

Opera Agents in 20th Century (1) Opera business and singers' careers

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Abstract: *The key point in the promoting singers' careers in the 20th century was the Agent (known also as impresario, the art manager, the promoter). The business of opera is quite old, starting in mid-17th century together with the new born genre of lyric show, but in the 20th century it has developed in more advanced forms, as a real institution. The "Opera Agents in 20th Century" is built in 2 parts. This first article presents the impresario throughout the history, focusing on the development and the notable transformations of the opera business in the 20th century. The second part will consist in a related article, focusing on the role of the agent in developing and promoting the singers' careers, different models of business contracts, agents' fees (Compensation), and the modern agencies.*

Key-words: *Impresario, Opera Agent, Opera business in 20th century, Singers' careers*

1. Introduction

After more than four centuries of existence, opera enjoy worldwide the attention of a wide audience (Agid, Philippe and Tarondeau, Jean-Claude 2010, ix)², arousing passions and controversy. A multi-faceted art form that integrates music, drama, choreography, painting, technologies, opera show mobilizes a significant number of

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² "Opera continues, 400 years after its birth, to be a worldwide phenomenon, enjoying great popularity throughout Europe, the Americas, Australia and in part of Asia. The fact that it is possible to experience live performances of opera, inevitably of varying quality, in so many of the world's town and cities, should be a cause for both amazement and celebration. Amazement, because the mechanics of producing and performing opera are so complicated. Any opera performance is the result of immense dedication and hard work by a large number of people with diverse skills. It also requires significant financial resources. Celebration because, as its best, opera offers revelatory, life-enhancing experiences, without which the world in general, and society in particular, would be much the poorer."

people – soloists, choristers, instrumentalists, dancers, conductors, directors, set designers, machinists and an entire technical staff – and need a complex management system. Opera is today the most expensive of the performing arts (*Opera management*, Wikipedia)³. The importance of the agent raised in the history of the opera. Through the centuries, the status of impresario and the environment of artistic business suffered multiple transformations. Today the opera agent and the agencies struggle in a highly competitive, complex and demanding space of business, which is constantly changing (Dan J.Martin/ William Byrnes 2009, ix)⁴. We explore here what are an opera agent and few coordinates of the history of this job, focusing on the 20th century which brought important changes and transformations in the business of opera.

2. What is an Opera Agent?

“Impresario” (known also as “agente teatrale”, “producer”, “artist manager” “talent manager”, “music manager” “opera manager” “promoter”) is a person who organizes and often finances concerts, plays or operas, performing a role in a stage art similar with a film or television producer. The impresario acts as an artist manager, guiding the professional career of artists in the entertainment industry (*Talent Manager*, Wikipedia).

The origin of the term “impresario” is found in the world of Italian opera of the eighteenth century. Then he became the central figure in organizing a lyrical season. The owner of a theater (who was generally from the nobles) empowered an impresario to organize a lyrical event.

His duties included hiring a composer to write a new work (whether or not related to a festive event), purchasing costumes, and sets, hiring singers and instrumentalists, and taking considerable financial risks. The stress involved in such responsibilities is reproduced in the opera *Der Schauspieldirektor* (Theater Director), written by Mozart in 1786.

³“In addition to the singers and musicians who form the core of the company, its production requires scenery and costumes and sometimes dancers and non-singing actors. Fixed costs in today's opera organizations—keeping many of the singers and musicians on year-round contracts, and if managing their own theatre, the cost of workers needed to create and maintain the sets and costumes as well as the cost of maintaining and running the building—combined with the costs of individual productions, make opera the most expensive of the performing arts” (*Opera management*, Wikipedia)

⁴ “The core challenge for us as arts managers is to deal with change: changing external environmental conditions, evolving styles and approaches to the arts by our artists, the advancements in how we present and distribute the art to our ever-changing audiences, and the shifting competition for resources and attention.” (Dan J.Martin in Foreword to the book of William Byrnes, *Management and the Arts*)

The term "impresario" is still used in the art world, designating an organizer of shows, concerts, tours or other artistic events. We will refer to him in this article also as the Opera Agent, because the main focus here is the business of opera.

3. Opera Agents in history

The first impresarios in the world of opera were Jewish merchants, who coordinated the musical festivities („*feste musicali*”) at the Court of Mantua, in Italy (16th century). Occasionally they also dealt with the "export" of singers and instrumentalists to Paris during the reign of Henry III of France. Also, the dukes of Gonzaga assumed the role of patron and also of impresarios, in Italy.

