

This is a working paper with minimal footnotes that was not written towards publication—at least not in its present form. Rather, it aims to provide some of the wider historiographical and methodological background for the specific (book) project I am working on at the Italian Academy. Please do not circulate this paper further or quote it without prior written consent. Huub van der Linden, 1 November 2013.

Towards a cultural history of Italian oratorio around 1700: Circulations, contexts, and comparisons

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*“Parlare e scrivere di musica implica
sempre una storia degli ascolti possibili.”*

Luciano Berio, *Intervista sulla musica*
(1981)

1. Oratorio around 1700: Historiographical issues since 1900

In the years around 1900, one Italian composer was hailed both in Italy and abroad as the future of Italian sacred music. Nowadays almost no one has heard of him. It was Don Lorenzo Perosi (1872-1956), the director of the Sistine Chapel. He was widely seen as one of the most promising new composers in Italy, to such a degree that the Italian press spoke of *il momento perosiano* (“the Perosian moment”) and that his oratorios appeared to usher in a new flourishing of the genre.¹ His oratorios were performed all over Europe as well as in the USA, and received wide-spread attention in the press and music magazines. They also gave rise to the modern historiography of the genre.

Like all historiography, that of Italian oratorio is shaped by its own historical context, and like all writing about music, it is related also to music making. The early years of the twentieth century were the last time that Italian oratorio was at the forefront of Italy’s and Europe’s musical interests, and it coincided not by chance with the first sustained investigations into the earlier history of the genre. The years around 1900 were a crucial period, a sort of historical hinge that marked, with a vociferous final flurry of attention, the beginning of the end of Italian oratorio as a prominent presence in Italy’s (and Europe’s) musical life, and the beginning of the genre’s modern historiographical tradition; it connects the bygone musical tradition with the current musicological tradition, providing a point of entrance into both.

In 1906 the Florentine publishing house Le Monnier published Guido Pasquetti’s *L’oratorio musicale in Italia*, the first comprehensive monograph on the history of Italian oratorio. In a dedicatory letter that functions as a preface, he declares straightforwardly

¹ On Perosi see Rinaldi, *Lorenzo Perosi*, and Merlatti, *Lorenzo Perosi*. On the oratorios see also Smither, *History of the Oratorio*, 4:621-24.

right at the beginning of the book that the reason for writing it was the reception in the international press of the oratorios of Perosi.² In 1903, the young conductor and composer Domenico Alaleona graduated with a thesis that was published in 1908 as *Studi sulla storia dell'oratorio musicale in Italia*, in which Perosi's oratorios figure as the praiseworthy, if ultimately doomed, attempts to revive a moribund musical tradition. This view differed from Pasquetti's, which presented Perosi's oratorios precisely as the successful restoration of those qualities admired in the music of the early Baroque.³ Finally, in 1906 the German musicologist Arnold Schering submitted his *Habilitationschrift* on the history of Italian oratorio in the first half of the seventeenth century, which later formed the first part of his *Geschichte des Oratoriums*, published in 1911.⁴ Schering, who had reviewed Pasquetti's and Alaleona's work in the *Zeitschrift der Internationalen Musikgesellschaft*, does not give any specific reasons why he got interested in the subject, but the performances of Perosi's *La risurrezione di Lazzaro* in Dresden (Schering's home-town) and Munich in 1899, and of *La Passione* in Berlin (where he lived at the time) in the same year, as well as the reactions in the press, perhaps played a part in directing his attention to Italian oratorio.⁵

After the brief period of great interest of the *momento perosiano* that inspired Alaleona, Pasquetti, and Schering's books, the subject of Italian oratorio lost much of its appeal to scholars. Howard Smither's four-volume *History of the oratorio* published between 1977 and 2000 remains a formidable overview of the genre's history, but the fact that its first volume, which dealt with Italian oratorio of the period up to the early 1700s, still stands as the standard guide to the genre in that period has now become problematic in view of scholarly developments of the last thirty years.⁶ In his six-volume *Oxford History of Western Music* from 2005, to cite what here may figure as a *summa* of late twentieth-century musicology, Richard Taruskin barely mentions (Italian) oratorio at all.⁷ That in itself—let it be clear—is no reproach. Taruskin wisely adopted a personal and selective approach in order to rein in his vast subject, but the absence is, precisely because of that personal selectivity, indicative of the marginalised place Italian oratorio holds both in current musicology. If the peak in attention during the *momento perosiano* bears out the fact that a society's musical and musicological interests tend to go hand in hand, then a lack of interest in Italian oratorio at other times is an equally eloquent sign of the other side of the medal.

