

Not just a Fairy Tale

Campisi, Maria grazia aurora

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NOT JUST A FAIRY TALE: PARODY, LATE FASCISM, AND GHEDINI'S 'LA PULCE D'ORO' (1940)

BY MARIA GRAZIA AURORA CAMPISI*

COMEDY IN CRISIS

It seems hardly likely, up to now, that the 20th century, ushered in by universal ruin and the destruction of civilisation, will give us much that is joyful. This is so true, that even in Italy, the birth-place of laughter, the native land of the greatest comic actors and buffoons, the soil on which grew that miracle of the stage called the *opera buffa*, the sense of fun seems to be lost for ever. The old maliciously sparkling wit of our grandfathers is replaced by scurrility, vulgarity and silliness. The most obscene vaudevilles which the Parisian *boulevard* has to export and the insipid Viennese operettas vie with the incredible invasion of the cinema in putting the finishing touch to the idiocy of the public.¹

Such was Alfredo Casella's disenchanted opinion on comic opera in the early decades of the twentieth century, as it appeared in a 1920 article with the title 'Some Reasons why a Futurist may Admire Rossini'. As the title suggests, Casella hoped for a convergence of modernity and tradition, albeit from an anti-romantic and nationalistic perspective. His reflection was multifaceted, covering issues of great concern to him and his contemporaries: the supposed historical, cultural, and moral crisis of the West, which by this point had already experienced the catastrophe of a global war; the recognition of a general crisis of opera (not just of the comic genre), which was losing its popular appeal in the throes of the emergence of mass society and the advance of new technologies and genres; and the widespread identification of a divorce between art, the public, and entertainment. This gloomy situation, depicted by Casella in 1920, was to be further complicated shortly after by the rise of the fascist regime in Italy. Within this framework, the question arises as to whether Casella's predictions came true. Was comic opera—and comedy more generally—possible in those ensuing troubled years? Was a sense of fun lost forever or did the genre just become coarse entertainment in the 'land of laughter', as Italy was (proudly) defined?

Let us skip forward a couple of decades to find some answers to these questions, to 1940, just before the outbreak of the Second World War and the final years of the fascist regime. Data relating to Italian operatic production seemingly justifies the increasing

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¹ Alfredo Casella, 'Some Reasons why a Futurist may Admire Rossini', *Chesterian*, 2 (1920), 321–4 at 322.

laments about the genre's crisis, especially with regard to the dearth of new operas performed and entering the repertory: if, when Casella wrote his article, sixty-seven new operas were premiered in the 1919–20 theatrical season, that of 1939–40 counted only twenty-one, including the Italian premiere of Ferruccio Busoni's *Arlecchino* (1917) and Luigi Dallapiccola's *Volo di notte*.² Operatic crisis was just one of a multitude of social, cultural, and economic crises afflicting Italy at this time. After almost twenty years, fascist consensus was crumbling in the face of widespread hardship and costly blunders by the regime, including expensive military enterprises (those in Africa, Spain, Albania), economic restrictions, and the introduction of racial laws. The triumphalist tones of propaganda conflicted with rising unemployment, forced emigration, rationing of consumption, and the devaluation of the Italian currency.³ Scepticism was rampant and discontent was growing, as documented by police reports: graffiti and clandestine leaflets were discovered, inscribed with the slogan 'pane pei nostri bambini o la testa di Mussolini' (bread for our children or Mussolini's head).⁴ The actual situation in Italy evidently clashed drastically with the regime's promises and unmasked the inconsistency of its propaganda, especially in the shadow of a new impending war, a war that would soon sweep away any remaining rhetoric and bluster of fascist Italy.⁵

Amid this dark and troubling time, on 15 February 1940, a one-act comic opera by Giorgio Federico Ghedini (1892–1965) titled *La pulce d'oro* had its premiere at the Carlo Felice theatre in Genoa. It was the third theatrical work by the Piedmontese composer, after his belated operatic debut with the mystical and late-D'Annunzian *Maria d'Alessandria* (1937) and then *Re Hassan* (1939), on a historical subject with anti-tyrannical and anti-militarist undertones. These three operas were composed in quick succession, but they were very different from each other.⁶ *La pulce d'oro* was inspired by the 1935 play of the same name by Tullio Pinelli, Ghedini's long-time collaborator and friend. Best known for his subsequent collaborations with Federico Fellini, Pinelli adapted his play as a libretto for Ghedini's opera.⁷ In a manner that already suggests the fantastical nature

² This data is taken from the yearly column edited by Giuseppe Albinati in *Musica d'oggi* between 1919 and 1941, beginning with 'Prospetto delle opere nuove italiane rappresentate nell'anno 1919', *Musica d'oggi*, 1 (1920), 16–17.

