

When Singers Come from the Sea. Some Remarks on Coastal Theatres and Their Management

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Abstract: This article aims to shed light on opera management in coastal theatres taking as an example the case of Istrian and Dalmatian institutions at the turn of the twentieth century. Where did the impresarios come from? How did the singers and the companies reach the coast and what were the main routes on land? Was there a consolidated network between theatre directors and impresarios in hiring artistic staff? The study of the production system behind the performances reveals a dense layer of underlying relationships between theatre management, publishers, singers, and musicians in the analysed theatres.

Keywords: Istrian and Dalmatian theatres, opera production, opera business, impresarios, management

This article aims to shed light on opera management in coastal theatres taking as an example the case of Istria and Dalmatia at the turn of the twentieth century. The archival material collected so far from Rijeka to Dubrovnik, through Zadar, Šibenik and Split, allows us to reconstruct, at least partially, the circuits of the major opera companies and the relationships between impresarios and theatre directors, and identify the contacts that the editors and their representatives from Milan, Venice, and Rome had in the coastal areas. What do we know about these networks? Who were the impresarios active there? How did they organize the opera seasons?

Some impresarios hailed from the Istrian and Dalmatian territory and also worked there, while many others came from elsewhere. Nonlocal impresarios in fact formed the majority.¹ Percentagewise most of the impresarios

1 This conclusion arises from a cross-check of the origins of hundreds of impresarios' letters addressed to the directors of coastal theatres in the period between 1861 and 1918, found in the archives between Rijeka and Split. It should be noted that, sometimes, the place of provenance of the letter did not necessarily identify the impresario's residence, but rather the place where the impresario was working, perhaps temporarily, during a given period

rios were from Milan, which should not come as a surprise given that Milan was considered the stronghold of opera in Italy in the nineteenth century. More precisely, they were based in Milan at the time they wrote their letters. Secondly, Trieste had its undisputed importance as to their provenance. The archives between Rijeka and Split include various names of impresarios and agents who were based in, and negotiated from, that city (see Giuseppe Ullmann, Giovanni Simonetti, or Enrico Gallina, among the most important ones, simultaneously active in several theatres). In smaller numbers, various other impresarios came from Rome, Venice, Bologna, Florence, or Naples. There were also impresarios who wrote and negotiated from towns such as Bari or Ancona, which may seem distant, but grew closer thanks to steamships. If orchestral musicians were needed in Dubrovnik or Split, sometimes they were engaged directly from Bari and arrived by sea. Epidemics, however, could be a deterrent advising against the transfer of singers and musicians: in Dubrovnik, for example, in the years 1910 and 1911, the arrival of artists from Bari was feared precisely on account of the cholera epidemic that had broken out there. Even earlier, in 1886, artists' baggage was subjected to disinfection procedures in Zadar and this, naturally, could discourage the artists from coming.²

Some Croatian impresarios made offers from the theatres of Osijek and Zagreb, but they were a minority and rarely staged productions of Italian opera.³ In one case, the company even came from Brno, with Johann Pistek, director of the municipal theatre there, staging operas by Smetana and Tchaikovsky, but also certain Verdi titles.

A register of the impresarios who were active in the theatres of the Istrian and Dalmatian coastline, or who merely came into epistolary contact with the theatre managements of the area, is being prepared (to date, it was possible to find the names and trace the coastal movements of around two hundred and eighty impresarios). The lists of impresarios of the Italian area in our possession, provided in the 1980s by John Rosselli (*Elenco provvisorio degli impresari*

of time. Some impresarios travelled frequently and wrote directly from the place where they were managing an opera season.

2 See the letter of the mayor of Zadar to the theatre management, Zadar, 31/08/1886, Državni arhiv u Zadru, HR-DAZD-252: Kazalište "Verdi" u Zadru 1863–1936, envelope 25.

3 See the correspondence in Državni arhiv u Šibeniku, HR-DAŠI-103, Kazalište i kino "Mazzoleni" – Šibenik (1863–1945), envelope 1, and the contract between Teatro Mazzoleni and Leon Dragutinović, manager of the Hrvatsko Narodno Kazalište u Osijeku, HR-DAŠI-103, envelopes 4 and 10.

e agenti teatrali italiani dal 1770 al 1890, kept in the library of the Department of Arts of the University of Bologna)⁴ and the bio-bibliographical dictionary compiled by Livia Cavaglieri in *Tra arte e mercato. Agenti e agenzie teatrali nel XIX secolo*⁵ contribute only to a very small extent to our knowledge about the people who worked in Istria and Dalmatia, either for chronological reasons (the impresarios surveyed worked during a historical period that stretches to the end of the First World War) or because of the different sources from which the materials were drawn. For most of them, it is currently very difficult to retrieve biographical information. There is no literature on these individuals and, if something has remained, it should be identified mainly in primary sources. Their names are therefore largely unknown.