A closer reading of the discourse on Italian oratorio over the centuries reveals the persistence of what appear as core concerns throughout the genre's history and

² Pasquetti, *L'oratorio musicale in Italia*, v-viii.

³ Alaleona, *Studi sulla storia dell'oratorio*, 292-304.

⁴ See Schering, "Neue Beiträge" from 1906 and his "Zur Geschichte des italienischen Oratoriums" from 1903. See furthermore his *Geschichte des Oratoriums*, 86n3 and 625 on the independent genesis of his own work with regard to Pasquetti and Alaleona.

⁵ His review of Pasquetti is in the *Zeitschrift der Internationalen Musikgesellschaft* 9:1 (1907): 44-46, and that of Alaleona in *ibid.* 10:6 (1908): 178-79.

⁶ Smither, *A history of the oratorio*.

⁷ There is little over a page on Carissimi's oratorios (Taruskin, *Oxford history of Western music*, 2:73-75) and the odd phrase here and there in other contexts.

historiography from the seventeenth century through the transitional *momento perosiano* into the modern historiography. A central problem, one that manifested itself in different ways, is that of the status of Italian oratorio as a genre. The debates over Perosi's oratorios were played out not in small part around the use of the term *oratorio*. More than once, critics and commentators posed the question whether Perosi's works were really oratorios at all, and the composer's own later substitution of the term with the somewhat contrived *poema sinfonico vocale* (and Pasquetti's subsequent hair-splitting over *that* term) are a sign of similar concerns.

The seventeenth- and eighteenth-century "taxonomic exuberance", in Derrida's term, was at bottom not very different. At both times did theoreticians feel the need to adapt their theoretical frameworks to the musical practice, although the argument was—as is often the case—reversed. The problems that early modern theorists posed themselves with regard to the name, form, and function of oratorio can be found in Italy during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as well. Like opera, oratorio could not be fit easily into the Aristotelian model that was the touchstone of all theatre. Arcangelo Spagna's *Discorso dogmatico* on Italian oratorio from 1706, was the first substantial discourse on the genre of oratorio itself, more than half a century after it had first been used as a denominator for a musical genre. But Spagna's ideal of an oratorio as a *melodramma spirituale* was only one of a number of pronouncements on what this genre really was or ought to be, and, as Robert Kendrick has recently underlined, "even when the genre was treated by theorists, problems are apparent".⁸

When Taruskin does refer to Italian oratorio, he reiterates the well-trodden (and on more than one count untenable) cliché that "the traditional Italian oratorio was simply an *opera seria* on a biblical subject, by the early eighteenth century often performed with action, although this was not always allowed".⁹ To quarrel over one phrase in six volumes of music history is of course not the point; rather, to find even Taruskin, who is otherwise so attentive to how politics and ideology shape the discourse on music, stating that one genre is "simply" another is representative of a persistent normative problem that has plagued the historiography of Italian oratorio. The return of seventeenth- and eighteenth century Italian *opera seria* on the modern stage (including the 'virtual stage' of the record industry) has been a clamorous success.¹⁰ This rekindled interest in (Italian) baroque opera has happened in symbiosis with a steady flow of scholarly articles, books, and conferences on the genre. Even more so than during their period of creation, a disequilibrium between oratorio and opera has arisen. Opera's historiographical hegemony make that its premises have also been used to measure up Italian oratorio.

One aspect of this hegemony derives from the circulation and popularity of Italian opera in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Undoubtedly the dissemination and reception of Italian opera in this period and its rise as a pan-

⁸ Kendrick, "Devotion, piety and commemoration", 363.

⁹ Taruskin, *Oxford history of Western music*, 2:314, in a section on Handel's English oratorios.

¹⁰ See Ndalianis, *Neo-Baroque Aesthetics*, and Leopold, "Sull'attualità dell'opera barocca" for considerations on this revival of the baroque.