³ As a result of international sanctions, Italian national debt had spiked to sixteen billion lire between 1936 and 1937. In 1938 Mussolini launched an austerity policy, which included restricting the population's diet and nutritional intake (e.g. less meat, and mandating the use of poorer-quality flour in bread-making) as well as proposing recipes for 'autarchic cuisine'. In 1940, with Italy's entry into the war imminent, a ration card was introduced for food and other necessities, such as soap and clothes. The Italians became ever hungrier and angrier and, as a prefectural commissioner would later recall, 'the stomach has no ideals: it is conservative if it is full, it is anarchic if it is empty'. Filippo Colombara, 'Si cantava per esorcizzare la tragedia: Quella fame terribile tra fascismo e guerra', *Patria indipendente*, 11 (2007), 12–16; Assunta Trova, 'L'approvvigionamento alimentare nella RSI', *Storia in Lombardia*, 1–2 (1993), 171–89. All translations are my own unless otherwise stated.

⁴ Riccardo Terzi and Luigi Martini (eds.), *Pane pei nostri bambini o la testa di Mussolini: Volantini e stampa della Cgdl nelle carte di polizia 1927–1943*, Storia e memoria (Rome, 2002).

⁵ Martin Clark, *Storia dell'Italia contemporanea, 1871–1999* (Milan, 1999), 346–49.

⁶ This eclecticism continued throughout Ghedini's operatic production. Apart from two youthful attempts that were never staged (*Gringoire* and *L'intrusa*), Ghedini's operatic output includes six finished works: the above-mentioned *Maria d'Alessandria* (1937) on a decidedly decadent libretto by Cesare Meano, *Re Hassan* (1939) and *La pulce d'oro* (1940), both on librettos by Tullio Pinelli; *Le Baccanti* (1948), based on an adaptation by Pinelli of Euripides' *Bacchae*; *Billy Budd* (1949), based on the novel by Herman Melville and adapted for a libretto by the Nobel laureate Salvatore Quasimodo; and the radio opera *Lord Inferno* (1952), with its staging version *L'ipocrita felice* (1956) on a libretto by Franco Antonicelli from Max Beerbohm's novel *The Happy Hypocrite*.

⁷ Tullio Pinelli (1908–2009) was a playwright, screenwriter, librettist, writer of radio plays and television dramas, and novelist. In his long and eclectic career, Pinelli collaborated with several important Italian directors, such as Roberto Rossellini, Pietro Germi, Alberto Lattuada, Dino Risi, and Mario Monicelli. A deep friendship as well as a prolific professional understanding distinguished his long collaboration with Federico Fellini, with Pinelli serving as screenwriter for films such as *La strada* (1954), *La dolce vita* (1960), and *8½* (1963).

of his future film scripts, such as *La strada*, *La pulce d'oro* staged a seemingly farcical tale: a mysterious wanderer (Lupo Fiorino) enters a tavern and entices the proprietor and his family (Olimpio, Fortuna, Lucilla), as well as the tavern's patrons (Verna, Daghe, Mirtillo), with his exotic flea, capable—as he says—of transforming anything it bites into gold. Everyone wants to possess the prodigious animal, but no one can see it; only old Verna remains sceptical. Suddenly, the flea supposedly jumps into the clothes of Lucilla, Olimpio's beautiful daughter, and Lupo Fiorino demands to stay with the girl overnight to keep watch over his precious animal. When at night time the stranger tries to escape by stealth, Olimpio almost kills him with a violent blow of his stick. The next morning, with Lucilla's honour at stake, marriage is inevitable, and the young couple happily take their leave.

