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The Capital of Scenery: Time, Labor,
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For decades, Gioachino Rossini attracted many artists to Paris¹. They were not only singers. The set designer Domenico Ferri also owed his arrival on the French stage to Rossini. It was in the following terms however that one of Ferri's closest friends, Paolo Sarti—chief accountant in Bologna at the Ospedale Maggiore—reflected in 1836 on the reasons which had led Ferri to Paris:

The flattering letters from Cav Rossini were what made you decide to abandon Naples. Yes my friend, no one will be able to persuade me of the contrary of what I thought then and still think now, namely that Rossini, who was then in Bologna, used flattering promises to tempt you to Paris. And you see now how he keeps them to you. But how is it possible that you do not want to recognize that this notorious miser gives nothing, promises much, and instead takes away! that he seeks only its own interest even at the cost of sacrificing others²!

If the portrait of the composer as a miser is striking in Paolo Sarti's letters³, it should not overshadow the indications given here on the uncomfortable position of the set designer himself. Born at the very end of the 18th century⁴, [p. 56] Domenico Ferri spent a third of a century designing sets for such theatres as Naples' Teatro San Carlo or the Paris Italian Opera⁵.

¹ List of RISM abbreviations: F-Pan: Archives Nationales, Paris; F-Pn: Bibliothèque nationale de France, Département de la Musique, Paris; F-Po: Bibliothèque nationale de France, Bibliothèque-musée de l'Opéra, Paris.

² Letter from Paolo Sarti to Domenico Ferri, Bologna, 2 February 1836, F-Po, NLAS-957 (10), also transcribed by VALERIA RUBBI, *Francesco Cocchi, Domenico Ferri. L'eredità di Antonio Basoli "Maestro" di scenografia*, Bologna, Minerva, 2017, pp. 178-182: p. 178: «furono le lusinghiere lettere del Cav. Rossini che ti determinarono ad abbandonare Napoli. Sì amico, niuno potrà persuadermi al contrario di quello che allora pensai e penso tuttora, e cioè che Rossini, che allora era in Bologna, t'invitasse a Parigi con lusinghe grandissime. E tu vedi poi ora come te le mantiene. Ma possibile che tu non voglia persuaderti che quell'avaro manifesto nulla dà, molto promette, e invece toglie! che cerca solo il proprio interesse anche a costo di sacrificare altrui!». All translations are mine unless otherwise stated—Rossini's implication in Ferri's arrival at the Théâtre-Italien is well-known to Rossinian scholars; see notably *Gioachino Rossini. Lettere e documenti* [from here on GRLD], edited by Bruno Cagli and Sergio Ragni, Pesaro, Fondazione Rossini, 1992-, vol. III, n. 810, pp. 298-299; vol. V, n. 1088, pp. 164-165. See also GRLD, vol. III, n. 936, p. 568; n. 940, p. 580; n. 942, pp. 585-586; n. 949, p. 603; n. 968, p. 641.

³ Cf. letter from Paolo Sarti, Bologna, 20 January 1835, F-Po, NLAS-957 (4).

⁴ Domenico Ferri's date of birth is uncertain. According to ANGELO MERCATI, *G. Rossini raccomanda al cardinale Bernetti una petizione del pittore Domenico Ferri*, «L'Archiginnasio. Bollettino della Biblioteca comunale di Bologna», XXVI/10 (1931), p. 265, Ferri was born 1797. However, the date of 1795 is reported in the existing bibliography devoted to Ferri, notably: MERCEDES VIALE FERRERO, *La scenografia: dalle origini al 1936*, in *Storia del Teatro Regio di Torino*, edited by Alberto Basso, Torino, Cassa di Risparmio, 1980, III, p. 404; AMALIA PACIA, «Ferri, Domenico», in *Dizionario biografico degli italiani*, Roma, Istituto della Enciclopedia italiana, 1997, XLVII, available online at: https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/domenico-ferri_%28Dizionario-Biografico%29/ (last access 20 July 2023); *Domenico Ferri*, in *Dall'Accademia al vero. La pittura a Bologna prima e dopo l'Unità*, edited by Renzo Grandi, Bologna, Casalecchio di Reno, 1983, pp. 127-130, see p. 130; TULLIO CALORI, *Il molinellese Domenico Ferri*, Molinella, Grafiche BIME, 2012.

⁵ FRANCO MANCINI, *Le scene, i costumi*, in *Il teatro di S. Carlo 1737-1987*, Napoli, Electa, 1987, III, p. 123. On Ferri's activities at the Théâtre-Italien, see CÉLINE FRIGAU, *Un Bolognais à Paris. Domenico Ferri peintre-décorateur du Théâtre-Italien*, «Schweizer Jahrbuch für Musikwissenschaft», 28-29 (2008/09), pp. 115-149; VALERIA RUBBI, *Il soggiorno parigino di Domenico Ferri: dalla scenografia alla pittura in Crocchia e capitale della migrazione artistica: forestieri a Bologna e bolognesi nel mondo (secolo XVIII)*, edited by Sabine Frommel,

At the Accademia di Belle Arti in Bologna, he was one of Antonio Basoli's pupils⁶. Basoli, who under Rossini's recommendation was offered a ten-year contract in 1818 as a set designer at the San Carlo, refused to leave Bologna⁷; but two decades later, Ferri was recruited by the San Carlo administration. In the meantime, Ferri had frequently collaborated with Rossini—starting with the many sets he created for some Rossinian Italian productions, including *Cenerentola* (1818), *Eduardo e Cristina* (1820), *La donna del lago* (1822), *La gazza ladra* and *Il barbiere di Siviglia* (1823), *Semiramide* (1825, 1826), *Otello* (1827), *Zelmira* (1828), or *L'italiana in Algeri* (1829)⁸. Such a fruitful collaboration with the composer was very likely decisive for Ferri's recruitment in Paris in 1829, when the administration of the Théâtre-Italien was actively looking for a Bolognese painter. Before Ferri, Pierre Luc Charles Ciceri, active at the French Opera since 1810, had held the position since January 1826. But Ciceri was Italian only in name. «La maniera italiana» came along with Ferri⁹, who stayed as the official set designer of the Paris Italian Opera until the beginning of the 1850s.

The only visual traces which remain of all of his activity as a set designer, however, are some twenty prints scattered across various institutions¹⁰, and a handful of sketches conserved by the Bolognese Pinacoteca, [p. 57] the Fondazione Cini in Venice and the Morgan Library in New York¹¹. The Bibliothèque-musée de l'Opéra in Paris (BnF) conserves much administrative material and, since 2011, a collection of a hundred letters sent to Ferri or to his assistant Verardi, which give detailed insights into the cultural and economic life of the time, but also more specifically into Ferri's diverse activities¹². Indeed, Ferri's longevity as the Paris Italian Opera's

Bologna, Bologna University Press, 2013, pp. 513-525; CÉLINE FRIGAU MANNING, *Chanteurs en scène. L'œil du spectateur au Théâtre-Italien (1815-1848)*, Paris, Honoré Champion, 2014, pp. 384-406.

⁶ In a broader art historical perspective, Valeria Rubbi sheds light on Ferri's importance as an heir—along with another set designer from Bologna, Francesco Cocchi—to the Bolognese School of painting, cf. RUBBI, *Francesco Cocchi, Domenico Ferri*. On Basoli, see ANNA OTTANI, «Basoli», in *Dizionario biografico degli italiani*, Roma, Istituto della Enciclopedia italiana, 1970, VII, available online at: https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/antonio-basoli_%28Dizionario-Biografico%29/ (last access 2 February 2023), and *Antonio Basoli. Ornatista, scenografo, pittore di paesaggio 1774-1848. Il viaggiatore che resta a casa*, edited by Fabia Farneti and Eleonora Frattarolo, Bologna, Minerva, 2008.

⁷ See ANTONIO BASOLI, *Vita artistica di Basoli Antonio*, Bologna, Accademia di Belle Arti, Gabinetto dei Disegni e delle Stampe, F4 28, c. 57, published as *La vita artistica di Antonio Basoli*, edited by Fabia Farneti and Vincenza Riccardi Scassellati Sforzolini, Bologna, Minerva, 2006, p. 139.

⁸ On Domenico Ferri and Gioachino Rossini's relationship, see RUBBI, *Francesco Cocchi, Domenico Ferri*, pp. 107-108, and MERCEDES VIALE FERRERO, *Staging Rossini*, in *The Cambridge Companion to Rossini*, edited by Emanuele Senici, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004, pp. 204-215, see p. 210.

⁹ See FRIGAU, *Un Bolonais à Paris*, pp. 118-121.

¹⁰ Mainly the Istituto Nazionale per la Grafica in Rome, the Museo teatrale alla Scala in Milano, the Houghton Library at Harvard University in Boston, and the Bibliothèque-musée de l'Opéra in Paris. The latter conserves a collection which includes eighteen prints related to French productions, mostly published in Paris in a series entitled *Choix de décorations du Théâtre Royal Italien*. These prints concern a dozen operas: three by Vincenzo Bellini, *Norma*, *I Puritani* and *La sonnambula*; two by Gioachino Rossini, *Matilde di Shabran* and *Otello*; two by Gaetano Donizetti, *Marino Faliero* and *Anna Bolena*; two by Giuseppe Persiani, *Ines de Castro* and *Il fantasma*; and *Malek-Adel* by Michael Costa. The Bibliothèque-musée de l'Opéra also conserves twelve prints related to some of his Italian productions, published by LORENZO RUGGI, *Raccolta inedita di cinquanta scene teatrali*, cf. *Raccolta inedita di cinquanta scene teatrali le più applaudite nei teatri italiani disegnate ed incise da Lorenzo Ruggi pittore di decorazioni in Bologna*, [s.l.], [s.n.], [s.d.], F-Po, C-546 or F-Pn, 4-RIC-6.

¹¹ For a reproduction of Ferri's drawing entitled *Medieval prison* conserved in the Morgan Library and Museum (Department of drawings and prints, Oenslager Box 28, inv. 1982.75:216), see <https://www.themorgan.org/drawings/item/187824>. For reproductions of the sketches conserved by the Pinacoteca nazionale in Bologna (Gabinetto dei Disegni e delle Stampe, inv. 1569) and by the Fondazione Giorgio Cini, Gabinetto dei Disegni e delle Stampe (inv. 34107, 34108, 34109, 34110, 34111), see RUBBI, *Francesco Cocchi, Domenico Ferri*, pp. 122, 125-127, 129.

¹² See F-Po, NLAS-956 (1-8); 957 (1-14); 958 (1-33); 959 (1-18); 960 (1-20). For a transcription of nine of the letters, see RUBBI, *Francesco Cocchi, Domenico Ferri*, pp. 167-186. For a digital version of the letters included in F-Po, NLAS-957 (1-14), see the online catalogue of the BnF (<https://catalogue.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/cb450482323>). I

official set designer from 1829 until 1852 must not conceal the transitory, inconstant and even precarious condition of his life and career between Bologna, Naples, Paris and London. Nor should such praise distract from the striking variety of his work as a set designer, but also interior decorator, painter, theatrical agent or even trafficker of paintings, books, or hats¹³. How are we to evaluate the importance of this variety and precarity at a specific time for a theatrical institution?

My intention here is to contribute to the ongoing research devoted to the scenographic iconography of Rossinian operas¹⁴, delving into a range of archival discoveries—starting with the mainly unpublished letters now conserved at the Bibliothèque-musée de l’Opéra—in order to investigate the process and politics of operatic spectacle, with a special focus on two [p. 58] key parameters of staging, namely time and logistics. When presenting his seminal hypothesis of a «saddle» or threshold time (*Sattelzeit*) between 1750 and 1850, Reinhart Koselleck identified two characteristic aspects: firstly, the expansion of the perception of European space following the Napoleonic conquests, and secondly the acceleration of time with the advent of new communication technologies¹⁵. For Koselleck, modernity has caused a perceptible acceleration of individuals’ experience of time due to the increasingly immediate communication of news across widening spatial limits. Now, it is not only Ferri’s multifarious activities that need to be contextualised with regard to French and Italian traditions, but also the parameter of time itself in operatic staging.

1. Time Has Taken Its Toll: Sceneries’ Ambiguous or Absent Legacy

«There is no-one who has not thought, while attending the performance of an opera or ballet: “It is truly unfortunate that so many splendid sets, so many charming costumes and beautiful corteges, disappear without a trace”», observed Théophile Gautier in 1845¹⁶. The well-known

discovered this series of letters in 2010 in a French bookshop that specializes in historical documents. All my gratitude goes to Pierre Vidal, then director of the Bibliothèque-musée de l’Opéra (BnF), who immediately accepted to acquire the letters for the Bibliothèque nationale de France. My warm thanks to Jean-Michel Vinciguerra, who is in charge of manuscripts and visual collections at the Bibliothèque-musée de l’Opéra (BnF), for all of his help in navigating and identifying these complex correspondences. I am also grateful to my translator, Nicholas Manning, and to the anonymous reviewers for their constructive suggestions and comments.