The concept of entrepreneurship in opera gradually crystallizes, with the need for economic management, when the activity of artists and companies becomes professional and the first public theaters were built in the second half of the seventeenth century (as in *Enciclopedia dello spettacolo* 1975, 355-520). It is the moment when the musical show leaves the aristocratic courts, where it was reserved only for a small circle of privileged people, and becomes accessible, for the cost of an entrance ticket, to a wider audience.

The duties of an organizer of artistic performances were taken over in time by composers, actors or their leader (called "*capocomico*"), when they were reunited in a small theater company, but also by people without music or economic studies, simple businessmen, many of them unscrupulous speculators, moneylenders and pimps. Leading a rather risky life, with frequent bankruptcies and perpetual insecurity, these impresarios often acted unscrupulously, often running away with the money, leaving the artists and the entire staff unpaid. In the seventeenth century, impresarios played a major role in theater, working with artists, encouraging the dictatorship of virtuoso singers (who attracted a large audience), setting fees, ticket prices for a performance, and controlling theater revenues. Having a strong influence in promoting (or boycotting, in return) lyrical careers, the impresarios received a percentage of 2 to 10% of the earnings for each performance, and generally did not enjoy a very good reputation (Rosselli 1992, 157)⁵. The figure of the impresario even became the subject of criticism and satire in literature, in the writings of Metastasio, Goldoni, Baretta.

⁵"Quite obscure contracts and frequent abuses have always led to rather strained relationships between impresarios and singers, with agents often risking large sums of money, and artists often denouncing the caste of traders as a "herd of pigs." However, the fast pace of operatic trade imposed the figure of the impresario as indispensable. In fact, not all singers were able to benefit from the services of an impresario. As nowadays, many non-employed artists negotiate their own contracts, in a system similar to that of a bazaar ..."

Among the first names of impresarios who became influential in the XVI-XVII centuries we find Marco Faustini (1606-1676) who managed several Venetian opera houses in the course of his career; the composer Antonio Vivaldi (1678-1741) who was a real mover and shaker in Venice at the turn of the 18th Century, running several seasons at the Teatro San Angelo. Vivaldi was a composer and impresario in equal measure during his 25-year career. Other prominent opera agents were Neapolitan Francois Morellon La Cave (1696-1768), Eustachio Bambini (1697-1770), Giuseppe Affigio, Agostino Santi.

However, in the true sense of the word "impresario" can be called the personalities who appeared in the world of lyrical theater of the early eighteenth century. Of these, Angelo Carasale in Naples; Giovanni Lucca (Milano), Johann Peter Salomon (1745–1815) best known as the man who brought Joseph Haydn to London.

After the French Revolution (1789-1799), with the economic decline of the aristocracy and the rise of liberalism and private initiative, the role of the impresario changed. Beyond the speculators of the past, there are first-rate impresarios, characterized by a deep knowledge of the theatrical phenomenon and a more developed sense for advertising and promoting the show, as well as for associations and collaborations (gradually initiating the first forms of agencies and companies).

In the 19th century, opera became a major industry, with branches all over the world, stimulating trade, tourism and the circulation of money, creating jobs not only for theater people (in Milan alone, opera had 3,000 employees!), but also for many auxiliary trades. The businessmen who ran this industry called themselves *impresario*, "*commercianti*" or "*negozianti*" and in France "*industriels*" (Rosselli 1992, 39). Among them, Alessandro Lanari (1787-1852), who produced a series of successful seasons for the Teatro La Pergola, in Florence and presented the premieres of few operas by Verdi, Donizetti and Bellini. Lanari and Bartolomeo Merelli (1794-1879) are influential impresarios who made the works of great Italian composers known throughout Europe, extending their activity beyond the great Italian cities, in Paris, Vienna, London, St. Petersburg, Berlin (Rosselli 1984, 35). The most famous of all was Domenico Barbaia (1778–1841) - one of the most powerful personalities in Europe of his time, who had exclusive contracts with poets (Felice Romani), composers (Rossini, Bellini, Donizetti), singers (Garcia, Rubini, Tamburini, Labrache, La Grisi, La Malibran) and musicians-instrumentalists, whom he "resold" (promoted) in the most important theaters in France, Spain, Italy, England and Austria. Barbaia (Barbaja) began as a café waiter and made a fortune at La Scala, in Milan, where he was also in charge of the gambling operation and introduced roulette. Richard D'Oyly Carte (1844-1901) an English talent agent, theatrical impresario and composer who founded D'Oyly Carte Opera Company. The French composer Charles Gounod, Clara Schumann and Oscar Wilde were all on his books at various points.

