurring at the same time. The multi-sectional passages from meta-opera discussed above are, in this sense, highly mimetic: they



provide a vivid and close theatrical representation of what could happen during rehearsals (or auditions), with people interrupting each other to comment on and judge the performances. The fundamental characteristic of these passages – their flexible use (and abuse) of operatic practices – produces a high degree of mimesis on stage. By bypassing the conventional obligation to distinguish between recitative and closed numbers, these sections provide a type of representation in which the flow of the action is remarkably close to reality.

The presence of realistic music can fulfil a number of different functions in meta-operatic scores, and its analysis can help us unravel some of the mechanisms at work in this repertoire. The ambivalence of the operatic medium – the continuity between music and 'music' to the spectator's ear – can be exploited in order to enhance the confusion between different levels of fiction, a confusion on which so many meta-theatrical works play.

Meta-operatic scores take part in the narrative stratification typical of metatheatre, and we can use realistic music to detect the simultaneous presence of different types of musical performance, pertaining to both the framing opera and the embedded piece. We can stress the duality of the music by pointing at a series of incongruities found in the score and related to its nature: in those passages in which realistic music is played, meta-operatic scores offer the representation of a particular performance of a piece, and not the piece in any 'original' form that one might imagine. All these examples provide meaningful insights into the way in which meta-operatic scores function: realistic music does not make the rest of the music disappear, as one may think, but engages with it in a continuous dialectic.

Furthermore, the presence of a performance within a performance increases the complexity of the medium, encouraging a relaxation in the syntactical articulation of the musico-dramatic structures of opera. Dramaturgical reasons justify the unusual passage within closed number from realistic to non-realistic music, which produces set pieces that overcome the standard oppositions between recitative and closed number, 'real-life' and 'performed', 'spoken' and 'sung'. In longer passages, this relative flexibility provides a living and realistic picture of the passing of time.

In all these cases, purely musical means can be used to underline the presence of more than one layer of reality – music can go above and beyond the dramatic narrative itself in delineating or dissolving the imaginary fourth wall between embedded and embedding representations. Thus the complex nature of meta-operatic scores and their musico-dramatic structures can be seen to be a full match for the complexity of their librettos, along with all their multi-layered plots and the games they play with dramatic conventions and levels of fiction.