European phenomenon justify scholarly attention, but the importance of opera is also a 'fact' constructed *a priori* by the choice of criteria. It is surprising, on closer consideration, how a genre like *opera seria*—or *opera tout court*—so tied to the *ancien régime* aesthetics and ethos of conspicuous consumption and to the affirmation of the social and/or cultural elite, has managed to retain its lofty status as an 'important' subject, unruffled and unquestioned by any historiographical school.¹¹ Measured by different but equally valid standards, Italian oratorio was, certainly in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Italy, if anything *more* important than opera. For one thing, the current status of opera does not reflect the numerical importance of its own times. John Walter Hill's observation that around 1700 oratorio was the "most accessible and pervasive genre of dramatic music in Florence during all but the summer months" holds true also for many other major and minor cities in Italy, especially those that did not boast an opera theatre.¹² Opera, moreover, remained a pastime for the nobility and upcoming middle class. Compared to baroque operas, oratorios had in Italy not only a socially wider and geographically more capillary dissemination, but, as for instance Juliane Riepe, Lorenzo Bianconi, and Margaret Murata have acknowledged, appear to have been more important also in sheer number of performances.¹³ And yet, the musicological community at large and scholars of Italian baroque music in particular have wielded their scholarly efforts mainly on opera rather than oratorio.

The discourse on genre and the related issue of the role of sacred music was of direct relevance to the place and context of oratorio performances: the idea that different types and styles of music all had their appropriate time and place. Alaleona saw little future for Perosi's oratorios—which were performed sometimes in churches, sometimes in theatres—because they had lost their "historical basis".¹⁴ Alaleona's acute grasp of the symbiotic relation between music and performance venue and historical and social 'reasons' for the musical genres seems remarkably modern, but he was not alone in seeing a devotional context as a prerequisite in order for an oratorio to function and to be understood properly. Somewhat less emphatically, Pasquetti and Schering made similar arguments. Schering, for instance, who himself was a Protestant, remarked on Perosi's oratorios that they were not well received in Germany because they were

¹¹ This is not to say that the genre itself and its ideological import have not been studied and questioned, but on the meta-level of *what* it is we occupy ourselves with in the first place the status of opera has remained unchallenged.

¹² Hill, "Oratory music in Florence, II", 250. Of course, when the opera season was Carnival, then it were those months rather than the summer that constituted opera's main period.

¹³ Margaret Murata, [Review of *L'oratorio musicale italiano e i suoi contesti (secc. XVII-XVIII): Atti del Convegno internazionale, Perugia, Sagra musicale umbra, 18-20 settembre 1997*, ed. Paola Besutti (Florence: Olschki, 2002) and *Percorsi dell'oratorio romano, da "historia sacra" a melodramma spirituale: Atti della giornata di studi (Viterbo, 11 settembre 1999)*, ed. Saverio Franchi (Rome: IBIMUS, 2002)], *Journal of Seventeenth-Century Music* 11, no 1 (2006), § 1.1, <http://www.sscm-jscm.org/jscm/v11/no1/murata.html>: "Research of the last twelve years or so points to the likely preponderance in Italy of oratorio performances over operatic productions"; Bianconi, *Music in the seventeenth century*, 123.

¹⁴ Alaleona, *Studi sulla storia dell'oratorio*, 295: "il rapporto tra gli oratori e l'oratorio musicale era un rapporto intimo, necessario, di causa e effetto; mentre il rapporto tra la sala da concerto e l'oratorio è puramente occasionale, esteriore, e potrebbe anche cessare, senza che la sala da concerto perdesse nulla del suo essere".

oratorios “in the old sense”, which “achieve their proper effect only in oratorios or at least in an ecclesiastically attuned environment”. Moreover, they required listeners “of the Catholic confession or at least those who can willingly transpose themselves into their kind of sensibility”.¹⁵ This “historical basis” or “old sense” of which Alaleona and Schering speak—the profound connection between genre, place, and what I call ‘ritual context’ that both of them recognise as of particular importance for Italian oratorio—is essential for a full understanding of the genre.