¹³ Of course, this diversity is to a certain extent common for other set designers of the time: in his *Vita artistica*, Antonio Basoli retraces his various commitments as a designer, interior decorator, architect, landscape painter and professor at the Accademia di Belle Arti, see BASOLI, *Vita artistica di Basoli Antonio*, now *La vita artistica di Antonio Basoli*.

¹⁴ Apart from VIALE FERRERO, *Staging Rossini*, pp. 204-215, see notably: MERCEDES VIALE FERRERO, *Per Rossini. Un primo tentativo di iconografia scenografica*, «Bollettino del Centro rossiniano di studi», 22 (1982), pp. 5-28; ELENA POVOLEDO, *Le prime esecuzioni delle opere di Rossini e la tradizione scenografica italiana del suo tempo*, in *Rossini 1792-1992. Mostra storico-documentaria*, edited by Mauro Bucarelli, Perugia, Electa, 1992, pp. 285-313; *Rossini sulla scena dell’Ottocento. Bozzetti e figurini dalle collezioni italiane*, edited by Maria Ida Biggi and Carla Ferraro, Pesaro, Fondazione Rossini, 2000; *Otello. Un percorso iconografico da Shakespeare a Rossini*, edited by Mauro Tosti Croce and Cesare Scarton, Pesaro, Fondazione Rossini, 2003.

¹⁵ REINHART KOSELLECK, *Introduction*, in *Historical Basic Concepts*, edited by Otto Brunner, Werner Conze, Reinhart Koselleck, Stuttgart, Klett-Cotta, 1979, I, pp. XIII-XXVII; ID., *About the Need For Theory In Historical Science*, in *Theory Of Historical Science and Practice Of History Teaching*, edited by Werner Conze, Stuttgart, Klett-Cotta, 1972, pp. 10-28.

¹⁶ THÉOPHILE GAUTIER, *Les beautés de l’Opéra. Souvenirs de théâtre d’art et de critique*, in *Les beautés de l’Opéra, ou Chefs-d’œuvre lyriques illustrés par les premiers artistes de Paris et de London, avec un texte explicatif rédigé par Théophile Gautier, Jules Janin et Philarète Chasles*, edited by Jean-Baptiste Giraldon, Paris [Soulié, 1845], Eugène Fasquelle, 1904, p. 70: «Il n’est personne qui ne se soit dit, en assistant à la représentation de quelque opéra ou de quelque ballet: “Il est vraiment regrettable que tant de splendides décorations, tant de charmants costumes, tant de cortèges magnifiques, disparaissent sans laisser de trace”».

problem, for theatre history, of sources and their availability, is particularly resonant with regard to scenography:

All this luxury, all this magic, all this art spent in vain, all these lavish riches which must [...] be buried forever in the dust of storerooms, inspire regret in the most indifferent spectator, [...] and, in order to find once more the living impression, we must search through the memoirs and periodicals of the time, and still we find there only incomplete descriptions, as when we describe things that everyone already knows¹⁷.

For Gautier, this material is necessarily a disappointment. On the one hand, these images and descriptions may be influenced or even dictated by an institution's communication strategy: they idealise the stage designer's work, and of course reflect the expectations of audiences rather than [p. 59] those of today's scholars. On the other hand, the impressions or fleeting memories of critics and spectators tend to express criteria which, at the time, were considered so obvious and widespread that they were often concealed behind generic terms.

A lack of sources is a frequent problem when considering the Paris Italian Opera, and more particularly Domenico Ferri. We have no *journal de la régie*, no *livret de mise en scène*, no original sketches, which would allow us to retrace his activities. Far from offering a snapshot of the stage, the lithographs and etchings printed after performances give an apparently idealized version. Carefully elaborated, with detailed ornamentation, they often expand on the richness and proportions of the set. But the sketches do not necessarily more accurately reflect what was indeed happening on the stage¹⁸. Of course, they were drawn by the set designers themselves, while the prints were made by other artists, at least two collaborating on each print, with his own style and status: draughtsman, engraver, lithographer or publisher. As I have previously argued, Ferri's aesthetics can nevertheless be perceived in the various styles of each of these individuals¹⁹. The sketches, however, were prepared before the performance, and their final state did not necessarily correspond to the initial project. It would thus be inappropriate to rigidly compare the prints with the sketches, with the idea that the latter are in fact closer to the scenic reality. Neither the sketch nor the print reproduce the actual set to which both refer. In both, specific perceptive filters—those linked to criteria of editorial images or to the standards of representation of staging practices—overlap. Both are subject, however, to the need to reduce large three-dimensional scenic structures to small-sized paper formats. Roland Barthes remarked on the same phenomenon with regard to clothing in *The Fashion System*: the actual dress, the photographed dress and the described dress are equivalent but not identical, as the

¹⁷ *Ibid.*: «Tout ce luxe, toute cette féerie, tout cet art dépensé en pure perte, toutes ces richesses prodiguées, qui doivent [...] s'ensevelir à tout jamais dans la poussière des magasins, inspirent une pensée de regret au spectateur le plus indifférent [...] et il faut, pour en retrouver l'impression vivante, aller feuilleter les mémoires et les feuillets du temps, et encore vous ne trouvez là que des descriptions incomplètement indiquées, comme on les fait lorsqu'on parle de ces choses que tout le monde connaît».

¹⁸ On the function of these sketches and prints, see notably MERCEDES VIALE FERRERO, *Luogo teatrale e spazio scenico*, in *Storia dell'opera italiana. 2. 5. I sistemi: la spettacolarità*, edited by Lorenzo Bianconi and Giorgio Pestelli, Torino, EDT, 1988 («Biblioteca di cultura musicale»), pp. 1-122, then *Stage and Set*, in *Opera on Stage*, translated by Kate Singleton, *The History of Italian Opera. Part 2. Vol. 5. Systems*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2022, pp. 1-123, and MERCEDES VIALE FERRERO, *L'invenzione replicabile*, in *Alessandro Sanquirico. «Il Rossini della pittura scenica»*, edited by Maria Ida Biggi, Maria Rosaria Corchia and Mercedes Viale Ferrero, Pesaro, Fondazione Rossini, 2007 («Iconografia rossiniana», 4), pp. XXIX-LIV.

¹⁹ Cf. FRIGAU, *Un Bolonais à Paris*, and FRIGAU MANNING, *Chanteurs en scène*, pp. 403-404: Ferri used and interpreted Romantic themes and motifs. Like many set designers, he frequently used an architectural element to define the foreground and frame the entire scene, making use of lighting to attain this effect. When representing interiors, Ferri especially appreciated the rays of the sun coming through coloured stained-glass window-panes. Another lighting effect was considered specific to Ferri's style, namely moonlight, created via a play of footlights placed behind a transparent canvas. With his use of *sfumato*, this is representative of the set designer's taste for mysterious atmospheres.

real piece of clothing forms a third structure, different from the first two, even if it provides them with their apparent model²⁰.

If one compares, however, a preparatory sketch and a print which refer to the same set, a mere glance is enough to realize that the sketch and the [p. 60] print are identical. The only differences to be found are, firstly, in the techniques adopted by the different artists, and secondly, in the fact that some elements not present in the sketch are then added in the lithograph—such as lighting effects or human figures represented in very small ratio, which are less intended to indicate the set's scale than to render it more impressive and vibrant with their costumes and gestures. As Mercedes Viale Ferrero suggests, these additional elements should not be seen as mere deformations. While the artist who did the sketch made a technical product, which was only one facet of the staging practices, the lithographer sought to give an overall idea of the scene, thus striving to reproduce the spectator's general impression. Instead of considering that the authors of the prints necessarily distorted reality, we may rather imagine that this impression emanated from a desire to produce an image which is both abstract and ideal; a response to «a scenery which is both performance, narration and illustration, then invention and description»²¹.

I have elsewhere argued the limits of approaching Ferri's iconography in terms of truth or falsehood, and the risks of believing that some are closer or more faithful reflections of the actual sets of the time, while others should be discarded²². If this were our approach, our expectations would be continuously frustrated. All these images depict time on stage differently²³. The image is not a mirror: it is not an imitation of what happened on stage, but rather an elaboration, presented to the spectator in order to recall specific situations.

Time has taken its toll, but a handful of prints, a hundred letters and administrative documents—conserved mainly at the Bibliothèque-musée de l'Opéra—spectators' accounts and documents in the National Archives of Paris and Naples, can now help us retrace Domenico Ferri's activities in all their variety, at a precise time in the history of the Paris Italian Opera.

2. The Time of the Italians

The birth of the Théâtre-Italien in 1815 institutionalised the presence of Italian opera in Paris. One of the few state-funded Parisian theatres, the theatre specialized in the production of Italian operas sung in the original language by singers often originating from Italy. The French Italian Opera was not so italophile, however, in its choice of set designers.

In one of a series of articles dedicated to the institution in Marie and Léon Escudier's *La France musicale* in 1843, we read that «the painter-[p. 61]decorator's merit is to speak to the eyes with a bright, vivid, improvised eloquence [...]. In recent times the Italians have even been our masters in this regard»²⁴. Escudier's readers may likely think here of Torelli, Gonzaga,

²⁰ Cf. ROLAND BARTHES, *Système de la mode*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1967, pp. 14-15 (*Fashion System*, translated by Matthew Ward and Richard Howard, New York, Hill & Wang, 1983).

²¹ ANDREA EMILIANI, *Introduzione*, in RUBBI, *Francesco Cocchi, Domenico Ferri*, pp. 5-6, see p. 6 (my translation).

²² Cf. FRIGAU, *Un Bolonais à Paris*, and FRIGAU MANNING, *Chanteurs en scène*, pp. 387-392.

²³ In my comparison of the images with the *libretti*—in order to understand whether the depicted scene corresponds to the text and its stage directions—two contrasting cases emerged, namely the illustration of one specific scene or the condensing of several. Critical writings allowed me to delve deeper into the relationship between scenic indications, scenographic creations, and *a posteriori* illustrations.

²⁴ Cf. LÉON and MARIE ESCUDIER, *Décorations dans leurs rapports avec l'opéra*, «La France musicale», 12 November 1843, pp. 367-368, cf. p. 368: «le mérite du peintre décorateur, c'est de parler aux yeux avec une éloquence vive, saisissante, improvisée [...] les Italiens furent jusque dans ces derniers temps nos maîtres dans cette partie».

Landriani or, closer in time, Sanquirico. All of them bear witness to the importance of the Italians and their influence on French theatrical memory. Before 1843 however, the Paris Italian Opera did not employ only Italian set designers, quite the contrary. Though the Milanese Giulio Cesare Carnevali²⁵ worked there for the singer-director Angelica Catalani, he was replaced by the Frenchman Jean-Baptiste Blanchard in 1819, when the Italian Opera was placed under a shared administration with the Académie royale de Musique. Named official set designer of the Théâtre-Italien in 1825²⁶, Blanchard paradoxically found himself deprived of his workload the same year, as all orders were sent to the Ciceri *atelier*. Italian only in name, Ciceri was active at the French Opera since 1810, named head designer in 1818, and then set designer of the Italian Opera on the 1st of January 1826. He remained in this position until 1829, when the director Émile Laurent hired Domenico Ferri. Ferri stayed until 1852, becoming the longest set designer in residence at the Italian Opera.

Although successive administrators of the theatre hired French set designers, they continually showed interest for Italian scenographies. In 1818, Jean-Jacques Grasset, future director of the orchestra, was sent to Italy as a theatrical agent²⁷. In a letter written to the stage manager Persuis and material administrator Courtin, conserved at the Paris National Archive, Grasset noted how impressed he was by the staging in Milan:

I have seen here, in the great theatre of La Scala, the Ballet of the Vestal, by Mr Viganò. The spectacle is very beautiful; there is in Act I a race between four chariots, each drawn by two horses; the scene takes place in the middle of a theatre full of people and without accident. You will easily get from this account an idea [p. 62] of the grandeur of this space, which is splendid, with excellent acoustics. The sets seem to me fine and boldly painted, the colours a little more contrasted than in our paintings²⁸.

Struck by the spectacular aspects of this ballet, Grasset takes note of several differences between French and Italian traditions, especially in terms of painting. Beyond this comparison, he imagines possible fruitful collaborations between French and Italian set designers:

I think if they worked together they would be useful to one other. I made an appointment with the finest artist of this genre in Milan to ask him, as previously agreed with you gentlemen, what his demands would be in order to exercise his talents in Paris, paid either per year or per décor²⁹.