With its mixture of fantasy and comedy, *La pulce d'oro* seemed to revive the stock recipe for comic opera, in the unlikely moment of 1940 and contrary to Casella's fatalistic prophecy two decades earlier. In those intervening twenty years, the comic genre in music theatre had in fact survived in various forms, ranging from realistic to fantastic subjects: operettas and musical fairy tales, such as Casella's own *La donna serpente* (1932) and Ottorino Respighi's *La campana sommersa* (1927); operas in the tradition of *opera buffa* and *commedia dell'arte*, such as Gian Francesco Malipiero's *Tre commedie goldoniane* (1926) and Ermanno Wolf-Ferrari's eighteenth-century-style comedies; and the so-called 'operina di scuola' of a sentimental character, such as Riccardo Zandonai's *La via della finestra* (1919).⁸ One of the few comic operas to emerge in the troubled late-fascist moment, *La pulce d'oro* is also difficult to define in relation to these previous examples, most of which date from the 1920s.

The opera's reception nevertheless offers some useful clues as to how to situate the work within the history of the genre and how its comedy was perceived at the time. From the outset, *La pulce d'oro* enjoyed a predominantly positive response and multiple revivals in the years immediately following the premiere, as well as being broadcast several times on the radio.⁹ Critics were impressed by the pleasantness of the opera. They especially praised its gracefulness in matching music and text and its playing with the conventions of comic opera. As one critic noted: 'The music is pleasant, adhering to the text in an illustrative way, and it draws on a tradition whose models in Italy are *Falstaff* and *Gianni Schicchi*.'¹⁰ The comparison was more than honourable: *La pulce d'oro* was recognized and invested with the weight of a noble legacy, providing that continuity between past and present hoped for by Casella.¹¹ At the same time, the critics glossed over any sense that the light-heartedness of the opera might stand at odds with the difficult contemporary moment. If comedy as a response to a time of crisis is an age-old phenomenon, critics in 1940 designated *La pulce d'oro* a pure form of entertainment, one apparently without deeper implications. According to the critical barometer of the time, calibrated to the governing mode of idealism, the opera was held to be well-crafted, confirming the

⁸ Guido Salvetti, 'L'opera nella prima metà del secolo', in Alberto Basso (ed.), *Musica in scena: Storia dello spettacolo musicale*, ii: *Gli italiani all'estero. L'opera in Italia e in Francia* (Turin, 1995), 435–86.

⁹ Along with *Billy Budd*, *La pulce d'oro* was perhaps the most performed opera by Ghedini during his lifetime. Following its debut, it was staged in Milan (1946), Turin (1947), Genoa (1950), Venice (1961), Florence (1963), Bologna, Ferrara, and Modena (1965), and Naples (1972).

¹⁰ F. B., 'Al Lirico "La Pulce d'oro" e "Mavra"', *Avanti!*, 18 May 1945. On that date, *La pulce d'oro* was performed again in Milan on the same bill with Stravinsky's *Mavra* and in place of Ghedini's next opera, *Le Baccanti*, in the attempt to insert a bit of light relief in the dark times of the immediate post-war period.

¹¹ This neoclassical ideal was defined in Alfredo Casella, 'Il neoclassicismo mio e altrui', *Pègaso*, 5 (1929), 576–83.

composer's technical mastery, but its flippant content supposedly prevented it from being a true art work, which would need to be predicated on sincerity of expression.¹²

This blind spot in the criticism might lead us to ask whether the opera was a form of escape from troubling times or rather an anachronistic attempt to perpetuate a glorious tradition. In this article, I propose a re-evaluation of *La pulce d'oro* that locates the opera's timeliness precisely in its commitment to tradition and in its seeming detachment from the contemporary moment. The questions *La pulce d'oro* posed go beyond interest in a single opera, leading us to some of the fraught concerns about Italian identity and culture in late fascism, as well as to a general reflection on the fate of comic opera in the tumult of the twentieth century. In what follows, I will continue from the starting point of critical reception to draw on historical studies of fascist Italy and contemporary culture, theories of comedy and comic theatre, and musicological studies on opera and tradition in twentieth-century music. The aim is to demonstrate the opera's striking relevance in 1940, a critical juncture for the history of both Italy and the genre.