Extending this line of reasoning, it becomes clear that music had no absolute meaning. It was used to imbue (verbal or non-verbal) messages with emotional effect in a connotational, associative connection that ideally—like the jingle or tune associated with a commercial product—made the message and the music become indistinguishable, with the words immediately calling up the melody and vice versa. It was an “associative enhancer of communication”.¹⁶ But these associations between music and connotation were multiple, in a process that the ethnomusicologist Thomas Turino has called *semantic snowballing*, a musical work’s accrual of multiple meanings over the course of time.¹⁷ These meanings were not intrinsic to the ‘work’ itself. Rather, they were the result of associations specific people (or groups of people) made between the work as realised in a specific performance, witnessed as part of a specific ritual context and as taking place in a specific place. Just how the promoters, composers, and audiences of Italian oratorios dealt with this layeredness of meaning lies at the heart of my concerns, and I believe the question is particularly acute for Italian oratorio because of its status as a genre in flux.

2. “L’oratorio aperto”: A situationist approach to the function of music

More than its eternal Other opera, Italian oratorio has appeared to scholars as “varied in institutional setting, discontinuous and multiform by artistic tradition”, leading to the conclusion that it “presents a very heterogeneous picture”.¹⁸ Like a reviewer’s characterisation of oratorio as a “slippery” genre in the 1970’s, so in the 1800’s E.T.A. Hoffmann described oratorio as a *Zwittergattung* (a “hybrid” or, literally, a “hermaphroditic” genre).¹⁹ An oratorio performance in Florence in 1712 at the Compagnia di S. Jacopo al Nicchio provoked Pasquetti’s comment that such was the oratorio in Florence: “so great and so strange in its most disparate tendencies to the

¹⁵ According to Schering, Perosi’s oratorios were judged as concert works, whereas “sie doch Oratorien im alten Sinnen sind und nur in Betsälen oder zum mindesten in einer kirchlich abgestimmten Umgebung zur richtigen Wirkung kommen können. Sie erfordern zudem Hörer katholischen Bekenntnisses oder doch solche, die sich willig in ihren Stimmungskreis versetzen können” (Schering, *Geschichte des Oratoriums*, 603).

¹⁶ Brown, “How does music work?”, 1.

¹⁷ Turino, “Signs of imagination”, 235-37.

¹⁸ Bianconi, *Music in the Seventeenth Century*, 123.

¹⁹ Helen E. Baker, Review of: Howard Smither, *A History of the Oratorio: 2. The Oratorio in the Baroque Era; Protestant Germany* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1977), *Musical Quarterly* 65:1 (1979), 128-33: 129. Hoffmann quoted in Dahlhaus, “Zur Problematik der musikalischen Gattungen”.

sacred and the profane, to cult and spectacle, to art and ceremony!"²⁰ Alaleona stated that, being "a compromise between the *melodramma* and the Oratorian meditation, ... the musical oratorio resulted a hybrid form, a mixture of representation and narration".²¹ A performance of an oratorio by Perosi was referred to by one newspaper as "this sacro-profane premiere".²² Comments along the line of baroque oratorio as "half devotional and sacred", of it being "based upon more or less religious texts" and performed by confraternities in a "more or less devotional context", or in palaces, "where they functioned as quasi-secular entertainments", show similar concerns.²³ Howard Smither summarised that the contexts of oratorio performances between 1660 and 1720 ranged from "ostensibly religious" to "purely secular" (presumably excluding "purely religious" contexts), and Taruskin speaks of the "Handelian model" of oratorio as "secular works on (usually) sacred themes".²⁴ But does not the very fact an *oratorio* rather than something else was performed *ipso facto* belie the possibility of a purely secular context? And how are we to understand a secular work on a sacred theme?

The vacillating between secular and sacred is persistent. But this small anthology, which could easily be extended with further examples, points at something further. The expressions they use—discontinuous *and multiform; heterogeneous; slippery; Zwittergattung; disparate tendencies; compromise; hybrid form; mixture; sacro-profane; half; more or less; quasi; ostensibly*—are the recurrent semantic indicators of a liminal and ambiguous status. Don Neville's response to his self-posed question whether "a Metastasian oratorio is, in reality, a sacred *opera seria*" captures in its hesitant suspension points precisely this: "Well ... yes ... but not really", he concludes, "because as soon as one of those two genres approaches the other too closely, that is what it becomes, and so loses itself".²⁵ Neville renders explicit what is implicit in many of the previous comments. Oratorio appears tossed between Scylla and Charybdis; or, put in Neville's psychological terms of "losing itself", it is consistently perceived as in an identity crisis.