²⁵ For further biographical information about Carnevali, Blanchard, or Ciceri, cf. NICOLE WILD, *Décors et costumes du XIX^e siècle à l'Opéra de Paris. Tome II. Théâtres et décorateurs*, Paris, Bibliothèque nationale, 1993 and BARRY DANIELS, *Le décor de théâtre à l'époque romantique. Catalogue raisonné des décors de la Comédie-Française, 1799-1848: d'après les documents conservés dans les collections de la Bibliothèque nationale de France et de la Comédie-Française. Suivi d'une édition du Registre des machinistes*, Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, 2003.

²⁶ Letter from La Rochefoucauld, 9 July 1825, F-Pan, AJ 13-115/710: «Considering the zeal and talent which Mr. Blanchard has shown in painting the sets of the *Théâtre royal Italien*, I have just given him the title of painter and decorator of this theatre [...]. This title is purely honorary and does not entitle him to any particular treatment» («ayant égard au zèle et au talent dont M. Blanchard a fait preuve dans la peinture des décorations du Théâtre royal Italien, Je viens de le nommer peintre et décorateur de ce Théâtre [...]. Ce titre est purement honorifique et ne lui donne droit à aucun traitement particulier»).

²⁷ Cf. *Théâtre royal Italien. Correspondance. Personnel. Document d'archives. Registre de correspondance, [5th of June 1818-31st of December 1823]*, F-Po, AD 34, pp. 7, 103, 132.

²⁸ Letter from Grasset to Persuis and Courtin, Milano, 10 July 1818, F-Pan, AJ 13-130: «J'ai vu ici au grand théâtre de la Scala le ballet de la Vestale, de Mr Viganò [*sic*]. Le spectacle est fort beau; il y a au l'acte une course de quatre chars attelés de deux chevaux [...], cette scène se passe au milieu d'un théâtre rempli de monde et sans accident. Vous aurez facilement d'après ce récit l'idée de la grandeur de cette salle qui est réellement fort belle et très sonore. Les décorations me paraissent bien et hardiment peintes, les couleurs peut-être un peu moins fondues que celles de nos peintures».

²⁹ *Ibid.*: «Je crois que si les uns travaillaient près des autres ils se rendraient mutuellement service. J'ai pris rendez-vous avec le 1^{er} artiste de ce genre à Milan pour savoir de lui comme j'en suis convenu avec vous messieurs quelles seraient ses prétentions pour l'exercice de ses talents à Paris, soit par année soit par décoration».

Grasset is referring to Alessandro Sanquirico. Other administrative records of the Italian Opera attest to the fact that management wanted Sanquirico to come to Paris³⁰. We know, for instance, that Ciceri consulted him for the volcanic eruption of *La Muette de Portici* in 1828, and that Sanquirico sold his album of theatrical scenes to the Paris Italian Opera in 1835³¹. Appreciated for the rigor and bright colors of his graphic compositions, Sanquirico was very well-known in France, thanks largely to his prints, but also to travel writing and musical criticism³².

Why did Sanquirico not come to Paris then, and why was there no collaboration between French and Italian artists? Why was no Italian set designer hired at the Paris Italian Opera before Ferri? Carnevali was refused the position in 1824, not only because he was a painter of architecture and not of landscapes, but primarily because he was not French. As a letter conserved at the Bibliothèque de l'Opéra demonstrates, the theatre's [p. 63] directors, unlike Grasset, refused any possible collaboration. This refusal was not merely a matter of taste:

the Italian way of painting sets is in no way related to the French one: impression, craftsmanship, effect, everything is different [...]. It follows from the particular methods of each school that it would be impossible for Mr. Carnevali to combine the different parts of the sets conserved in our storerooms, because they were crafted in the French manner, and it would thus be necessary to make, for each work, a new set, which according to the Italian practice would be included in the painters' wages³³.

The main difference between French and Italian practices relies then on a culture of conservation: valuing, on the one hand, what already exists and striving to make it last, and on the other, maintaining a culture of novelty and high productivity. Unlike his Italian colleague, the set designer in France paints *and* repaints; this is a different approach to temporality which, as we shall see, Domenico Ferri shared with the French.

The reason why Ferri was chosen in 1829 by the director Émile Laurent—on the recommendation of Édouard Robert and Carlo Severini, future directors of the Théâtre-Italien³⁴—was precisely because he would be useful in the struggle against material deterioration in the new Paris Italian Opera. Once the period of shared administration with the Académie royale de Musique had ended, the theatre strove to free itself from the hold taken by Ciceri and his crescendoing demands. And when, on the 15th of October 1829, Ferri's sets for the *première* of *Matilde di Shabran* were well received, the Paris Italian Opera was clearly adopting a new Italian policy³⁵. «By hiring the *Bolognese* painter», *Le courrier français* noted

³⁰ F-Po, AD 34, pp. 20-21.

³¹ Note by C. Severini quoted by WILD, *Décors et costumes du XIX^e siècle à l'Opéra de Paris*, t. II, p. 93: «Sanquirico can only give me the sets of Pompei with the whole album which he had engraved and coloured, and which he will let me have for 12 pounds when I want it» («Sanquirico ne peut me donner les décorations de Pompei qu'avec tout le volume qu'il a fait graver et colorier et qu'il me cédera pour 12 louis quand je voudrais [*sic*]»). The album was indeed bought and is conserved by the Bibliothèque-musée de l'Opéra, F-Po, B-299.

³² Sanquirico was considered a model, cf. for example *Théâtre royal italien. Première représentation de «Zelmira»*, «Journal de Paris», 16 March 1826, pp. 2-3, cf. p. 2: «There is a nice set in Zelmira, a landscape; the most distant part of it, on the left, is worthy of Sanquirico, who in this genre is the greatest living painter» («il y a dans *Zelmira* une jolie décoration; c'est un paysage; le lointain, à gauche, est digne de Sanquirico qui, dans ce genre, est le plus grand peintre vivant»).

³³ Letter by the Paris Italian Opera administrators to the King's Minister, 1 May 1824, F-Po, AD 35, pp. 51-52: «la manière italienne de peindre les décorations n'est nullement en rapport avec la manière française : impression, métier, effet, tout est différent [...] il résulte du faire particulier de chaque école, qu'il serait impossible à M. Carnevali de raccorder les parties des décorations prises dans nos magasins, pour la raison que celles-ci ont été confectionnées à la française, et qu'alors, il faudrait, pour chaque ouvrage, une décoration neuve, habitude d'ailleurs que les peintres italiens ont dans leurs gages». Daniels indicates the existence of a file dedicated to Carnevali's request, F-Pan, AN 03/1740, cf. DANIELS, *Le décor de théâtre à l'époque romantique*, p. 24.

³⁴ In 1829, Édouard Robert was officially «inspecteur du personnel et du matériel» of the Théâtre-Italien, and Carlo Severini was «regisseur», under the supervision of Émile Laurent, director until October 1830.

³⁵ Cf. FRIGAU, *Un Bolonais à Paris*, pp. 124-127.

in 1829, «Mr. Laurent has done an agreeable thing for his subscribers, which may not be useless to our other theatre companies»³⁶. Édouard Robert was aware though of the importance of reserving the public congratulations for his own future administration³⁷. A few months before becoming, [p. 64]



Source gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France

fig. 1: Vittore Pedretti, *Théâtre Royal Italien*. *Salon dans l'opéra «Matilde de [sic] Shabran» par Mr Ferri*, aquatint after set by Domenico Ferri. Paris, [s.n.], [1829]. Paris, BnF.

after Laurent, the director of the Paris Italian Opera, Robert concluded: «Ferri was successful. We should have a good Italian painter in order to get out of the clutches of Ciceri and Co», agreeing with Severini's «excellent idea to keep [Ferri] for three years, even paying him from year to year, and having him repaint all our sets»³⁸. Creation as well as conservation were thus

³⁶ *Théâtre italien. Première représentation du [sic] «Nozze di Lammermoor»*, «Le courrier français», 14 December 1829, p. 3: «en engageant le décorateur bolonais, M. Laurent a fait une chose agréable à ses habitués et qui peut-être ne sera pas inutile à nos autres entreprises théâtrales».

³⁷ Cf. F-Po, LAS Th. It. (2-3), letter from É. Robert to C. Severini, 16 October 1829: «It would be good to avoid him doing too many sets for Laurent, in order to keep for ourselves this golden goose, and to display ourselves in all the freshness of his talent» («il faudrait éviter qu'il fasse beaucoup de décorations pour Laurent, afin de garder ce moyen de succès pour nous et de nous montrer avec toute la fraîcheur de son talent»). See also the letter from É. Robert to C. Severini, 22 September 1829, F-Po, LAS Th. It. (2-2). At this point in time, Robert was in Italy searching for exceptional singers to hire for the upcoming season.

³⁸ Letter from É. Robert to C. Severini, Bologna, 12 March 1830, F-Po, LAS Th. It. 1 (2-9): «Rapport à Ferri votre idée est excellente de le garder pour les 3 ans même en le payant à l'année en lui faisant repeindre toutes nos décorations. [...] Ferri a eu du succès, il nous convient d'avoir un bon peintre italien pour nous tirer des griffes des Ciceri et Cie». The idea is repeated in the next letter of the same day, F-Po, LAS Th. It. 1 (2-10): «Concerning Ferri—we should try to keep him even if we have to pay him from year to year. Your idea of taking advantage of the 3 years left in his contract in order to make him repaint all our sets is excellent, and if we don't have Ferri we'll need to have someone else» («Rapport à Ferry. Il faudrait bien tâcher de le garder même en le payant à l'année.

the two missions that the new directors bestowed upon Ferri, and they sought to justify having hired him from July 1 on—long before the reopening of the season on October 2, 1830—in the following terms: «Concerning Ferri, we have to hire him from July 1 onwards as Laurent wants to dismiss him [p. 65] from this date, and it suits us because he will work in advance on our sets and renew all our old stuff»³⁹. Indeed, Domenico Ferri's approach to his status and to temporal parameters encourages us to think differently of one of the most widespread of French staging practices: the *réemploi*, or re-use of previous sets.

3. Sets In or Out of Time: Typologies, Genres, Influences

Ferri's prints reflect scenographic standards of the time, tied to Romanticism or more widely with the staging practices inherited from a long history and consecrated by administrative rules. These images obviously show sets which are utterly in phase with Romanticism. They depict arsenals and fortresses, medieval castles, nocturnal forests, gothic interiors and exotic exteriors. Not only the types of places chosen, but also the codes of representation used, correspond to a generic Romantic to-



fig. 2: Villemin del., *Théâtre Royal Italien. Vestibule dans l'Opéra de «Malek-Adel» par Mr. Ferri*, lithograph after set by Domenico Ferri. Paris, Benard & Frey, [1837].

[p. 66]

Votre idée de profiter des 3 ans de son engagement pour lui faire repeindre toutes nos décorations est excellente et si nous n'avons pas Ferri il faudra en avoir nécessairement un autre»).

³⁹ Letter from É. Robert to C. Severini, Bologna, 24 April 1830, F-Po, LAS Th. It. 1 (2-10): «Rapport à Ferri il faut le prendre dès le 1^{er} juillet puisque Laurent veut s'en défaire dès ce terme-là et cela nous convient parce qu'il travaillera à nos décorations d'avance et renouvellera toutes nos vieilleries».



Source gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France

fig. 3: [Anon.], *Théâtre Royal Italien. Le couvent du Mt. Carmel. 3^e Acte «Malek-Adel» (Opéra)*, lithograph after set by Domenico Ferri. Paris, Thierry frères, [1837].

pography. The lithography depicting the hall of the opera *Malek-Adel*⁴⁰, for example, presents the viewer with complicated, dense «Arabian» architecture. According to the lithographer's vision, in 1837 Ferri's set made use of a widespread pictorial model of the 1830s, namely the arcade opening out onto a landscape beyond. Of course, this model also referred to the «Moorish» architectural style, as it was termed in the standard staging practices of the time. It is within the limits of these codes, as Ferri himself wrote, that we must approach «the well-ordered performances which must be as faithful a mirror as possible of the places and events shown on the stage»⁴¹.

When more carefully analysed, these standards seem paradoxically to be both in and out of time. When Ciceri was still working at the Paris Italian Opera, the set designer and directors signed a decree «on the creation

[p. 67]

⁴⁰ VILLEMEN, *Théâtre royal Italien. Vestibule dans l'Opéra de «Malek-Adel» par Mr. Ferri*. Lithograph, 36 × 55 cm (f.), Benard & Frey, 1837. F-Po, EST. SCÈNES Malek-Adel (1).