In ways that were in some respects typical and in others idiosyncratic, *La pulce d'oro* responded to and illuminated this seminal, but much overlooked, late-fascist moment. At the same time, Ghedini's opera might be viewed as a bridge, in the history of the genre, between Busoni's *Junge Klassizität* and the post-war renewal of themes and modes such as the grotesque, the caricature, and the mixing of styles. As we shall see, parody was the opera's primary mode of engagement with its contemporary moment of crisis, with respect both to operatic tradition and society at large. Combining comedy with a certain critical stance, *La pulce d'oro* created multiple parodic levels that wove together past and present, fiction and reality, fairy tale and history. Deploying parody as musical technique and allegory, Ghedini's opera encompassed some of the key cultural currents of the time—neoclassicism, magic realism, and social satire—in a hitherto unexplored and original way. Comic opera and fascism collided here, corroborating the words of the Italian historian Gaetano Salvemini, who defined fascism itself as an 'opera buffa', an absurd chain of misunderstandings improperly called revolution.¹³ Just as Verdi's use of comedy and tradition in *Falstaff* served as a testament to its troubled present, the *fin de siècle*,¹⁴ so too *La pulce d'oro* engaged with both the past and the present at a similarly heightened historical moment, an Italy in the midst of collapse and on the brink of war.

STRADDLING PAST AND PRESENT

La pulce d'oro opens with a conventional tavern scene on a dark and stormy night: while all are gathered inside, a gust of wind violently opens the door, and a mysterious stranger

¹² The opera was defined as an 'opericciola di mestiere' in 'Lettera da Genova', *La rassegna musicale*, 3 (1940), 160–2. Complying with the aesthetics of idealism, critics often found fault with Ghedini's music, which seemed to them marred by a mismatch between technical perfection and a supposed weakness of expression. According to the philosopher Benedetto Croce, the critical assessment of an art work was based on a strict dichotomy between 'poetry or non-poetry', disregarding any technical and purely intellectual dimension, detrimental to the immediacy of inspiration and its 'lyrical foundation'. Alberto Casadei and Marco Santagata, *Manuale di letteratura italiana contemporanea* (Rome, 2007), 66.

¹³ This famous definition of fascism as a comic opera was coined by Salvemini (1873–1957) in his lectures at Harvard University in 1943, when he was in exile. The historian called the march on Rome a 'comedy of errors'. Gaetano Salvemini, *Scritti sul fascismo* (Milan, 1961), 610–12. Others too, such as the writer Ennio Flaiano, have compared fascism to opera more generally, stressing the theatricality of its political strategies. See Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi, *Fascist Spectacle: The Aesthetics of Power in Mussolini's Italy*, Studies on the History of Society and Culture, 28 (Berkeley, 1997); Stefano Biguzzi, *L'orchestra del duce: Mussolini, la musica e il mito del capo* (Turin, 2003); Patricia Gaborik, *Mussolini's Theatre: Fascist Experiments in Art and Politics* (Cambridge, 2021).

¹⁴ Emanuele Senici, 'Verdi's *Falstaff* at Italy's Fin de Siècle', *Musical Quarterly*, 85 (2001), 274–310.

Ex. 1. Giorgio Federico Ghedini, *La pulce d'oro: Un atto in tre quadri* [vocal score] (Milan, 1940), 1

The musical score is presented in three systems. The first system (measures 1-3) begins with a treble clef, a key signature of two flats, and a 3/4 time signature. It is marked 'Allegro' with a tempo of quarter note = 80. The first measure is marked 'ff' and includes the instruction '(lampi e tuoni)'. The second system (measures 4-6) is marked 'dim.' and includes '(tuono, vento)'. The third system (measures 7-9) is marked 'p' and includes '(pioggia)'. The score features chromaticism, rapid triplets, and string tremolos in the lower register.