This vocabulary of ambiguity implies that oratorio sits in a liminal space between categories, in particular between the secular and the sacred. However, it is more than liminal (in the sense of "occupying a position at, or on both sides of, a boundary or threshold", OED 2), because the line that divides the sacred from the secular is not straight but blurry. In fact, it transpires that the discussions on the genre's identity and the wavering between the sacred and the secular were not merely perplexities *about*

²⁰ Pasquetti, *L'oratorio musicale in Italia*, 396-97: "Tale era l'oratorio di Firenze, così grande e così strano nelle sue più disparate tendenze al sacro e al profano, al culto e allo spettacolo, all'arte e al cerimoniale!", "non fu più possibile distinguere l'oratorio dal melodramma".

²¹ Alaleona, *Studi sulla storia dell'oratorio*, 293-94: "L'oratorio ... fu un compromesso del Melodramma con la meditazione oratoriana. ... l'Oratorio musicale riuscì una forma ibrida, mista di rappresentazione e di narrazione".

²² "questa *première* sacro-profana" (quoted in Rinaldi, *Lorenzo Perosi*, 106).

²³ The first expression in Tcharos, *Opera's orbit*, 47, the second expression is taken, by way of example, from Poultney, "The Oratorios of Alessandro Scarlatti," 100 and in the unpagged preface. The last two come from Smither, *History of the oratorio*, 1:258.

²⁴ Smither, *History of the oratorio*, 1:361; Taruskin, *History of Western music*, 3:163.

²⁵ Neville, "Opera or oratorio?", 606.

oratorio, but this ambiguous status was itself a defining characteristic of oratorio *as* a genre. In other words, more than a mere question of definition, or an identity to be clarified, its status is that of something intrinsically unresolvable and fluid, an equilibrium that is carefully maintained through a discourse that continuously undermines stability.

There is often an ingrained angst for things that fall outside the system of classification or between its categories—“Any structure of ideas is vulnerable at its margins”, the anthropologist Mary Douglas has said in an influential book on purity, and “all margins are dangerous”.²⁶ Because musically, performance context-wise, and as a genre *tout court* it manoeuvred between the secular and the sacred (a system of classification if ever there was one), oratorio was potentially subversive and dangerous. This emerges clearly from a letter that the Roman Oratorian Mariano Sozzini sent to his Florentine peers in 1677, in which he agrees to the reintroduction of music in their oratory at the condition that, among other things, “the vanity of the music does not destroy the devotion of the prayer gathering, as to some degree the devil has achieved at our oratory in Rome, where we sweat blood to counter the disorder of the music, and every day we loose ground”.²⁷ These preoccupations were in fact a not uncommon, and this is not by chance, for I would argue that Italian oratorio was from the outset a deliberately ambiguous creation, and that it was precisely this ambiguity, this body with two souls—to adopt Paolo Prodi’s well-known characterisation of the early modern Papal State—that made it so eminently suitable for musically (re)negotiating the sacred and the secular in society, and using the one to serve the other.

At the same time, however, practical examples show that Italian oratorio’s fundamental ambiguity between the realms of the Sacred and the Secular was resolved—but even then only tentatively and temporarily—by actual performances, framed as these were by the specific places and ritual contexts in which they took place. But this was no one-way process; oratorios themselves could shape and call into question the status of their performance location. A performance of Perosi’s *La Resurrezione di Cristo* in 1898 attended by five thousand people including the Roman nobility had some newspapers comment that SS. Apostoli in Rome, where the event took place, was “no longer a church, but a theatre”. On the other hand, a performance of *La risurrezione di Lazzaro* in Venice’s La Fenice theatre earlier that year had, according to another newspaper, the opposite effect of having so “enraptured” the audience that “it thought itself not in a theatre, but in a place of worship, no less”.²⁸ Such opposites underline exactly the mediating role of Italian oratorio between the church and the theatre, and its apparent ability to transform the sacred into the secular and vice versa ‘merely’ through its interaction with the place and context of its performance—or, more

²⁶ Douglas, *Purity and danger*, 150.

²⁷ Morelli, *Il “tempio armonico”*, 185 doc. 405: “che la vanità della musica non distrugga la devotione dell’oratorio, come in qualche parte il demonio ha guadagnato col nostro oratorio di Roma, dove sudiamo sangue a rimediare i disordini della musica, e ne restiamo con scapito giornalmente”.