The penetration of the opera on the territory of the two Americas determined an expansion of the lyric industry to an unprecedented scale. Among the important impresarios who mediated this phenomenon are Frederic Gye (1810-1878) and his son Ernest Gye (1879-1955), the conductor Max Maretzek, James Henry Mapleson, Antonio Pestalardo, Lorini, Angelo Ferrari, Ciacchi, Bonetti, Padovani, Scotto, Walter Mocchi, Oscar Hammerstein. They imposed the maximum hegemony of Italian opera on the American cultural market even after the First World War. Under the same influence of the Italian opera were in the eighteenth-nineteenth centuries the theaters from Spain, Portugal, those from the Balkans, Malta, Egypt, etc. More or less the same situation was in Germany, Austria and Russia (as in *Enciclopedia dello spettacolo* 1975, 355-520)

Also in the 19th century, the publishers acquired a notable influence in the musical promotion, especially of the composers, by stipulating the copyrights (Ricordi, Lucca, Sonzogno). Particular is the figure of the publisher Edoardo Sonzogno, who also acted as impresario, representing Barrientos, De Lucia, Kaschmann and Caruso. Gradually, in the twentieth century, the role of the impresario began to change – from being an active creator to that of a mere participant in the opera industry (Jutta 2012, 448-459)⁶

4. Opera Business in 20th Century

Although the twentieth century has been marked by two world wars and multiple social and political turmoil remains in history as extremely fertile for culture in general and for opera in particular (Byrnes 2009, 30)⁷. In the field of artistic entrepreneurship there are notable changes, the managerial activity being gradually taken over by commercial companies (impresario agency/ artists' management agencies) that bring together one or more agents. In addition, after the First World War, the tendency to institutionalize theaters, supported by the state, is accentuated, the role of the impresario being taken over by the theater director ("*il sovintendente*" or "*general manager*" or "*Intendant*"), who often assumes the double role of administrative director (executive director) and artistic

⁶"The impresario was a key figure of nineteenth-century Italian operatic life. After 1861, the role of the impresario changed considerably and was subsequently taken over by the publishers. Generally speaking, the impresario's role changed from being an active creator to that of a mere participant in the opera industry."

⁷"Despite two world wars, European arts institutions expanded into smaller communities, developing national networks of performing spaces and providing jobs for managers and artists. Seasons expanded, repertoires grew, and new facilities were constructed – especially after World War II – in an overall environment of support from the government."

director, leading the theatrical institution with the involvement and financial support of the state but also of private companies and richer citizens. Among the important names of lyrical theater managers in the twentieth century, we mention: Rudolf Bing (Metropolitan Opera in New York), Kurt Alder (San Francisco Opera), Arturo Toscanini and Antonio Ghiringhelli (Teatro alla Scala, Milan), Gerard Mortier (Brussels, Belgium), Rudolf Libermann (Hamburg, Germany), Günther Rennert (Munich, Germany), Erich Schäfer (Stuttgart), Wolfgang Swallisch (Cologne), Albert Moser and Eberhard Waechter (Volksoper Vienna, Austria), Ioan Holender (Staatsoper, Vienna), Hans Zimmermann (Zurich, Switzerland).

Independent modern impresarios (in the traditional sense) were still in the business. From them, we note the prominent figure of Sergei Diaghilev (1872-1929), art critic, ballet impresario who after he founded the Ballet Russes transformed theatre, music and the visual arts as no one had ever done before. The English conductor and impresario Thomas Beecham (1879-1961), the Italian opera impresario Fortune Galo (1878-1970), the Russian-American impresario Sol Hurok (1888-1974), the American pianist, art manager and educator Aaron Richmond (1895-1965) and the English composer and impresario of musical theatre Andrew Lloyd Webber (born in 1948). They all are very famous art agents from 20th century.

A special figure in the French and Anglo-Saxon cultural space is represented by the "*producer*", who assumes the production and promotion of a single show. But one of the most important achievements for opera business in the 20th century was the development of artistic agencies.

The first major agency appeared in Milan in the late nineteenth century, assuming the organization of theatrical performances, opera, operetta and variety. In the years before the First World War, several agencies developed in Italy that work on the basis of a recatto contract: Giovanni Chiarella (Turin, Naples), Suvini-Zerboni (Milan), Giuseppe Paradossi (Bologna), the agency founded by Icilio Polese and Pietro Ravizza (1870) and the one from Bologna (*L'Agenzia del "Piccolo Faust"*).