appears. The opera is replete with clichés drawn from fairy tales and the operatic tradition, right from this opening scene through to its conventional happy ending with the marriage of the young couple. In this section, I will explore the opera’s perspective on tradition, particularly via the use of parody and the relationship between music and text within the wider context of Italian neoclassicism and the rhetoric of *italianità*. To start with, the thematic clichés noted above all find their counterparts in the opera’s music. The musical portrayal of a thunderstorm bears within it long-standing echoes of the operatic repertory. Chromaticism and rapid triplets, string tremolos in the lower register, and glints of the flute in the upper register all onomatopoeically depict the stormy scenario and inevitably lead us back to Rossini’s *Il barbiere di Siviglia* and Verdi’s *Otello*, to mention just two precursors (see Ex. 1). Ghedini explicitly evokes these Rossinian and Verdian operatic tropes, which are evident not only on listening but also when comparing the scores, in which can be recognized the use of similar gestural figures, instrumentation, and precise descriptive stage directions (*tuoni, lampi, pioggia, vento*, etc.).

Ghedini’s turn to tradition was part of a broader cultural attention to the past, which was considered the basis on which to found the new Italian music of the twentieth century—as the title of Casella’s article suggested. According to the latter, a spiritual continuity connected the Italian tradition from Monteverdi to Verdi, passing through musicians such as Scarlatti, Vivaldi, and Rossini.¹⁵ From the early decades of the twentieth century, Italian musicians were engaged in the revival of their national musical heritage, especially of that prior to the celebrated epoch of nineteenth-century opera. In

¹⁵ Fiamma Nicolodi, ‘Casella e la musica di Stravinsky in Italia: Contributo a un’indagine sul neoclassicismo’, *Chigiana*, 29–30 (1972), 41–67.

addition to linking directly to the origins of the genre, *opera buffa* was an especially prized part of this tradition and seen as a possible Italian antidote to Romantic and Wagnerian models. In this exploratory work, *Falstaff* acted as a compendium and a model.¹⁶ Casella himself, complaining about the decadence of comic opera, hailed Verdi's last work as both the culmination of the illustrious Italian tradition and the starting point for new Italian music.¹⁷

The rebirth of the comic genre in Italy during the early decades of the twentieth century was chiefly understood in a nationalistic and aesthetic sense. The tradition of *opera buffa* could shield composers from foreign operatic influences, as well as, amid a general call for objectivity, curbing the sentimental excesses of *verismo* operas, considered by many as a commercial degeneration of the genre.¹⁸ Recovering music's autonomy and the anti-realist roots of opera as *favola in musica*, twentieth-century composers found in *opera buffa* a wealth of musical forms and subjects. They were mainly drawn from the *commedia dell'arte* and the opposing theatrical models of Carlo Goldoni's realism and Carlo Gozzi's *Fiabe teatrali*—the former inspiring many operas by G. F. Malipiero and Wolf-Ferrari, the latter providing the subjects for *Turandot* by Puccini and Busoni, and for Casella's *La donna serpente*. Italian comic opera of the eighteenth century was also studied and performed. In 1923, the critic and musicologist Andrea Della Corte published *L'opera comica italiana nel '700*, and in the following years was committed to promoting the revival of examples of this 'muted music', such as *L'impresario in angustie* by Domenico Cimarosa, staged at the Teatro Regio of Turin in 1933. Ghedini was part of this cultural turn: in addition to transcribing the music of Gabrieli, Monteverdi, Frescobaldi, and Vivaldi, he was also involved in the wider rediscovery of *opera buffa*, collaborating on an anthology of arias and duets from the eighteenth century, edited by Della Corte in 1925 and including excerpts from operas by Paisiello, Piccinni, Sarti, Pergolesi, and Cimarosa.¹⁹

The fascination for this forgotten repertory and the embedding of the past in new compositions most obviously connects with contemporary practices of neoclassicism, widespread internationally and commonly associated with Igor Stravinsky. As is well known, the term neoclassicism, conventionally simplified as a generic return to the past, is a cluster-concept, as Taruskin defined it, covering a wide array of characters, musical techniques, and aesthetics.²⁰ Quotation and *pastiche*, transcription and arrangement, and the use of classical and pre-classical forms were some of the possible ways to approach the past in contemporary music.²¹ Parody, an ancient musical device, involving the use or

¹⁶ Salvetti, 'L'opera nella prima metà del secolo'. According to the Italian writer Massimo Bontempelli, 'after Verdi's *Falstaff*, Italian opera lives on its epigones'. Massimo Bontempelli, *Passione incompiuta: Scritti sulla musica, 1910–1950*, Arcobaleno, 10 (Milan, 1958), 203.