²⁸ “non era più una chiesa ma un teatro”, “non gli par d’essere in un teatro, ma in un luogo sacro addirittura” (contemporary newspapers quoted from Rinaldi, *Lorenzo Perosi*, 105, 97).

forcefully put, it could be seen to hallow secular spaces as well as invade and desecrate the realm of the sacred. More generally, this drives home the inaptness of any essentialist or abstract account of the cultural meaning or function of an Italian oratorio—even of one specific musical work—and hence the need for a rigorously situationist interpretation grounded in the particularities of specific performances.

3. *Comparison and contextualisation: A methodological quandary*

Yet, focusing on specific performances and their contexts without taking into account how the same works functioned elsewhere provides only half or less of the story. The criticism expressed some years ago by the anthropologist James Clifford that his discipline “privileged relations of dwelling over relations of travel”, can also be raised against much music historiography.²⁹ While in recent years a number of publications on the circulation of music and musicians in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries have worked from the premise, as formulated in one of them, that “one cannot study the history of musical life in Europe without studying the circulation of musical works”, a closer look at this work suggests a discrepancy between this intention and the approaches actually taken.³⁰ On the whole, many of the studies that expressly take the circulation of music as their starting point have tended to favour specific geographic areas or locales as the way through which to view the phenomenon of circulation. They elucidate what repertoire arrived at a certain place and how it arrived there, the processes of adapting it to local requirements and tastes, the contexts of its performances in these new locales, and how these local contexts created new meanings. Like an observant at a train station, they chronicle arrivals and departures from a fixed vantage point, providing more a picture of the station than of the trains and the passengers, so to say. Others have addressed the actors—musicians, impresarios, patrons, etc.—involved with the circulation and performance of music, following the journeys of one or more of them and exploring their role in the circulation and performance of musical works, but these, too, have in so doing moved away from the circulation of musical works.³¹

All of this work has provided valuable insights into the circulation of music, but in most of it the actual circulation of the musical works themselves has moved to the background in favour of accounts of influx and reception from fixed vantage points, be they places or people. This ‘influx approach’ to circulation methodologically marginalises a core aspect of the very practice it sought to explore. The relative inattention to the actual circulation of musical works directly affects studies of local performance contexts, for the interest in specific performances always tacitly implies a degree of comparison. The specificity of a performance is, after all, the degree to which it differs from a previous or next one, and this can only be grasped by making

²⁹ Clifford, “Traveling cultures”, 99.

³⁰ Rasch, “Introduction”, 1.

³¹ See *Circulation of music* (consider its thematic sections: “Countries and cities”; “Publishing and purchasing”; “Repertoires and reception”; “Assimilations and appropriations”); *Eighteenth-century diaspora; Le musicien et ses voyages*. Despite their titles, the actual circulation of music is still less prominent in *Francesco Cavalli: La circolazione dell’opera veneziana*, and in *Produzione, circolazione e consumo*.

comparisons. A full view of the migrations and mutations of a libretto or musical work over the course of time can, through the resulting juxtaposition of the various guises in which 'one' work appeared, provide a tangible view of the different uses to which it was put. Paradoxically, then, while it has become a topos in the historiography of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Italian *opera seria* that these works "existed during their runs and revivals in a ceaseless maelstrom of negotiation and revision, existing in a multitude of versions", as Richard Taruskin has summarised it recently, the actual multitude of versions itself is little studied.³² Given the "amazing persistence in the reuse of libretti", as another recent study of the genre has it, this dearth is regrettable, because in so doing it leaves unused a formidable source for exploring how local contexts shape the meaning and function of musical performances.³³

The interest in specific locales, performance contexts, and human agency of recent studies on the circulation of music seem to do so because accounts of changes in taste borne out only by the various versions of a libretto or score run the risk of staying on the level of generic histories of style. They ought, in fact, to be grounded in an understanding of the interests and motivations of actual people and all the other contingencies of each specific performance. There is good historic justification for such an attentiveness to human agency and performance events when dealing with early modern music, but the importance attributed to agency and performance events has unwittingly led to an unjust association of work- or text-centred approaches with perforce a disregard for human agency. For although "the view that things have no meanings apart from those that human transactions, attributions, and motivations endow them with" is well justified, "this formal truth does not illuminate the concrete, historical circulation of things", as the anthropologist Arjun Appadurai has written in a different context—"for that we have to follow the things themselves, for their meanings are inscribed in their forms, their uses, their trajectories".³⁴