When writing to places in Istria and Dalmatia, agents and impresarios took pains to book a series of venues, or at least more than one, in the area. Given the long journey, attempts were made to organize a complete tour of the coastal towns, not just one date. The present state of research suggests that the companies tended to move from north to south along the coast, rather than in the opposite direction. Those who got dates at the Politeama Ciscutti of Pula or the Municipal Theatre of Rijeka also wished to move down to Zadar or Šibenik for further performances.

These trips cost impresarios on average more than running Italian companies within the Italian peninsula and, given that the ticket price could not be increased much, they certainly represented a risk. The benefits were not proportionate to the high risk of financial loss. The companies wanted to be guaranteed or paid for a considerable number of representations. At the end of the century, companies of a certain importance did not move to Istria or Dalmatia if they were not paid in lire, while the more modest ones and the music hall artists accepted contracts which paid half or two thirds of the sum in lire and the remainder in Kronen. For engagements, the companies needed advances in lire that some theatre managements could only make by changing their Krone into Italian lire.⁶

4 ROSSELLI, J. *Elenco provvisorio degli impresari e agenti teatrali italiani dal 1770 al 1890*, printout, Università di Bologna, Dipartimento delle Arti, 1982.

5 CAVAGLIERI, L. *Tra arte e mercato. Agenti e agenzie teatrali nel XIX secolo*. Rome : Bulzoni, 2006.

6 See the report of the theatre management of Šibenik, with their headquarters at the Šibenik Presidium, Šibenik, 05/09/1919, HR-DAŠI-103, envelope 4. On the currencies of the time in relation to the operatic environment, see WALTER, M. "Geld und Münzen" in *Oper. Geschichte einer Institution*. Heidelberg : Springer, 2016, pp. 13 – 36.

As one might imagine, most of the trips from Italy were made by sea on steamships, for obvious geographical reasons. The fact that most of the singers and most of the scenery arrived by sea entailed major organizational problems if the weather conditions were bad. When the bora was blowing, steamships from Trieste did not depart and the arrival of the artists at the venue could be delayed considerably. This was the case also when leaving from Rijeka. We come across a number of telegrams in which delayed arrivals were announced, and there was little or nothing that could be done in such circumstances. The baritone Silveti telegraphed the theatre management in Šibenik: "Unable to continue journey because terrible sea, will be delayed."⁷ Or the agent Gallina telegraphed from Trieste: "Chorus leaves tomorrow because of horrible sea. On Thursday spotlight accessories leave".⁸

The delivery of materials could also experience delays. The scenery, which usually came from Milan, and various other items, such as stage costumes or scores, travelled directly by train as far as Trieste or were transported by the Gondrand transport company (still operating today, for a hundred and fifty years).⁹ From Trieste, they reached the coastal cities by sea on steamships such as the Lloyd Thetis. Complications and shipping errors could happen, as when certain materials, instead of being embarked with Lloyd for Šibenik, were loaded on the *Montenegro*, a steamship of Navigazione Generale Italiana, that was not going to Dalmatia at all. As a result, the chests – in the words of the director of the theatre of Šibenik, Giovanni Mazzoleni – made "a long pleasure trip" as far as Turkey and Greece instead of arriving at their proper destination in time.¹⁰ The decision to order the materials potentially

7 »Impossibilitato proseguire viaggio causa mare pessimo ritarderò«, telegram from the baritone Silveti to the theatre management of Šibenik, n.d, HR-DAŠI-103, envelope 8.

8 »Coristi partono domani causa tempo oribile [sic] giovedì partono riflettori accessori«, telegram from the agent Gallina to the theatre management of Šibenik, n.d, HR-DAŠI-103, envelope 8.

9 The Milanese firm Gondrand, offering a »general service of transportation«, was founded in 1866 and still functions today. It has branches in nineteen Italian cities.

10 For the failed delivery of a scena parapettata – for that was the item in question – damages were claimed from Casa Parisi of Milan, which had made a mistake in the shipment: »I enclose a copy of the letter that my brother is sending today to Casa Parisi of Milan in which he asks for compensation for the damages arising from the mishap of the parapet that Signor Parisi instead of sending directly from Venice to Austria sent to make a long pleasure trip to Turkey and Greece and delivered to Šibenik by the long route of southern Dalmatia.« (»Le inchiudo una copia della lettera che mio fratello oggi imposta alla casa Parisi di Milano colla quale richiede il risarcimento dei danni per il disguido della parapettata che il Signor Parisi invece di mandare direttamente da Venezia in Austria ha

from several different locations could also be a response to a specific need to reduce the risk. It should be noted that the materials (or “effetti teatrali” as they were called) also had to be returned to the company that had hired them out, therefore the return journey had to be included in the cost estimates.