⁴¹ Request from Domenico Ferri of the 11 June 1834, Naples, National Archive, Teatri, 116, quoted by FRANCO MANCINI, *La scenografia sancarlina all'epoca di Donizetti*, in *Donizetti e i teatri napoletani nell'Ottocento*, edited by Franco Mancini and Sergio Ragni, Napoli, Electa, 1997, pp. 89-102, cf. p. 92: «spettacoli bene ordinati che devono essere lo specchio il più fedele che sia possibile dei luoghi e dei fatti che mettono in Scena».



Source gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France

fig. 4: Luigi Verardi del., Martens sc., *Théâtre Royal Italien. Salon dans l'opéra «Otello» par Mr. Ferri*, aquatint after set by Domenico Ferri. Paris, [s.n.], [183.]. Paris, BnF.

of sets required for scenographic execution»⁴². The decree, dated March 13 1822, lists nine different types of sets: skies, landscapes and military camps, and six kinds of architecture—rural, military, maritime, civil, noble, majestic and fantastic. Two main distinctions were made according to a spatial and temporal partition: interiors and exteriors on the one hand, and modern and ancient sets on the other. «Ancient» in this case means far away in both time and space, and is specified by other adjectives such as Moorish, Roman, Persian, Egyptian, Turkish, Arabic, Greek, Asiatic, or even Chinese and Peruvian. Obelisks and pyramids are synecdoches here of Egyptian architecture, colonnades and fountains of Moorish scenes. The «different kinds of landscapes» of the modern style also rely on detail for their effect; the catalogue is more specifically rustic, full of internal and external views of cottages, mills, cellars, factories, villages decorated with plants, flowers, and agricultural tools. The latter function as allusions to the entire scene, representing the scenic and unreal reality of *opere buffe* or *semiserie*.

[p. 68]

⁴² Decree of 13 March 1822, Paris, F-Pan, AJ 13-109: «la confection des décors nécessaires à l'exécution scénographique». On this decree, cf. FRIGAU MANNING, *Chanteurs en scène*, pp. 373-377; JANET L. JOHNSON, *The Théâtre Italien and Opera and Theatrical Life In the Restoration*, unpublished Ph.D. Diss., Chicago (IL), University of Chicago, 1988, pp. 376-379.



Source gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France

fig. 5: Luigi Verardi del., Vittore Pedretti sc., *Théâtre Royal Italien. Salle d'armes dans l'Opéra «I Puritani»*, aquatint after set by Domenico Ferri. Paris, [s.n.], 1835. Paris, BnF.

The prices of the sets vary in exact accordance to their degree of picturesque. The views of «mountains, forests, grasslands, [...] rivers, streams» are cheaper, more economical, firstly because they are not practicable, and secondly because, being more generic and «perceived in the distance», they do not require the same accurate treatment as other vistas. In contrast, the «mountains, forests, rocks, waterfalls, pleasant or hellish caves» along with the landscapes called «agreeables»—with their full range of traditional *loci amœni* (in Italian *scene amene* or *deliziose*: gardens adorned with flowers and statues, pleasant countrysides, waterfalls)—and finally «full and dark» landscapes, cost much more, especially the «big and beautiful forests, sacred or enchanted woods, decorated with caves and underground caverns». These so called «modern» topologies are certainly in no sense more realistic than «ancient» scenes; for after all, set designers create a space interspersed with symbolic details meant to conjure a present as imaginary as the past.

Whereas the adjective «modern» in the decree is sufficient unto itself, and needs no more qualifying descriptors, «ancient» has revealing synonyms: «fabulous», derived from *fabula* (in Latin, a fictional story or play), underlining the fact that the past is meant here to feed and stir the imagination; «heroic», referring less to a specific period or country than to a generalised iconic effect, featuring heroes, exemplary gestures

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Source gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France

fig. 6: Jean-Louis Tirpenne, *Théâtre Royal Italien, moulin, dans l'opéra de «La sonnambule», par M.r Ferri*, lithograph after set by Domenico Ferri. Paris, Benard et Frey, [1831]. Paris, BnF.

and energetic scenes. We can thus glimpse here a certain vision of history, which opposes the present to the past, with no continuity between the two. There is no question of timeless models of places and types, inscribed within celestial topologies; the time of deities has passed.

A few lines are sufficient to describe the tenth type of sets, namely the «fantastic» ones, which include palaces of the Gods, adorned with all their attributes, and embellished with allegorical figures in all their glory. If no additional details are provided, is it because they are so conventional that there is nothing more to say than what we already know? Is it because such sets are only rarely ordered and thus are perhaps less well maintained? In 1830, eight years after the 1822 decree, the Vicomte de La Rochefoucauld regretted «that the staging of the works of the old repertoire, particularly those whose subjects are taken from mythology, is as neglected as it is and somehow sacrificed». In this case, «there is no pomp and style [...] the sets have deteriorated, accessories and costumes in bad taste are in almost complete disharmony with the subject and pieces and space of the stage itself»⁴³. Seven years later [p. 70] still, Gautier expressed his annoyance when Ferri, in *Lucia di Lammermoor*, presented «a painting in the set of the first act which figuratively depicts Jupiter's fight against the Titans: one cannot imagine

⁴³ Letter from La Rochefoucauld, 31 May 1830, F-Pan, AJ 13-123: «que la mise en scène des ouvrages du vieux répertoire, de ceux particulièrement dont les sujets sont empruntés à la mythologie, soit aussi négligée qu'elle l'est et sacrifiée en quelque sorte. [...] Il y a absence de pompe et de style, [...] les décorations sont détériorées, les accessoires de mauvais goût et les costumes en désharmonie presque complète avec le sujet et des pièces et le lieu de la scène».

anything more absurd»⁴⁴. Certain elements which continued to appear in the topologies of 1820 were no longer acceptable in 1837; but in the ancient and modern sets, standard topographies did not seem to significantly evolve from Ciceri to Ferri, a fact which allowed the Paris Italian opera, when hiring the Bolognese set designer, to insist both on the creation of entirely new sets and the *réemploi* of others.

4. A Stitch in Time Saves Nine: the Logistics of Scenery Creation

It may seem surprising that, on the question of re-use, an Italian set designer adopted an approach that appears so thoroughly French. Indeed, Ferri studied at the Accademia delle Belle Arti in Bologna, whose courses were no more specialized in set design than any other art school in Italy or France, but which was heir to the Bolognese School of painting in which the Bibiena tradition was still very much alive. Ferri started to work in the city at a young age, as demonstrated by the chronologies of performances (reconstituted from the *libretti*) at the Teatro Comunale. He also worked with Antonio Conti in Venice in 1818-19, at the San Samuele e San Luca theatres, and in Lugo and Bologna (at the Teatro Contavalli) in 1819-20⁴⁵. The number of operas would have been impressive to a spectator of the Paris Italian Opera house: the Parisian repertoire was far more limited, and Ferri had the opportunity in Italy to contribute to works which were never staged in Paris or London⁴⁶.

In Bologna, Ferri designed sets used for at least 23 works (operas and ballets), from 1817 to 1833, including several Rossinian operas: *Tancredi* in January 1817, *La donna del lago* in September 1822, *Semiramide* in October 1825, *Sigismondo* (again by Rossini) in 1827, *L'italiana in Algeri* in January 1828, *Il barbiere di Siviglia* in January 1829. He also made sets for *Pietro il Grande* by Donizetti in [p. 71] December 1823, *Il re Teodoro* by Paisiello in 1825, *Il torneo* by Giuseppe Baglioli in November 1826, *Ser Marcantonio* by Stefano Pavesi in February 1827, and *I Capuleti e i Montecchi* by Bellini in November 1833. As Mercedes Viale Ferrero reminds us, two staging practices coexisted in Italy at that time, and were often interrelated. Smaller theatres had a stock called 'di dotazione' (literally, 'dowry'): eight, nine or sometimes ten sets, which could be used for the majority of scene changes required by the libretti; more could be added if necessary. Only major opera houses (La Scala in Milan, the San Carlo in Naples, La Fenice in Venice, the Teatro Regio in Turin, and several others) provided new sets each season, but only for opere serie. Sets for opere buffe were not very frequently updated⁴⁷.

In this context, Ferri rarely worked alone: each set was often given to two or more painters. Ferri thus collaborated with painters such as Francesco Bortolotti, Gaetano Burcher, or

⁴⁴ THÉOPHILE GAUTIER, *Histoire de l'art dramatique en France depuis vingt-cinq ans*, Leipzig, Hetzel, 1858, I, p. 81: «un tableau dans la décoration du premier acte, où est figuré le combat de Jupiter contre les Titans: on ne saurait rien imaginer de plus saugrenu».

⁴⁵ For a general timeline of Ferri's engagements, see RUBBI, *Francesco Cocchi, Domenico Ferri*, pp. 105-118.

⁴⁶ Cf. *Chronologie synthétique des opéras représentés au Théâtre royal Italien du 1^{er} janvier 1815 au 23 décembre 1848*, and *Liste alphabétique des compositeurs joués au Théâtre royal Italien (1815-1848)*, in FRIGAU MANNING, *Chanteurs en scène*, pp. 569-628 and pp. 687-691. Less than 40 *maestri* are represented in the Paris Italian Opera's repertory, and more than half of them had only one or two of their operas performed. Rossini's works are the most frequently represented, but the Parisian audience saw only 18 of Rossini's operas, *Il barbiere di Siviglia* and *Otello* being the most appreciated, with 316 and 217 performances respectively. There were only 8 operas by Bellini and 13 by Donizetti during the period, the most successful of which saw no more than 100 performances.

⁴⁷ Cf. VIALE FERRERO, *Staging Rossini*, pp. 204-215.

Luigi Martinelli⁴⁸, or with others, who frequently appear in Ferri's letters, such as Mauro Berti (because of the rivalry between the two men)⁴⁹ or Antonio Basoli (Ferri's professor at the Accademia and subsequent rival as well)⁵⁰. In comparison to Paris—where, since the 1830s, the *libretti* frequently mentioned the name of the head set designer, or even of his assistant, next to the names of the librettist and composer⁵¹—the aesthetics of the scenery for one opera was not associated with just one name. Only the major Italian opera houses employed the most famous set designers, associating their names with the season's novelties and the institutions' prestige.

However, set designers in Naples, like their Bolognese colleagues, worked as a team, a point demonstrated by a letter sent to Ferri in 1835 which refers to «a tent, which was entirely the fruit of Angiolini's efforts, covered everywhere with coloured figures, in natural size», and of two of the four scenes of *Ines de Castro*: «one was a burial place, showing a counterpoint of two lights, that is to say the moon, and the fire. Such a work deserved to be esteemed for its effect; it had been made by the painters Belloni and Gentili. The other depicted a Gothic hall and was signed Pelandi and Angiolini». The San Carlo painters worked however «under the direction of the Cav[alie]r[e] Nicolini», the head set designer⁵². Even [p. 72] though the latter's status was clearly superior in terms of prestige, this does not mean that the staging depended on an individual critical relationship established by the head set designer with the entire opera, requiring his aesthetic interpretation of the work. The creation of the sets was orchestrated by the head set designer, not merely in terms of aesthetics but also logistics.

This helps to shed light on the letter that Gherardo Bevilacqua Aldobrandini—one of Rossini's librettists, who had recently been entrusted with the sets and costumes of the San Carlo⁵³—sent to Ferri in January 1834. In order to convince him to work in Naples, Bevilacqua underlined «all the facilities» to which Ferri would have access:

Think of the honor of being the painter of this great theatre, [...] Think of how I managed to specify in the lighting director's contract that he would have to answer only to the painter, and that the painter would be able to put as many lights as he wished, and where he wished, and in whatever form he may see fit. I managed to specify in the costume designer's contract that all sketches of the costumes, as well as the fabrics used, must be shown to the set designer, and that the ballet composer would also have to show you the choreographies of his dances⁵⁴.

⁴⁸ Cf. SERGIO PAGANELLI, *Repertorio critico degli spettacoli e delle esecuzioni musicali dal 1763 al 1966*, in *Due secoli di vita musicale. Storia del teatro comunale di Bologna*, edited by Lamberto Trezzini, Bologna, Alfa, [1966], 1987, II, pp. 21-43.

⁴⁹ In 1836, Berti was offered the professorship that Ferri himself had requested, see the letter from Paolo Sarti to D. Ferri, Bologna, 2 February 1836, F-Po, NLAS-957 (10). Another pupil of Basoli, Francesco Cocchi, had applied for the same position and was hired a few years later, in 1846, when Berti died, aged 60.

⁵⁰ See the letter from Paolo Sarti to D. Ferri, Bologna, 22 October 1834, F-Po, NLAS-957 (3).

⁵¹ The libretti published for *I briganti* (Saverio Mercadante), *Corrado di Altamura* (Federico Ricci), *Don Pasquale* (Gaetano Donizetti), *Il fantasma* (Giuseppe Persiani), *Norma* (Vincenzo Bellini) all mention Ferri.