Mutatis mutandis, such as the fact that we are considering not the lives of physical objects as such but those of texts and music in their various material and performative guises—an important distinction on which I cannot expand here—, I contend we could do with more following-of-the-thing-itself also when studying the circulation of music. It is precisely by following one and the same work that we grasp how human transactions, attributions, and motivations endow it with different meanings. Hence, we ought not only to contextualize but also to compare. I am interested, then, in the various and changing functions of one 'cultural product' as it moved through time and through space, in what kind of meaning was created by whom, and how this was achieved (or at least attempted). In fact, to take the text and a score rather than specific performances as the start of an analysis would almost inevitably lead to the pitfall of essentialist interpretations of intrinsic meanings. In other words, to fully accept the premise that

³² Taruskin, *Oxford history of Western music*, 2:33-34. Indicative is the attention given to the circulation and revision of opera in Bianconi, *Music in the seventeenth century*, 190-204; 220-37. Similar comments e.g. in Strohm, *Italienische Opernarien*, 1:9, and Glixon and Glixon, *Inventing the business of opera*, 172.

³³ Feldman, *Opera and sovereignty*, 6.

³⁴ Appadurai, "Commodities and the politics of value", 5.

meaning is temporary, continually (re-)constructed in the mind of the listener— influenced by both his own horizons of expectation and memories as well as by the framework provided by the librettist, composer, but also the context in which a performance takes place—entails putting historically and spatially located performances centre stage. “The text of music is a performance”, as Carolyn Abbate has succinctly put it.³⁵

While such a contextual approach to interpretation is not new in the field of music studies, often such investigations tend to look at the reception and production of *various* works in *one* place. However, when trying to understand how a reservoir of potential meanings was actualised in different realisations of a work, it is arguably through comparisons of *one* work in *various* places that both the importance of the (poetic and musical) text and that of the context in creating the meaning of a performance best appear. Some years ago Christopher Small deplored the fact that “it is rare indeed to find the act of musical performance thought of as possessing, much less creating, meanings in its own right”.³⁶ Given its ambiguous status and the volatility of its many possible meanings, the need to write a history of music as a history of performances appears particularly necessary for Italian oratorio.

Such an effort “to analyse how things—the same things—change meaning according to the different configurations, the different systems of tension in which they are positioned” is akin, I would suggest, to the historian Angelo Torre’s “contextual and comparative reading of devotional practices” in early modern Piedmont. It allows one to derive larger-scale views from detailed analyses of specific local situations.³⁷ By the same token, focusing on the circulation of specific oratorios will yield multiple readings and usages of one and the same work, providing a series of variations on a theme. In short, I suggest writing *cultural biographies* of musical works that trace the various uses to which they were put.³⁸ Ultimately, the accumulation and comparisons of such cultural biographies is the only way to write a history of the Italian oratorio that does justice to its inherent ‘openness’ and ambiguity at the level of the genre *tout court*.

This two-fold need of providing both agent-based accounts of the *trajectories* of specific Italian oratorios—to stick with Appadurai’s terms—as well as exploring up-close their different *forms* and *uses*, is the core methodological problem. While the first concern brings into the picture an exponentially growing number of people with every new documented performance of the same work, expanding the network of interacting agents that brought a work from one place to the next and that were subsequently involved in its performance, the second demands a fine-grained and multi-faceted account of the particularities of each and every performance context in which these works functioned. My project at the Italian Academy aims to focus on the second of

³⁵ Abbate, *Unsung voices*, 12.

³⁶ Small, *Musicking*, 4.

³⁷ Torre, *Il consumo di devozioni*, resp. pp. 17, 344, for the quotations, and pp. 14-18 more generally.

³⁸ On the concept of cultural biography in this sense, but as applied to objects, see Kopytoff, “Cultural biography of things”, as well as the various perspectives in Brower Stahl, “Material histories”, and, specifically on objects in 17th-century Rome, Ago, *Il gusto delle cose*.

these two elements. It does so by looking at one performance context—the Palazzo Ranuzzi in Bologna in the early 1700's—which saw performances of a couple of oratorios of which I traced the trajectories and discussed the different performance contexts and functions (necessarily more cursorily given the number of performances) in my dissertation.

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