Over the years, expenses kept increasing and were compounded by a decrease in subsidies. Some of the expenses could have been reduced if there had been a close network between the theatre managements. The fact that this was a type of cooperation which was sorely needed already in 1870 is attested by the following lines sent to Mazzoleni from an as yet unidentified colleague: “[...] and we will always go from bad to worse, for as long as unity is lacking between the various presidencies of the theatres, never ever will any good come out of it and, by always leaving things to the last minute, we shall have to pay for spoilt merchandise instead of good, and cast more and more discredit on poor Dalmatia. “Unity gives strength” and we are disunited. All the worse for us.”¹¹

In 1884, an attempt was made by Pietro Ciscutti, impresario founder of the Politeama of Pula (later named after him), to make the theatres of Pula, Rijeka and Zadar enter into an agreement for hiring productions. “The proposals that would be made to us,” wrote Ciscutti to the theatre management of Zadar, “would be made to you, too, so that, by the same token, Pula could be combined with Zadar, and the immense costs of travel and transport would decrease.”¹² The idea was largely accepted by the theatre management in Zadar, and even Šibenik and Dubrovnik later agreed to the idea of creating a network. The theatre of Split was not included in this network because it burnt down in 1881.¹³ Unfortunately, the conditions for consolidating the system were not present (and Ciscutti died already in 1890). As for the

mandato a fare un lungo viaggio di piacere in Turchia, Grecia e fatto inoltrare a Šibenik per la lunga via della Dalmazia meridionale»), letter from Giovanni Mazzoleni to Paolo Rocca, [Šibenik], 06/02 [1909], HR-DAŠI-103, envelope 9.

11 »[...] e sempre andremo di male in peggio, mentre mancando l'unione fra i vari corpi Presidenziali dei Teatri, mai e poi mai avremo alcunchè di buono e sempre riducendoci agli ultimi momenti dovremo pagare per buona, mercanzia avariata, e screditare sempre più la povera Dalmazia. 'L'unione forma la forza' e noi siamo disuniti. Dunque peggio per noi.«, letter from Antonio Feoli to Paolo Mazzoleni. Split, 06/10/1870, HR-DAŠI-103, envelope 1.

12 “Le proposte che verrebbero fatte a noi, noi le faressimo anche a loro, così a viceversa loro nel carteggio potrebbero dire, dopo Zara, potreste combinare Pola che allora le immense spese di viaggio e trasporti sarebbero diminuite,” letter from Pietro Ciscutti to the theatre management of Zadar, Pula, 03/05/1884, HR-DAZD-252, envelope 5.

13 Per Antonio Bajamonti. In *Il Piccolo*, 1900, Issue 6590, 19 January 1900.

impresarios, they were perfectly aware of the risks and of the unfavourable situation. Even if it was true that “to be an opera impresario was becoming less of a profession and more of a disease” – to quote John Rosselli,¹⁴ many impresarios continued to get involved and repeatedly offered their services to the theatre managements.

If we examine the archival documents of the theatres of the coastal regions, what immediately strikes us is that, for the most part, they are written in Italian. In fact, right in the beginning of the Napoleonic era, Italian became the official language of the area. And if, for example, we leaf through the *Gazzetta Musicale di Milano* of 1862, we note that these theatres were still viewed as “theatres of Italy”,¹⁵ whereas in the years to come, all news concerning them in the Italian press would be found in the sections marked “Estero” (International). If we examine the language of the performances, we should note that, at the beginning of the twentieth century, it was mandatory for an impresario in Rijeka to guarantee that the performances were given only in Italian (this was a special article in the tender specifications of that theatre: the only language permitted was Italian).¹⁶ This was the rule for all the coastal theatres, with the exception of Šibenik and Split from 1893. After a change in Split’s government (from Italian to Croatian), the impresario was under a contractual obligation to ensure that the performances were given in Croatian and not in Italian. An example of this can be seen in the contract written in German between the theatre direction of Split and impresario Johann Pistek, stating that: “die Oper Dalibor, Prodana Nevjesta, Traviata, Maskarni Ples und Marthe in croathischer Sprache singen zu lassen”.¹⁷ The Croatian mayor of Split was also the director of the theatre: as the mayor changed, the language and the repertoire changed, too.

The same started to happen in Šibenik at the beginning of the twentieth century, although there was no obligation regarding the language in Šibenik.