⁵² Letter from Pietro Ferretti to D. Ferri, copied by Pietro Sarti in a letter from Naples, 17 February 1835, F-Po, NLAS 956 (4): «una tenda, che fu tutta fatica dell'Angiolini, essendo intieramente coperta di figure a colori, e di grandezza naturale»; «Una rappresentava un luogo sepolcrale, essendovi il contrappunto di due luci, cioè della luna, e del fuoco. Un tal lavoro meritava di essere considerato per il suo effetto; fu eseguito dai Pittori Belloni, e Gentili. L'altra figurava una Sala Gotica del pennello dei S.i Pelandi, e Angiolini»; «Le scene del 12 scorso Gennaio giorno di Gran Gala furono dipinte dai consueti Artisti sotto la direzione del Cav.r Nicolini».

⁵³ In 1834, impresario Domenico Barbaja lost the concession of the San Carlo which was given to the *Società d'Industria e Belle Arti* composed, along with Barbaja, by Terziani, Onofrio Petagna, Fortunato Caffora, Vincenzo Flauto and Antonio Niccolini. The first decision they made was to dismiss Canna and to call upon Ferri.

⁵⁴ Letter from Gherardo Bevilacqua Aldobrandini to Domenico Ferri, Naples, 30 January 1834, F-Po, NLAS-958 (1): «Pensate all'onore di essere pittore del teatro massimo, [...] io poi quivi vi farò godere di tutte quelle facilitazioni che potrete mai godere. Avvertite che ho fatto mettere in patto di scrittura all'Illuminatore che dipenda univamente dal pittore, e che sia il pittore in arbitrio di mettere quanti lumi le piaccia, e dove le piaccia, ed in

Bevilacqua also added that he was ready to make available to Ferri his 5 thousand books and 10 thousand prints. All this does not mean that the set designer would have acted like an ancestor of the modern stage-director, orchestrating his own critical interpretation of an opera. Ferri was told three times that he would simply need to «limit [his] demands», and was informed that he would thus be «declared painter of the Royal Court Theatres»⁵⁵. Prestige and authority were very likely meant to compensate for the lack of economic and artistic means.

This is what several accounts (such as Édouard Robert's) had previously confirmed: «What decrepitude this beautiful theatre has fallen [p. 73] into!», exclaimed the future director in 1829⁵⁶. In a request sent immediately after his appointment in June 1834, Ferri presented the lack of economic means as the main reason why he felt unable to work at the San Carlo theatre. A few years later, in 1839, the set designer Antonio Niccolini wrote a text entitled *Abbozzo della nuova organizzazione della Scuola di scenografia [Project for the new organization of the School of scenography]*, in which he expressed regret at the slight budget made available for the sets, compared to the Paris and London opera houses, in order to justify both Ferri's departure and his own⁵⁷. Ferri's position was not so simple, however, and cannot be reduced to the economic factor. Demonstrating his yearning for higher status accorded to his art and his own person, the Bolognese set designer invoked his international «experience, acquired by travelling in countries where scenography is infinitely more advanced than in Italy and the Kingdom of Naples». According to Ferri, the problem was not merely economical in nature: he confessed that he was himself «unable, with the means available there» not only to work, but «to establish a good *system* of sets that could satisfy the justifiable expectations of an educated audience, accustomed to well-ordered performances». Ferri then specifies the main criterion of the art of scenography: «to be as faithful a mirror as possible of the places and events represented on the stage»⁵⁸.

The main negative points of the Neapolitan situation in Ferri's eyes may be summarised as follows: a «lack of machines suited to the movement of sets», a too small and too poorly paid team of painters and, crucially, an unbalanced relationship between the output of time, energy and creativity for «spectacles of too short a life» which «sometimes die before their birth»:

for these sudden visions requiring great expense, and the meditations of various intelligent and educated minds, it is simply not worthwhile to waste so much capital, in money, time and creativity, just to see

qualunque forma le piaccia. Ho fatto mettere in patto di scrittura al costumista l'obbligo di far vedere tutti li figurini al pittore delle scene, e le stoffe di cui si servirà, come pure i compositori di balli daranno la pianta de' loro Balli [...]. Io ho 5 mila volumi di libri, e 10.mille stampe che farò venire a Napoli, e saranno per voi in tutti li vostri bisogni. Quivi sarete padrone del Museo, e Gallerie per copiare e far copiare tutto quello che vi farà bisogno. Ho parlato al Cav. Bosco, ed al Duca di Serra Capriola ciambellani intimi del Re per farvi in seguito dichiararvi pittore de' Teatri di Corte nelle ville Reali, e spero di riuscirvi... Ma per amor del Cielo limitate le pretese, e fate in modo che possiamo avervi qui con noi».

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*: «e perciò limitando le vostre pretese lusingherete la Società a prescegliervi, ed io poi quivi vi farò godere di tutte quelle facilitazioni che potrete mai godere»; «Ho parlato al Cav. Bosco, ed al Duca di Serra Capriola ciambellani intimi del Re per farvi in seguito dichiararvi pittore de' Teatri di Corte nelle ville Reali, e spero di riuscirvi... Ma per amor del Cielo limitate le pretese, e fate in modo che possiamo avervi qui con noi».

⁵⁶ Letter from É. Robert to C. Severini, Naples, 10 December 1829, F-Po, LAS Th it (2-4): «Dans quel vieillessement ce beau théâtre est-il tombé!».

⁵⁷ ANTONIO NICCOLINI, *Abbozzo della nuova organizzazione della Scuola di scenografia*, 1839, Naples, National Archive, Teatri, 2, quoted by MANCINI, *La scenografia sancarlina all'epoca di Donizetti*, p. 99: «più volte mi sono ritirato per non farmi complice di un cattivo servizio, e [...] Ferri gli abbandonò per la stessa ragione. D'altronde se si debbono trarne esempi dall'estero, perché non dire quanto si spende nelle decorazioni a Parigi e a Londra. Allora si vedrebbe che veramente a Napoli si spende tre grani».

⁵⁸ See footnote 38 above.

all these damned efforts fall into nothingness. Only sets made like improvised poems suit the *system* now in use: ones which do not cost much, do not last very long, and have no value⁵⁹.

[p. 74] According to Ferri the problem is thus systemic, a point illustrated by the repetition of the term «system». A stitch in time saves nine, and the set designer would like to make sets built to last, even if he has to take care of them in order to make them last longer. His approach towards his art is thus economic: like his financial budget, time and creativity constitute here a form of capital, which must be wisely invested in order to generate interest (in both primary senses of the term). Being systemic and not simply contextual, the problem cannot be resolved by a response to his request. Ferri thus distanced himself from a system he considered overly wasteful in terms of temporal, material and human resources. Following *Don Giovanni tenorio*, performed on July 6 1834, Ferri left for Paris.

Another reason for Ferri's departure may have been the censorship and majority support given to his rival Niccolini. Ferri gave some of his intermediaries the task of getting articles published for him. His friend Pio Sarti, for instance, was asked several times in 1835 to write about Ferri's work (and even his Parisian creations) in Neapolitan newspapers⁶⁰. Due to censorship this was not always possible. In Paris, Ferri found a very different state of affairs: there was no merciless censorship, but rather a press ready to support him, anticipating the effect of his sets and extending their reach, thus prolonging their duration both before and after the performances.

In Paris, Ferri therefore hoped to find a different system, one based on conservation more than on creation: a system in which there would even be «a Government agent responsible for the sets' conservation», replete with his own on-site office⁶¹. Indeed, until the end of his time at the Paris Italian Opera, Ferri was contractually obliged to create new sets but above all to restore existant ones and supervise their staging⁶². He thus found his place in a system founded upon what he called the «capital» of time, imagination, and labor, and which valued scenographic work in duration.

[p. 75]

⁵⁹ Request from Domenico Ferri, 11 June 1834, Naples, National Archive, Teatri, 116, quoted by MANCINI, *La scenografia sancarlina all'epoca di Donizetti*, p. 92: «Qui mancano macchine idonee al movimento dei cambiamenti di decorazioni, i decoratori sono pochi e mal retribuiti, gli spettacoli di cortissima vita e qualche volta muoin nel nascere per cui l'apparizione in scena di queste subitanee visioni richiedendo grandi spese, meditazioni non poche di menti intelligenti ed istruite, non varrebbe la pena di dissipare tanti capitali di denaro di tempo e d'ingegno per vedere tutti questi sforzi biasimati cader nel nulla. Con il sistema fin'ora adottato non sono compatibili che decorazioni fatte nel modo dei versi all'improvviso che poco costano, poco durano, e nulla valgono».

⁶⁰ Letters from Pio Sarti to Domenico Ferri, Naples, 18 November 1834, 2 January 1835, 21 February 1835, 25 May 1835, F-Po, NLAS-956 (2, 3, 5, 7). On the question of censorship, the first letter is especially eloquent. Pio Sarti was a fervent patriot, the uncle of another active patriot, Marco Minghetti. Both took part in the *Moti di Bologna* in 1830-1831. Along with teachers at the Barnabite boarding school where Minghetti was educated, including Ugo Bassi and Alessandro Gavazzi, Sarti is named by Alberto Banti as one of the points of reference who led him towards valuing ideas of liberty and *patria*; see ALBERTO MARIO BANTI, *The Nation of the Risorgimento: Kinship, Sanctity, and Honour in the Origins of Unified Italy*, translated by Stuart Oglethorpe, London, Routledge, 2020, p. 27.

⁶¹ Cf. F-Pan, F21 1113/I, «Confidentielle sur le Théâtre Royal Italien de Paris», from the Police Commissioner to the Minister of the Interior, Paris, 21 May 1836, pp. 13-14: «Il y a bien un commissaire du Gouvernement chargé de veiller à la conservation des décors. Par sa demeure dans le théâtre même et ses rapports journaliers avec le Directeur il pourrait donner des renseignements utiles, mais moyennant des faveurs réciproques, l'accord est parfait entre eux».

⁶² F-Pan, AJ13-1163, *Administration et comptabilité 1830-1862, 4. Administration. M. Ferri. Décors*, Contract between Ronconi, Ferri and Verardi, from [18] January 1849 to 28 February 1850.

5. Clocking in, Clocking out: Ferri's Aesthetic Production in Terms of Labor and Capital

Time in attendance and in absence is a crucial factor in every theatrical agreement. It was specified in Ferri's Neapolitan contract, as demonstrated by a letter written by Pio Sarti (who administered the set designer's affairs in Naples) in September 1834. While giving Ferri some advice and helping him to explain his departure, Sarti mentioned the «strict obligation of attendance, from the moment the contract is accepted». Sarti tried to get around this requirement, arguing that Ferri had not been informed of the «immensity of the task on the one hand, and of the lack of means on the other»; he thus sketches an epic portrait of the guileless, cheated set designer, faced with «obstacles», «labors», «impossibilities» and «refusals»⁶³. Ferri, however, had already left for France.

At this point, Paolo Sarti, his friend and accountant in Bologna, felt betrayed, and his words seem to imply that Ferri had lied to him: «Was there no obligation of attendance in Paris? Was that not in the contract»⁶⁴? Ferri's time away from Naples seemed though to be an accepted fact, as a year later, while he was negotiating with Paris and London, he was pressured into accepting a Neapolitan contract because of its clause specifying the possibility of three-months' absence, «whereas neither Paris nor London would allow [him] not to be there»⁶⁵. The *Società d'industria e Belle Arti*, which administered San Carlo Theatre at the time, still hoped that Ferri would return. The same situation occurred in 1840 when Ferri was hired once more, this time by the impresario Édouard Guillaume, and disappeared again soon after.

In his contract signed with the Neapolitan theatre on April 30 1840, the name of his assistant, Luigi Verardi, frequently appears: they would share one salary between the two of them, and Verardi would replace Ferri in case of illness or absence. But if Verardi left with Ferri for Paris for six months per year, then Verardi himself would need a substitute⁶⁶. Indeed, this is precisely what occurred. Ferri thus agreed with Angelo Belloni, his colleague in Bologna, that Gaetano Ferri, Domenico's son, would replace Verardi in Naples⁶⁷. Time passed, and towards the end of November, Ferri [p. 76] still had not returned. This time, Ferri asked an intermediary to present a medical certificate for him⁶⁸. The response sent by Vincenzo Flauto,

⁶³ Letter from Pio Sarti, Naples, 9 September 1834, F-Po, NLAS-956 (1): «rigoroso diritto di presenza dall'accettazione del contratto»; «ostacoli», «fatiche», «impossibilità», «rifiuto» (all these words are underlined in the letter).

⁶⁴ Letter from Paolo Sarti, Bologna, 11 September 1834, F-Po, NLAS-957 (2): «A Parigi non eravi già obbligo che tu v'andassi? Così non era la scrittura?». This letter, while simultaneously blaming and reassuring Ferri, seems to imply that he had gone against his word not only with regard to Naples, but also Bologna, where he most likely also had contractual commitments; indeed, after 1833, he never again worked at the Comunale.