The economic recession causes the activities of opera institutions to deteriorate dramatically after the First World War. The big publishing houses, once dominant on the art market, face severe financial difficulties. For example, the famous Tito Riccordi (1865-1933) is forced to cede his business to bureaucrats (in 1919) and although his publishing house remains quite famous throughout the twentieth century, it no longer regains its original dominant position, being finally assimilated into the German Bertelsmann trust (in 1994). Also, after the First World War, many of the small Italian opera houses were transformed into cinemas or closed their doors, and the traditional ones reduced their activity, continuing to struggle for existence. *La Scala* Theater was forced to seek private financial support after it was closed during the First World War (1918-1921). Among the most

important Italian business agencies operating in the middle of the century in Milan: L'ALCI (led by Liudino Bonardi), L'Ufficio Teatrale Internazionale (Francesco Ansaloni), ULI (Toni Sojat) and in Rome: L'OPERA (led by Cardenio Botti) (as in *Enciclopedia dello spettacolo 1975*, 356). But the era when Italy set the tone for the opera, provided the most desired singers, attracted a large number of young people who wanted to improve in the art of singing or start a lyrical career, and the impresarios could successfully organize international tours of entire opera company, gradually sets in the twentieth century. Today, Italian theaters are only one of the points in the international operatic circuit, equal to those in America, Russia, and other European spaces or overseas. To this day, Italian theaters are confronted with a financial crisis, being only partially subsidized by the state; preserving the tradition of a show that arouses "less and less interest of the Italian on the street, who prefers to go to the movies, listen to the music of the San Remo festival or simply watch TV" (Mallach 2007, 371) but still having an audience of the most passionate opera lovers.

Among the largest international business agencies, with an impact in the art world from the second half of the twentieth century to the present day, is the Columbia C.A.M.I. (Columbia Artists Management Inc.), ICM Artists (Opus 3 Artists), IMG Artists, Breslin, Trawick Artists Management, Askonas Holt (London), Colbert Artists Management, Zensky Green Artists Management, Atelier Musicale, Opera Domani and Arias (Italy) , Firenzemusica (Rafaella Coletti), Poilvé - Paris (Bettina Brentano), Haydn Rawstron and Harrison Parrott Agency (London), Künstleragentur Raab und Böhm (Vienna).

Towards the middle of the twentieth century, with the improvement of audio-video recording and playback media, the music and entertainment industries became increasingly dominated by major record labels and media. According to a study dedicated to the modern music industry (*Music industry*, Wikipedia), the multitude of people and organizations working in this space can include: the musicians who compose and those who perform music; companies that create and sell recordings (publishing houses, recording studios, sound engineers, graphic designers, copyright institutions, institutions for the promotion and marketing of music products); those who promote "live" shows (producers, agents who manage the spaces for these events); professionals who assist musicians in their careers (impresarios, agents, theater managers, lawyers specialized in the entertainment industry); those who broadcast music (satellite, radio, television, internet); journalists, musicologists, teachers; musical instruments manufacturers and many others. A modern singer with an important international activity can hire a large number of people for his own advertising and promotion of his career, from impresarios, photographers, to other image promoters. The idea is repeated in detail

in the book by soprano Renée Fleming, which emphasizes the important role of advertising in the career of an artist in the twentieth century (Fleming 2004, 116-122). The artist's manager (impresario / agency) oversaw all aspects of an artist's career in exchange for a percentage of the artist's income.

In the next article on OperaAgents we will mark the distinctions between the business models practiced in Western and Eastern Europe in the 20th century. After the fall of communism, the "Two Europes" were gradually reunited in a single market. However, the import of Western business models in the former communist countries was slow and hit by multiple blockages. In the ever-changing reality of the art world, unity, free movement, and openness are keys to successful artistic management, as Anthony Freud, general director of the Lyric Opera of Chicago, points out: "We are living through uniquely challenging times. The world around us is changing at a bewildering speed. We need all the resources at our disposal to understand, analyze and respond to the opportunities and challenge swirling around us; our ability to respond swiftly and accurately have become ever more critical. We cannot afford to exist in hermetically sealed bubbles. We must work together, as a worldwide community of opera companies, sharing experiences both positive and negative, learning from one another, and ensuring, as we move through the 21st century, that opera becomes more relevant and indispensable than ever." (Anthony Freud, in his Foreword of the book signed by Agid and Tarondeau 2010, xiii).

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