14 ROSSELLI, J. *L'impresario d'opera*, Turin : EDT, 1985, p. 36.

15 Prospetto del movimento musicale nei teatri d'Italia. In *Gazzetta musicale di Milano*, 1862, Vol. 20, Issue 21, p. 84 – 85, 25 May 1862.

16 See for example art. 1 of the tender documents for the operation of the Teatro Comunale in the three-year period from 1 January 1909 to 31 December 1911, and art. 1 of the tender documents for the operation of the Teatro Comunale in the three-year period from 1 January 1912 to 31 December 1914, Državni arhiv u Rijeci HR-DARI, Općinsko kazalište “G. Verdi,” DS 60.

17 Contract between the theatre direction of Split and Johann Pišteck, letter “m” of art. 1, Split, January 1896, Muzej Grada Splita, HR-MGS: Kazalište 1/ kut. I-XII.

Therefore, impresarios who wanted to perform in Croatian had better possibilities of acceptance in theatres such as those of Šibenik or Split than in Rijeka or Zadar.

Over the years, the importance of Italian (the Italian “element” as well as the Italian “language”) declined in accordance with the “de-Italianization” policy of Istria and Dalmatia promoted by Emperor Franz Joseph I of Austria from 1866 onwards. Franz Joseph ordered the Crown Council to resist the influence of the Italian element in a resolute manner (“mit aller Energie und ohne alle Rücksicht”).¹⁸ This change can also be seen in the musical chronicles of the newspapers. In *Il nazionale*, for example, the musical chronicles had been written in Italian until 1872, after which they appeared in Croatian (and the newspaper changed its name to *Narodni List*).¹⁹ This progressive Germanization and Slavicisation of the area did not stop the impresarios from hiring Italian opera companies for one or more seasons. The companies came from the hinterland, and only a part of the musicians (and choristers) were local. Resident orchestras were sometimes semi-professional. Consequently, concerns about the quality of the performances were raised.

According to some tender specifications, sixty orchestral musicians and sixty choristers were needed after 1909 in Rijeka,²⁰ and forty and thirty-six, respectively, in Zadar.²¹ But these theatres did not have such a high number of permanently available musicians. Just an example: at the dawn of the twentieth century, there were no choir members and there were only twelve

18 “Se. Majestät sprach den bestimmten Befehl aus, dass auf die entschiedenste Art dem Einfluss des in einigen Kronländern noch vorhandenen italienischen Elements entgegenzutreten durch geeignete Besetzung der Stellen von politischen Gerichtsbeamten, Lehrern sowie durch den Einfluss der Presse in Südtirol, Dalmatien, dem Küstenland auf die Germanisierung oder Slawisierung der betreffenden Landesteile je nach Umständen mit aller Energie und ohne alle Rücksicht hingearbeitet werde. Se. Majestät legt es allen Zentralstellen als strenge Pflicht auf, in diesem Sinn planmäßig vorzugehen.”, cfr. *Die Protokolle des Österreichischen Ministerrates 1848/1867. V Abteilung: Die Ministerien Rainer und Mensdorff. VI Abteilung: Das Ministerium Belcredi*, Wien : Österreichischer Bundesverlag für Unterricht, Wissenschaft und Kunst 1971, p. 297.

19 There are also other periodicals for reference, such as *Il Dalmata*, or *La Bilancia di Fiume*, *la Gazzetta di Fiume*, *la Gazzetta di Zara*, but not specifically musical periodicals printed in the territory, simply because they did not exist yet.

20 Cfr. art. 15, “Capitolato d'appalto per l'esercizio del Teatro Comunale nel triennio 1 gennaio 1909-31 dicembre 1911”, Fiume, [1908], HR-DARI, RO-24, envelope 6.

21 Tender specification of the Teatro Giuseppe Verdi of Zadar, Zara, [post 1901], HR-DAZD, envelope 29.

orchestral musicians (but no »prime parti«) in Split.²² Therefore, if an impresario wanted to guarantee a season of opera seria, he would have needed to bring at least thirty choir members and eighteen musicians. This implied bigger expenses.

Along the Istrian and the Dalmatian coast, we have examples of theatres without public funding as well as theatres subsidized by the municipality and the government. An impresario could receive more or less money as an endowment on the basis of this subsidy. The endowment, however, was always voluntary and at the discretion of the institution granting it, which was clearly pointed out in the correspondence of the theatre managements. Hence, for example, the government of Dalmatia wrote as follows to the theatre of Zadar in reply to a request for funding: "this subsidy is to be considered completely voluntary and may be reduced or even completely suspended".²³ It was clear that the theatre management did not have any assurance to obtain money.