⁶⁵ Letter from Paolo Sarti, Bologna, 20 January 1835, F-Po, NLAS-957 (4); see also two other letters from Paolo Sarti, Bologna, 3 July 1835, F-Po, NLAS-957 (6), and 13 November 1835, F-Po, NLAS-957 (9).

⁶⁶ Contract between Domenico Ferri and the San Carlo Theatre, Naples, 30 April 1840, Naples, National Archive, Teatri, 83, quoted by MONICA BRINDICI, *Donizetti e i teatri napoletani: un caso giornalistico (1822-1848)*, in *Donizetti e i teatri napoletani nell'Ottocento*, pp. 103-122, cf. p. 120.

⁶⁷ Letter from Angelo Belloni, Naples, 1 August 1840, F-Po, NLAS 958 (10): «Resta dunque convenuto fra noi giusto il di lei figlio in data d'oggi ch'elli farà le veci del Sr Luigi Verardi in congedo pe' lavori scenografici di questi Reali Teatri per tutto quanto possa la mia scrittura coll'Impresa, ed io le corrisposterò per le sue fatiche ducati sessanta mensili cominciando dal presente giorno».

⁶⁸ Letter from G. Prati, Naples, 28 November 1840, copied by Antonio Gozzi, Bologna, 5 December 1840, F-Po, NLAS 958 (11): «da che portai il noto certificato a Mr Guillaume [*sic*] non più sono andato alla scenografia»; response from Antonio Gozzi, Bologna, 4 December 1840, copied by A. Gozzi himself, Bologna, 5 December 1840, F-Po, NLAS 958 (11): «Il Pittore Dom.co Ferri, mio cugino, a cui trovo diretta la grata sua del 28 9bre scaduto, partì in diligenza la notte 27 suddetto diretto a Parigi, ove credo si troverà a momenti. Di questa sua risoluzione ella ne avrà avuto un sentore nella lettera del 26 che Ferri le scrisse prima di partire, e che mi fece leggere, e in cui avrà trovato un'attestazione del nostro S.r Prof. Valorani sullo stato di salute di esso Ferri, sul bisogno che ha di riposo, e sul beneficio che potrebbe ritrarre viaggiando».

one of the six members of the *Società*, could not be clearer. He begins by placating Ferri, stating «I am very sorry to hear about your bad health», only to then add:

You have no illness, your head is sick. Believe me. Your illness is not an aneurism but rather what is called nervous hypochondria. Throw away the medicines, send away the doctors, get rid of apprehensions, you just need cheerfulness and necessary distractions [...]. I'm not telling you this to make you come and paint; but Naples' mild climate will be good for you⁶⁹.

Ferri reacted by sending another medical certificate⁷⁰. But the most interesting point in all of this is that Ferri had elaborated a complicated system of intermediaries, replacements and transferred correspondence in order to manage his absence.

Ferri gave instructions to his cousin Antonio Gozzi in Bologna and to Pio Sarti in Naples, who opened Ferri's letters, copied out the most important ones (or at least certain parts of them) and answered them if necessary⁷¹. The idea was to keep his departure for Paris a secret as long as possible, or at least to remain elusive. When communicating with Naples, Ferri often forgot to carefully date his letters: several responses from his correspondents begin with sentences such as «my dear Ferri forgot the date» or «I received your last letter dated the... (I couldn't understand the date)»⁷². An even more elaborate case is to be found in the following example: «my dearest Ferri, I eventually saw your own [p. 77] handwriting dated... that is to say undated», a sentence initially written by Pietro Ferretti, copied a few days later by Sarti in a letter which was itself copied by his cousin Gozzi two days later⁷³. Although complex, the system of letters copied beneath other letters, themselves sometimes copied again inside other letters, worked rather efficiently. Other informants in both cities could communicate precious information to Ferri or to his intermediaries, such as that concerning his employers' attitude towards his absence. This is how we know that Ferri was not paid during this time of continued absence⁷⁴.

⁶⁹ Letter from Vincenzo Flauto, Naples, 1 December 1840, copied by Pio Sarti, Bologna, 6 December 1840, F-Po, NLAS 958 (11): «Duolmi però sentirvi indisposto [...] è di mestieri che parli chiaro. Voi non avete alcun male, siete ammalato di testa. Credete a me. La vostra indisposizione non è aneurisma ma quel che dicesi ipocondriasi-nervosa. Lungi le medicine, lungi i medici, lungi le apprensioni, allegria e distrazioni necessarie. [...] Non ve lo dico perché venghiate [*sic*] a dipingere; ma l'aria tiepida di Napoli vi farà star bene».

⁷⁰ Letter from G. Prati, Naples, 4 December, copied by Paolo Sarti, Bologna, 14 December 1840, F-Po, NLAS 958 (13): «Consegnò il secondo certificato medico al Sr Forlì».

⁷¹ See for example the letter from Pio Sarti, 6 December 1840, F-Po, NLAS 958 (11): «Please find attached two letters which arrived today from Naples: Gigia opened them, according to your instructions, and I immediately copied them out for you» («Eccoti qui in seguito due lettere oggi venute da Napoli, che la Gigia, secondo i tuoi ordini, aporse, e che subitamente io ti ricopio per tua norma»).

⁷² Letters from Pietro Ferretti to D. Ferri, copied by Pio Sarti in a letter from Naples, 17 February 1835, F-Po, NLAS-956 (4): «il mio Ferri dimenticò la data»; letter from Pio Sarti to D. Ferri, Naples, 21 February 1835, F-Po, NLAS-956 (5): «Ho ricevuto l'ultima vostra in data delli... (non ho potuto capire la data)».

⁷³ Letter from Pietro Ferretti to D. Ferri, 1 December 1840, copied by Pio Sarti in a letter from Bologna, 6 December 1840, then copied by Antonio Gozzi in a letter from Bologna, 5 December 1840, F-Po, NLAS 958 (11): «Ferri mio carissimo, Ho finalmente veduto i vostri caratteri segnati colla ossia senza data».

⁷⁴ Letter from Pietro Ferretti to D. Ferri, 1 December 1840, copied by Pio Sarti in a letter from Bologna, 6 December 1840, then copied by Antonio Gozzi in a letter from Bologna, 5 December 1840, F-Po, NLAS 958 (11): «I managed to get some information thanks to my Don Carlo di Lorenzo about what these gentlemen Impresarios of the Royal Theatres think about the delay of your return to Naples. They are sorry about it but they won't prosecute you with protests or anything, firstly because you're undergoing medical examinations, but also because in the meantime they won't be sending you your monthly pay» («Mi è riuscito di sapere qualche cosa col mezzo del mio Don Carlo di Lorenzo di ciò che pensano i Sig. i Impresari di questi R. Teatri vedendo ritardare il vostro ritorno a Napoli. Nell'essere eglino dispiacenti non si propongono di inquietarvi maggiormente con proteste ed altro, e ciò perché vi trovate disteso da mediche consultazioni, e oltre ciò perché non vi fanno correre intanto il vostro assegno mensile»).

Ferri nevertheless tried to work for Naples remotely. As Gozzi wrote in December 1840, the set designer sent drawings to the San Carlo painters in order to set them to work under his virtual direction: «Ferri is in Paris: [...] I don't know how these gentlemen of the *Società* will take it: he thinks he has compensated for his absence by sending oil-painted designs of the scenes: it is something, but it is not Ferri»⁷⁵. The painters did more or less what they were supposed to do. As Sandri reported in a letter copied by Sarti, some of them (like Gentili or Sandri) seemed to follow Ferri's instructions, while others (like Belloni) failed to respect them:

We went on stage with the opera *Saffo* which was met with extraordinary success, and audiences kept calling the master Pacini back onto the stage, three or four times every night. Beautiful sets, the public had nothing to say this time, except the one by Pelandi (the interior of the Temple) which was bad. All the others were met with great acclaim. Now we have started on the sets for the Ballet. I am making the one you asked me to do, and Belloni is making the Armory, but he changed the drawing that you left. Pelandi is making the Stag Hall which was supposed to be made by Belari, and Velandri is doing nothing in the Ballet because he doesn't want to. Gentili is making the other sets, the Garden, for which you left a drawing⁷⁶.

[p. 78] When Ferri sent other drawings, along with instructions, both Belloni's bad faith and the administration's concern about the images and descriptions emerged more clearly:

Your sketches arrived this morning, Belloni, who got them from the Admin[istration], showed them to me. I asked him if you wrote, he said no. On the contrary Prati told me that along with the sketches there was a letter from you to Belloni and me. Belloni then added that there was a description accompanying the sketches, which the Admin took in order to make a copy. An hour later an usher from the Admin took away the sketches⁷⁷.

It was not only Ferri's painters' disobedience or the administrators' dissatisfaction which caused such tensions. For a long time, the administrators seemed willing to negotiate: «you will see», wrote Gozzi to his cousin, «that those gentlemen do not wish to offend you, they are afraid of the audience»⁷⁸. The real or virtual role played by the Neapolitan audience is underlined in Prati's letter from Naples, as copied out by Gozzi:

⁷⁵ Letter from Antonio Gozzi to Prati, Bologna, 4 December 1849, copied by A. Gozzi himself in a letter to Domenico Ferri, 5 December 1840, F-Po, NLAS 958 (11): «Ferri è a Parigi: [...] non so come cotesti Signori della Impresa lo sentiranno: egli crede di avere supplito alla mancanza della persona coll'aver mandati i Bozzi dipinti a olio delle scene: questo è qualche cosa, ma non è Ferri».

⁷⁶ Letter from Sandri to Domenico Ferri, Naples, 6 and 8 of December 1840, copied by Paolo Sarti to D. Ferri, Bologna, 14 December 1840, F-Po, NLAS-958 (13): «Siamo andati in scena coll'opera la Saffo che ha fatto un incontro straordinario, e non si cessa ogni sera di chiamare il maestro Pacini tre o quattro volte sul palco. Belle scene questa volta il pubblico non ha avuto che dire, fuori di quella di Pelandi (l'interno del Tempio) che era cattiva. Le altre tutte piacquero assai. Ora abbiamo principiato le scene del Ballo. Io faccio quella che voi mi ordinaste, e Belloni fa la Sala d'armi, ma ha variato il disegno che gli lasciaste. Pelandi fa la sala dei Cervi che doveva far Belari, e Velandri nel Ballo non fa nulla essendo Guerra che non lo vuole. Gentili fa l'altra scena il Giardino, che voi lasciaste il disegno».

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*: «Questa mattina sono arrivati i vostri Bozzetti, che mi furono mostrati da Belloni, che gli ebbe dall'Amm[inistratore]. Gli dimandai se voi avete scritto, mi rispose di no. Al contrario Prati mi disse che uniti ai Bozzetti voi avevate scritto a me ed a Belloni. Belloni poi soogiunse che unita agli Bozzetti vi era una descizione, la quale fu tenuta dall'Amm[inistratore] per farne una copia. Un'ora dopo un usciere dell'Amm[inistratore] si è ripreso i Bozzetti».

⁷⁸ Antonio Gozzi, 5 December 1840, F-Po, NLAS 958 (11): «Vedrai, che quei Signori non ti vorrebbero disgustare, ma hanno paura del Pubblico».

The Impresarios' dissatisfaction is caused by the fact that, because of your absence, things are not going well, and you may have already read some ironic comments concerning this in the newspaper, namely that the sets have no effect, because the colours are not high-quality &c⁷⁹.

The rest of the letter reveals the hypocrisy of the situation:

In Naples they seem to content themselves with your mere presence, if you could simply take a look at the works in order to at least dupe the audience, and to give them no reason to go complain to the Minister about your prolonged absence⁸⁰.

[p. 79] On the one hand then the theatre was ready to accept employing an on-site set designer who did not work; on the other hand, the set designer wanted to be off-site, working from a distance—that is, sending in drawings and instructions. This was not deemed sufficient, and following Ferri's dismissal from Naples, Belloni himself took his place.

In Ferri's procrastination, however, we begin to glimpse the entire definition of the work of set designer and his status. Does the designer materially construct the sets, or does he imagine, invent, create them? Is the painter a craftsman in a theatre, or an artist? Ferri was very likely concerned by this question. He most likely felt—as we may ourselves feel reading the letters sent to him—that the prestige and authority frequently underlined by his correspondents were a mere compensation for poor working conditions. When Ferri asked for better ones, even his friends disapproved: «An artist like you will venture that?», finding it overly risky: this may be the reason why «fame could not cheer the best designer in Europe»⁸¹. Ferri nevertheless attempted to receive official honours: distinctions in Rome, or a position as professor at the Accademia delle Belle Arti in Bologna. It was in vain: «a good brush, but his resolution is too unstable», Ferri had a bad reputation in Italy in a profession based largely on positive word of mouth.

The Bolognese designer happened to be as stable in Paris as he was unstable in Italy. First hired (as we previously saw) in 1829, Ferri was still working at the Paris Italian Opera in 1852⁸². He stayed there for the majority of this period, save for some stays in Naples, Bologna, or even London⁸³. This stability must not distract us from the precarity of Ferri's situation: his first contract with Robert lasted three years, one of his last contracts with Ronconi in Paris was for one year⁸⁴. According to this document, Ferri did not receive a high salary (1166,66 Francs per month), especially in comparison with the other Artists, especially the singers. This sum is more than Ciceri's, who received 6000 Francs per year in 1820; the same year, the *primo tenore* Bordogni earned 14 666,64 Francs, the *primo buffo-cantante* Pellegrini 18 749,94 Francs, and

⁷⁹ G. Prati, Naples, 28 November 1840, copied by Antonio Gozzi, 5 December 1840, F-Po, NLAS 958 (11): «Il dispiacere degli Impresari è perché le cose non vanno bene per la vostra assenza, e già avrete forse letto in questo giornale i frizzi, cioè che le scene non fanno la loro figura, perché non sono colori fini &c».

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*: «Pare che i medesimi si contentano della sola vostra presenza in Napoli, e che semplicemente daste una qualche occhiata ai lavori per così illudere almeno il pubblico, e non dare qualche motivo al Ministro di reclamo per la vostra prolungata assenza».

⁸¹ Pio Sarti in a letter from Bologna, 6 December 1840, F-Po, NLAS 958 (11): «Un Artista qual sei vorrà avventurarsi a ciò?», «lasciare che per questa meschinità che la fama non più possa acclamarti il primo scenografo d'Europa?...».

⁸² F-Pan, AJ13-1163, «Administration et comptabilité 1830-1862, 4. Administration. M. Ferri. Décors», «Rapport», [1852].

⁸³ None of Ferri's letters conserved at the Bibliothèque de l'Opéra were sent to his London address but some do deal with possible contracts in London, and we can read, in the final letter from Paolo Sarti to Luigi Verardi, Bologna, 15 August 1849, F-Po, NLAS-960 (20): «I already knew that [...] Ferri was in London with Clementina» [his wife] («Io già sapevo che [...] Ferri colla Clementina era a Londra»).

⁸⁴ Cf. F-Po, LAS Th. It. (2-9, 10, 12) and F-Pan, AN AJ13-1163, «Administration et comptabilité 1830-1862, 4. Administration. M. Ferri. Décors», Contract between Ronconi, Ferri and Verardi, January 1849 and 6 December 1849.

the *prima donna* Fodor up to 24 999,96 Francs; but the set designer's wages were twice as high as those of the librettist, and equivalent to those of the *régisseur* or the *chef des artistes*⁸⁵. [p. 80] Ferri still had to provide his own material however, such as «glue, colour, brushes, pots [...] and gilding», as Ronconi's contract stipulated. He also had to share his salary with his faithful assistant Luigi Verardi, or with more occasional collaborators such as Giuseppe Badiali, who worked with Ferri in Bologna in the 1830s and subsequently came to Paris for several months, earning 400 Francs per month⁸⁶. Ferri's strategy, as well as his team of collaborators, did not seem to change much throughout this two-decade period of Parisian residence.

Ferri's working time in Paris was optimised. Firstly because he worked both hard and quickly; in the Italian style, the architectural elements were in the foreground, and the background was pictorial, whereas the French set designers made greater use of architecture and practicables⁸⁷. French journalists underlined this fact: for the same opera, *Le courrier français* appreciated «three sets of the most beautiful effect which do not reveal the quickness with which they were painted», going into greater detail when comparing French and Italian practices:

three admirable sets improvised in less than five weeks by the Bolognese Domenico Ferri, with only one assistant. It will remain a mystery in Paris how so much work could have been done in so little time and with so few resources; Signor Ferri should definitely tell his secret to our slow and expensive set designers⁸⁸.

L'universel even suggested that the Italian set designers could serve as models for the French:

when one considers how quickly and how economically the transalpine artists execute these great machines, and with how little they produce such remarkable effects, one must hope that the benefits of the Italian method will be studied and practiced by our painters⁸⁹.

[p. 81] According to these French journalists, celerity thus seems to be one of the characteristics of Italian scenography and staging practices. Ferri of course had left Naples because he did not want to make «improvised» sets (a recurrent adjective there), «like improvised poems»⁹⁰. But he very likely found better working conditions in Paris, not only as a set designer, but for the whole gamut of his various activities.

⁸⁵ Cf. Decree of 31 January 1820, F-Pan, AJ 13-109; and «Appointements au Théâtre royal Italien: autorisations de Delaferté au caissier de l'Académie royale de Musique de verser sommes à payer à qui de droit», AN AJ 13-173. The maximum that a labourer or factory worker could hope to earn at this period was approximately 2 francs per day (cf. CATHERINE JOIN-DIÉTERLE, *Les décors de scène de l'Opéra de Paris à l'époque romantique*, Paris, Picard, 1988, p. 74).

⁸⁶ See the letter from Giuseppe Badiali to Domenico Ferri, Bologna, 2 February 1835, F-Po, NLAS 958 (10); and the letters from Paolo Sarti to Domenico Ferri, Bologna, 26 July 1835, F-Po, NLAS-958 (7), 2 February 1835, F-Po, NLAS-958 (6), and 24 February 1836, F-Po, NLAS-958 (7).

⁸⁷ Ferri's sets also presented acoustic advantages. He not only relied on a backdrop, as was custom in the Italian style, but placed his sets on the second and third planes of the stage, closer to the audience. He removed the wings of the third and fourth planes, leaving more space for the backdrop painting. The stage was enlarged on both sides, as well as from the spectator's perspective: the actor could move further along the width of the stage, while the central canvas prevented him from moving too far backwards. Indeed, the presence of an actor at the back of the stage posed problems for sight and sound. By removing the depth of field, Ferri prevented these difficulties. Cf. FRIGAU, *Un Bolonais à Paris*, pp. 126-127.

⁸⁸ «Le courrier français», 13 December 1829: «trois décorations du plus bel effet et qui ne se ressentent point de la rapidité avec laquelle elles ont été peintes», and previously, on 20 October 1829: «trois admirables décorations improvisées dans moins de cinq semaines par le Bolonais Domenico Ferri, à l'aide d'un seul adjoint. On ne comprendra pas à Paris qu'un aussi grand travail ait pu être fait en aussi peu de temps et avec aussi peu de moyens; il signor Ferri devrait bien communiquer son secret à nos lents et dispendieux décorateurs».

⁸⁹ «L'universel», 15 December 1829.

⁹⁰ Report from Domenico Ferri, 11 June 1834, Naples, National Archive, Teatri, 116, quoted above.

6. Time for Posterity?

In Italy, Ferri often accepted work as an interior decorator. This was not unusual, as set designers often made theatre curtains, roofs, or halls. It is thus pertinent to think about the aesthetic unity that such theatres could present between their stage and the auditorium, as Ferri, for instance, created the roof of the *Teatro Nicola degli Angeli* in Montelupone, near his hometown Macerata. He also took on the interior decoration of private apartments, as several letters⁹¹ illustrate, including apartments in Bologna where he had an array of problems with a commission from the famous singer Donzelli. Ferri left Bologna for Paris in October 1833 without finishing a *Prospettiva* in the beautiful new house that Donzelli had just acquired. A *prospettiva*, as Paolo Sarti defined it, was not a view of a whole set bathed in light, but rather a landscape full of elements which could possibly be seen in the actual place represented⁹². Ferri seemed very concerned with an unspecified mistake he had made in this painting and sought to protect his reputation by concealing the work following its completion. Donzelli accepted to wait: his goal was to have a work by Ferri, he affirmed when refusing to hire anyone else⁹³. Donzelli and Paolo Sarti's pressure and letters were, however, insufficient, as Ferri still had not returned to Bologna three years later⁹⁴.

Ferri did not, it seems, work on private apartments in Paris, but he did give advice to compatriots such as Giovanni Battista Sangiorgi or Timoleone Barratini. The former was a Bolognese painter who asked Ferri to recommend him as a «painter of interior decoration»; the latter was a tenor active in Bologna in the 1830s and in London in the 1840s, who relayed advice from Ferri and an order from Giulia Grisi about chairs to be gilded. Another Bolognese, Lodi, gave Ferri the dimensions of a [p. 82] room and asked him how much it would cost to decorate it with a beautiful piece of cloth, very light-coloured, and if he could also send him some drawings⁹⁵. Ferri also acted as a theatrical agent, giving an appointment to Giovanni Tadolini for a certain St-Salvy⁹⁶; or as an art agent, setting the painter Sebastiani to work restoring paintings which belonged to the singer Mario⁹⁷, or buying famous singers' portraits

⁹¹ Another good reason for Ferri to come was to work in private apartments in Naples (see the letter from Gherardo Bevilacqua-Aldobrandini to Domenico Ferri, Naples, 30 January 1834, F-Po, NLAS-958 (1). Many letters from Paolo Sarti also deal with the *Prospettiva* that Ferri was supposed to finish in the famous singer Donzelli's beautiful new house.

⁹² Letter from Paolo Sarti to Domenico Ferri, Bologna, 26 October 1833, F-Po, NLAS-957 (1).

⁹³ Letter from Paolo Sarti to Domenico Ferri, Bologna, 3 July 1835, F-Po, NLAS-957 (6).

⁹⁴ Letters from Paolo Sarti to Domenico Ferri from Bologna, F-Po, NLAS-957 (1-14): 26 October 1833 (1); 11 September 1834 (2); 22 October 1834 (3); 20 January 1835 (4); [s.d.], stamped 5 February 1835 (5); 3 July 1835 (6), 26 July 1835 (7), 23 August 1835 (8), 13 November 1835 (9), 2 February 1836 (10), 24 February 1836 (11), 29 April 1836 (12), 14 December 1840 (13), 6 July 1846 (14).

⁹⁵ Letter from Giovanni Battista Sangiorgi to Domenico Ferri, Bologna, 16 June 1834, F-Po, NLAS-958 (4); letter from Timoleone [Barattini] to Luigi Verardi, [London], 2 August 1844, F-Po, NLAS-959 (3); letter from Lodi to Domenico Ferri, Bologna, 6 September 1847, F-Po, NLAS-958 (14).

⁹⁶ Tadolini refused the offer, see his letter to Ferri, Bologna, 12 October 1850, F-Pan, AJ 13-1162. Ferri had worked several times with Tadolini in Bologna in 1822-28 when the latter was «maestro al cembalo e direttore dei cori», «maestro direttore della musica e dei cori» or composer.

⁹⁷ See the seven receipts conserved at the F-Po (NLAS-958, Sebastiani, Paris, 26 October 1849 (26, 2), 7 (26, 1) and 31 December 1849 (26, 3), 12 July 1850 (26, 4), 3 November 1850 (26, 5), 17 October 1850 (26, 6), 7 December 1850 (26, 7).

for Donzelli⁹⁸. Ferri thus oversaw and managed an important traffic and exchange of objects⁹⁹. His activities as an importer/exporter do not seem merely occasional but rather regular. It very likely allowed Ferri to earn a substantial portion of his livelihood. His activity as a painter was certainly, however, the way Ferri sought to attain posterity.

Ferri not only created sets but also drawings and oil paintings. To do so, he was able to use his studio at the Paris Italian Opera. This is at least what his contract with Ronconi stipulated in 1849 and 1850: «the painting workshop of the Italian Opera is available to Mr. Ferri and Mr. Verardi, including for their own works»¹⁰⁰. Like other set designers, Ferri mainly painted landscapes. He used to sell them or give them away¹⁰¹. The famous tenor Giovan Battista Rubini possessed several works from Ferri which can be seen today at the *Museo Rubini* in Romano di Lombardia: Parisian landscapes (*I Campi Elisi*, 1838; *Arrivo di un vapore sulla Senna*, [p. 83] *Il Louvre dal ponte nuovo sulla Senna*, 1832; *Teatro degli italiani*, 1832; *Le Louvre depuis le Pont-neuf*, *Le Pont-neuf Henri V*), calm or steep alpine scenes, or views of Calais. Graziella Martinelli Braglia identified in Ferri's art borrowings from Dutch landscape painters, from Ruisdael in particular, but also from Turner for his chromatic and vaporous palette. Ferri certainly hoped to obtain public recognition with his canvases in oil. His *Cathédrale de Caen* was displayed in Paris at the 1836 *Salon*¹⁰², and *Una fattoria* was distinguished by an award from the *Accademia delle Belle Arti* in Bologna¹⁰³.