For theatres without public funding, the foremost source of money were their shareholders – this was the case of Šibenik. "It is very tiresome to be the director of these poor provincial theatres without endowment, without audience, and with very few people who understand what a theatre is":²⁴ with these words – this was in 1913 – the manager (and impresario) of the Teatro Mazzoleni of Šibenik expressed in a private letter all his discomfort about being the head of a theatre that clearly produced continual worries: zero public funding, hence reduced productions, fewer performances, and scant attendance. However, at certain meetings of the shareholders of Šibenik, the fact that the Teatro Mazzoleni received no subsidies from the government or the city became almost a source of pride, given that they succeeded in organizing their opera seasons *in spite of* the lack of public aid. At such meetings, a parallel would be drawn between the resources of the theatre of Zadar²⁵ – a theatre that

22 Cfr. Letter of Antonio Lana to the theatre presidency of Split, Milan, 02/02/1895, HR-MGS: Kazalište 3/ kut. I-XII.

23 "[...] del tutto volontaria e tale da potersi anche eventualmente restringere ed anche del tutto sospendere". Letter of the district captain to the theatre direction of Zadar, Zadar, 22/02/1897, HR-DAZD, envelope 25.

24 "È una gran noia fare il direttore di questi meschini teatri di provincia senza dote, senza pubblico e con pochissime persone che comprendono cosa sia un teatro", Letter of Giovanni Mazzoleni to Enrico Gallina, Šibenik, 19/09/1913, HR-DAŠI-103, busta 6.

25 During the 1865-1882 period, two opera theatres were active in Zadar: the Teatro Nobile and Teatro Nuovo (in 1901 renamed after Verdi). Here, mention is made exclusively to the Teatro Nuovo.

had subsidies from both the municipality and the government and had a sizeable audience, but which over a period of thirty months amassed a large deficit – and that of Šibenik, which received no public funding at all. This prompted Giovanni Mazzoleni to say: “we are not running at a loss and this in itself is a cause for satisfaction”.²⁶ In spite of the glowing publicity given in the newspapers (“Teatro Mazzoleni Šibenik – The cherished refuge of the most distinguished aristocracy / Theatre of great elegance – Luxurious electric lighting / Large waiting room – Reading room – Buffet – Large smoking room / Always hosting big stars and attractions”),²⁷ the underlying organizational realities showed a world that was less dazzling and did not lack difficulties.

Nevertheless, Mazzoleni suffered less from the lack of funding than from the political changes: in 1922, the theatre passed to the Croats and this was the real reason of his discouragement. He and his brother Paolo (the previous director of the theatre) were threatened and attacked. With the Second World War, even the theatres that had not already done so changed their name and owner. From the twenties onward, other forms of entertainment, such as variety shows and cinema, competed fiercely with the opera seasons. The impresarios who dealt only with opera had to change their orientation to survive.

Conclusion

Tracing and reconstructing the activities of impresarios on the eastern Adriatic coast at the turn of the twentieth century allows us to better understand the production and organisation processes of opera in this region. Most of the impresarios were from Milan, but their names are largely unknown (to date at least two hundred and eighty are known). When writing to places in Istria and Dalmatia, agents and impresarios took pains to book a series of venues in the area. The trips, made by sea on steamships, cost impresarios on average more than running Italian companies on the Italian peninsula. Some of the expenses could have been reduced if there had been a close network between the theatre managements, but the efforts of Pietro Ciscutti in this

26 »Noi non siamo in perdita, e già questo ci soddisfa«, letter from Giovanni Mazzoleni to Enrico Gallina, Šibenik, 01/12/1911, HR-DAŠI-103, envelope 1.

27 “Teatro Mazzoleni Sebenico / Il ritrovo preferito della più eletta aristocrazia / Teatro elegantissimo / Sfarzosa illuminazione elettrica / Grande salone d’aspetto / Sala di lettura / Buffet / Gran fumoir / Sempre posto a grandi vedettes ed attrazioni”, Advertisement Teatro Mazzoleni, [s.l.], [s.d.], HR-DAŠI-103, envelope 4.

direction could not take shape. Along the Istrian and the Dalmatian coast, we have examples of theatres without public funding as well as theatres subsidized by the municipality and the government. The impresarios could receive more or less money as an endowment on the basis of this subsidy. With the twenties, and the competition with other forms of entertainment, such as variety shows and the cinema, the impresarios who dealt only with opera had to change their orientation to survive.

Archival material

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- Contract between Teatro Mazzoleni and Leon Dragutinović, HR-DAŠI-103, envelopes 4 and 10.
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