Because of the lack of sources it is difficult to precisely address the relationship between these two types of painting. They appear to be quite separate, both aesthetically and professionally. As the singer Barattini wrote to Luigi Verardi in 1846, referring to Ferri's son, Gaetano, and his vocation as a painter:

I hope he has already understood that there are two things in his work, namely the art and the craft, the art to torment the soul and dry the liver of the poor artist, the craft to fill his purse, it is truly necessary to separate the two, otherwise you die of anger¹⁰⁴.

⁹⁸ Letters from Paolo Sarti to Domenico Ferri, Bologna, 3 July 1835 (paintings for Donzelli), F-Po, NLAS-957 (6); Bologna, 2 February 1836, F-Po, NLAS-957 (10). Donzelli wants portraits of Lablache, Rubini, Tamburini, Grisi and Pasta, but not of Rossini, Taglioni, Malibran and himself which he already has.

⁹⁹ See the letters to Domenico Ferri from Marchesa Brigida Fava Tanari, Bologna, [24 September 1836] (painting equipment and miniature glass), F-Po, NLAS-958 (23); Paolo Sarti, Bologna, 20 January 1835, F-Po, NLAS-957 (4) (books for the astronomer Girolamo Moratti, books for Giuseppe Pasta; prints for Brigida Tanari); Paolo Sarti, [Bologna], [5 February 1835] (music scores for *Maestro Corticelli* or *Liverani*); Carolina Ghedini, Severini's niece, Bologna, 9 March 1835 (gloves for the Bolognese ladies), F-Po, NLAS-958 (7); see also the letters to Luigi Verardi from L. Grabinski, Rome, 24 April 1846, F-Po, NLAS-960 (2), and Bologna, 26 October 1846, F-Po, NLAS-960 (7); in the first, he asks Verardi to go buy silk hats for his wife and Clementina Ferri.

¹⁰⁰ F-Pan, AJ13-1163, «Administration et comptabilité 1830-1862, 4. Administration. M. Ferri. Décors», contract between Ronconi, Ferri and Verardi, from [18] January 1849 to 28 February 1850: «L'atelier de peinture du Théâtre-Italien est à la disposition de Mrs Ferri et Verardi, y compris pour leurs travaux personnels».

¹⁰¹ In a letter to Domenico Ferri, Bologna, 20 January 1835, F-Po, NLAS-957 (4), Paolo Sarti asked the painter to make an oil-painting or a miniature which could be placed inside a box; see also his letters from Bologna, 26 July 1835, F-Po, NLAS-957 (7), and 29 April 1836, F-Po, NLAS-957 (12), about landscapes he received, two from Ferri and one from Verardi. In his letter to the latter, from Bologna, 15 August 1849, F-Po, NLAS-960 (20), Paolo Sarti expresses how much he regretted having lost a painting by Verardi, a copy of a Ferri watercolour; an oil-painting by Ferri of a nocturnal landscape scene; two small oil-paintings by Ferri with their frames; he stated that he conserved only three works by Verardi (a little child riding a broom, an oil painting of a beach and a watercolour of a mountain) and a sketch from Ferri (a landscape with graves for *L'assedio di Corinto*).

¹⁰² Bologna, *Collezioni comunali d'arte*; GRAZIELLA MARTINELLI BRAGLIA, *La pittura dell'Ottocento in Emilia Romagna*, in *La pittura in Italia. L'Ottocento*, Milano, Touring Club Italiano, 1991, I, fig. 370.

¹⁰³ GIULIO FERRARI, *La scenografia. Cenni storici dall'evò classico ai nostri giorni*, Milano, Hoepli, 1902, p. 232. For historical testimony, cf. [M.G.], *Belle Arti. Alcuni quadri dello scenografo Domenico Ferri*, Bologna, Tipi governativi della Volpe al Sassi, 1827.

¹⁰⁴ Letter from Timoleone Barattini to Luigi Verardi, London, 27 June 1846, F-Po, NLAS-959 (5): «Spero che egli avrà ben capito, che nella sua parte ci son due cose, cioè l'arte, ed il mestiere, l'arte per tormentare l'anima, e

The relationship between these two different types of painterly activity appears more clearly, however, in one of Ferri's works. For the place and scene it represents, as well as the more contrasted use of colour and light, the 1838 *Fire at the Théâtre-Italien* seems dramatically closer to Ferri's theatrical sets—or at least to the prints which depict them.

It may seem somewhat ironic that these prints, more than Ferri's direct activity as a set designer or painter, finally ensured his posterity. They are aimed at two different audiences: *dilettanti* on the one hand, and professionals of the theatrical world on the other. Although we do not know much about Ferri's *Choix de décorations du Théâtre Royal Italien* or the conditions of its publication and diffusion, it is in line with other collections of theatrical scenes published in the first half of the 19th century. Sanquirico's and Stucchi's collection are two famous examples of this phenomenon¹⁰⁵. As Robustiano Gironi (the director of the Brera library, where Sanquirico often went to ask for advice) put it in 1829, such albums

[p. 84]



seccare il fegato del povero artista, il mestiere per riempire la sua borsa, bisogna ben separare le due cose, altrimenti si crepa di rabbia».

¹⁰⁵ *Raccolta di varie scene eseguite dai più celebri pittori teatrali in Milano*, Milano, presso l'incisore Stanislao Stucchi, 1819; *Raccolta di scene teatrali, eseguite o disegnate dai più celebri pittori scenici in Milano*, Milano, presso l'incisore Stanislao Stucchi ed i principali Negoz.ti di Stampe, [after 1819?]; *Raccolta di scene teatrali, eseguite o disegnate dai più celebri pittori scenici in Milano, III parte ed ultima*, Milano, presso l'incisore Stanislao Stucchi ed i principali Negoz.ti di Stampe, [1829?]. Cf. *Alessandro Sanquirico. «Il Rossini della pittura scenica»*, p. x.

fig. 7: Charles Villemin, *L'incendio du Théâtre Royal Italien. Nuit du 15 janvier 1838*, lithograph after painting by Domenico Ferri. Mulhouse, Engelmann, 1838. Paris, BnF.

prolong the sets' existence beyond the transitory cycles of performances, providing future models for set designers and recollections for audiences of the time and posterity¹⁰⁶. This is because the prints register scenic im-

[p. 85] ages linked with an individual theatre, an individual set designer, or an individual work, by specifying their names. The albums' role is also didactic, as they are meant to depict architectures and landscapes from different countries and different times¹⁰⁷.

Although this notion echoes Ferri's own description of his sets as «faithful a mirror as possible of the places and events represented on the stage»¹⁰⁸, the *Choix de décorations du Théâtre Royal Italien* very likely sought to reach not only contemporary spectators and posterity, but set designers. We have already seen that Sanquirico sold his album of theatrical scenes to the Paris Italian Opera in 1835¹⁰⁹. And in a letter written by Timoleone Barattini to Verardi, we discover that Ferri's assistant sought to publish another collection of prints in England:

Finding myself with one of the best print merchants in London, I explained your project and your desire to create an artistic work of great use and profit for set designers... He told me that it was possible, but anticipated the difficulty of selling an expensive work made especially for a group of people famous for their talent rather than their riches, and told me with good sense that... before saying anything about it he would have to see some drawings, find out how many are to be printed, and understand himself what it is all about¹¹⁰.

This letter was written, of course, in 1846, a few years after the publication of the *Choix de décorations*. It shows Verardi's interest for this type of collection and the value it could have for set designers. Ruggi's collection also seems to address this sort of public: its highly generic titles, «Farm», «Village», «Subterranean Temple», «Square», «Dance Hall» sound sufficiently detached from the context of a particular opera, and are ready to be reused for other works. Rather than referring to a specific performance in a specific theatre, they were likely meant to offer standard scenes for possible standard sets, thus ensuring for the set designer his primary legacy.

Conclusions

¹⁰⁶ ROBUSTIANO GIRONI, *Sulle decorazioni sceniche ed in ispezie su quelle dell'Imp. R. Teatro alla Scala in Milano*, in GIULIO FERRARIO, *Storia e descrizione de' principali teatri antichi e moderni*, Milano, Ferrario, 1830, pp. 311-312.

¹⁰⁷ This was the main argument used by Giovanni Ricordi when publishing Sanquirico's collection, cf. VIALE FERRERO, *L'invenzione replicabile*, pp. XXIX-XXX.

¹⁰⁸ See footnote 38.

¹⁰⁹ Note by C. Severini quoted in WILD, *Décors et costumes du XIX^e siècle à l'Opéra de Paris*, II, p. 93.

¹¹⁰ Letter from Timoleone Barattini to Luigi Verardi, London, 27 June 1846, F-Po, NLAS-959 (5): «trovandomi dunque in società con uno dei primi mercanti di gravures di Londra gli spiegai il tuo progetto, ed il tuo desiderio di dare alla luce un'opera artistica di grande utilità e vantaggio, per i pittori di scene e decorazioni [...] mi disse che la cosa potrebbe farsi, ma oltre la difficoltà che egli prevede nel vendere un'opera costosa adattata specialmente ad una classe di gente reputata più per talento che per ricchezza, egli mi disse con molta ragione, che [...] egli non poteva dir niente prima di aver visto alcuni disegni, di conoscere il numero da incidere, finalmente prima di accertare col suo proprio criterio di cosa si tratta».

This case study enables us to come to grips with the questions of time, labor, and logistics as central parameters in the creation and manage-[p. 86]ment of theatrical sets in nineteenth-century theatrical institutions. This is firstly because these limitations condition research itself, as the materials which allow us to shed light on historical staging practices are too often considered to be lost and buried. Though they may be lacunary and dispersed, there are nevertheless sources to work with, in this case because of the history of the Paris Italian Opera, and because of the history of its history.

Ferri's wanderings and longevity, at a peculiar time for the institution—the time of the Italians, with Ferri's presence stimulated by a truly italophile policy—encourage us even more strongly to bring together different kinds of sources, whether French or Italian, sketches or images, newspaper articles or administrative archives, letters or *libretti*. Ferri's position gives us the opportunity to think differently about specific French staging practices such as *réemploi*, which for him did not simply mean conservation and repainting, but rather contributing to a veritable economy of scenography, founded on a capital of means, imagination, and above all, time. It is the whole system, the entire cultural industry of scenography which can thus be analysed. From production timetables to the real-time presence of the set designer at the theatre, from the mediatic time of an artist-contractor to his eventual posterity, from the time of individual works and conventions to the rules and memory of an institution, Ferri's circulations and attempted ubiquity allow us to reconsider the temporal and material logistics of staging operatic works.

Ferri's itinerary prevents us however from reconstructing a network of overly fluid production or a too clear division of labor. As a set designer but also painter, interior decorator, theatrical agent or even trafficker of goods, Ferri encourages us to take into account interactions between a vast variety of aspects of his working life. It was across all these different types of work in Bologna, Naples, Paris and London, that Ferri managed to build an international “portfolio” career. Through this diversity and precarity—from which his longevity at the Paris Italian Opera should not distract us—Ferri not only developed his art through well-established theatrical circuits but also struggled against constant obstacles, difficult working conditions, various pressures and expectations. In his wanderings, the question of his status is essential, and is deeply linked with historical staging practices. Who or what in fact was a set designer at this time? Was he a craftsman who conceived and then built sets, who thus had to remain on-site? Was he a contractor who orchestrated a team and organized the staging as a whole? Or was he an artist, responsible mainly for the creation of ideas or images, even if this creation occurred at a distance, thus allowing him to send in his drawings from afar, without always being present in the theatre itself?

Domenico Ferri's final year at the Paris Italian Opera did not resolve these equivocal issues. After the theatre's bankruptcy in the early 1850s, when Ferri asked to be considered «an artist whose salary is guaranteed by the state», he was instead merely designated as a theatrical entrepre-[p. 87]neur¹¹¹. It is one of the final paradoxes of his career that Ferri was later hired by the Savoia family as the official painter of the kingdom, thus spending the rest of his life painting interior apartments and official rooms in the future new Italy. This was, however, another time in his life, and must be explored beyond the stage, stalls and corridors of the opera itself.

¹¹¹ F-Pan, AJ13-1163, «Administration et comptabilité 1830-1862, 4. Administration. M. Ferri. Décors», report: «M. Ferri avait l'entreprise de la peinture des décors. Le prix fixé par son marché comprenait, non seulement son propre travail, mais celui des peintres qu'il employait. Il n'appartient donc pas à la catégorie des artistes désignés par les arrêtés ministériels des 30 avril 1841 et 22 août 1849» («Mr Ferri was in charge of painting sets. The price fixed in his deal included not only his own work, but also the work of the painters he hired. He thus does not belong to the category of artists named by the Ministerial Decrees of 30 April 1841 and of 22 August 1849»).

Translated by Nicholas Manning