¹⁷ See Alfredo Casella, 'La riabilitazione del teatro musicale in Italia', *Musica d'oggi*, 12 (1925), 345–6; Casella, 21 + 26 (Rome, 1931); Casella, 'Il neoclassicismo mio e altrui'. According to Emanuele Senici, *Falstaff* was the first opera consciously involved with tradition in a modern way. It is an opera about opera, a meta-opera, reflecting on and questioning as it does the genre's history and aesthetic foundations. Senici, 'Verdi's *Falstaff* at Italy's Fin de Siècle'.

¹⁸ The controversy about *verismo*, epitomized by Fausto Torrefranca's pamphlet *Giacomo Puccini e l'opera internazionale* (Turin, 1912), was widely felt, above all by the Italian composers of the so-called 'generation of the 1880s'.

¹⁹ Ghedini transcribed almost half the pieces of the anthology. Andrea Della Corte (ed.), *Piccola antologia settecentesca: Ventiquattro arie e duetti inediti o rari* (Milan, 1925); Della Corte, *L'opera comica italiana nel '700: Studi ed appunti* (Bari, 1923). Before *La pulce d'oro*, Ghedini and Pinelli had collaborated—without ever completing it—on an opera with an 18th-c. setting, a sort of moralistic fairy tale with grotesque overtones, as we can read in their letters, in Stefano Parise, *Giorgio Federico Ghedini: L'uomo, le opere attraverso le lettere*, *Opere documenti orientamenti del Novecento musicale*, 2 (Milan, 2003), 133.

²⁰ Richard Taruskin, 'Back to Whom? Neoclassicism as Ideology', *19th-Century Music*, 3 (1993), 286–302 at 288.

²¹ See, for example, Stravinsky's *Pulcinella* (1920) or, in Italy, the emblematic titles of Casella's *Scarlattiana* or G. F. Malipiero's *Cimarosiana*.

reference to other existing music, as the etymology of the term suggests (*para-*, ‘besides, near’ + *oidē*, ‘song, ode’), came to be a pivotal technique in twentieth-century neoclassicism. As commentators have suggested, then as now, this modernist turn to tradition had social and political implications, with connections being drawn between a return to order in art and reactionary forms of politics, and with Stravinsky’s music being frequently associated with fascism.²² The Italian politicization of neoclassicism, perhaps inevitable in a nation where attention to tradition came directly into contact with fascism, was not so straightforward in any case. For all Stravinsky’s success as the most performed foreign composer during the fascist period, Italian musicians—with Casella as a figurehead—claimed the existence of an idiosyncratic national neoclassicism, one intrinsically linked to the concept of *italianità*.²³

Italianità was a term much in vogue at the time, demarcating a rather vague ideal of Italianness, one with both aesthetic and political connotations. The post-Unification aim ‘to make Italians’, by excavating common roots and traits beneath regional differences, was still on Mussolini’s agenda.²⁴ Under the regime, ‘Italian’ and ‘fascist’ became synonymous, with *italianità* the umbrella term, encompassing disparate and contradictory positions, and looking both backwards and forwards. This is how *Il Selvaggio*, one of the most widely disseminated magazines in the fascist period, defined the ideal of an ‘arci-italianità’: ‘Italians to the bitter end ... classic and modern at once, that is, perfect fascists’.²⁵ Musical manifestations of *italianità* tended to be similarly ambiguous and diverse, corresponding to a purely melodic, expressive, and vocal character (namely, the so-called *cantabilità*), or otherwise to an ideal of linearity, purity, and anti-rhetorical sobriety.²⁶

In Italy, looking to the past therefore meant seeking a national identity based on the pride of the country’s historic glories. Tradition was a serious matter, to be confronted with reverence and not with the ironic and dehumanizing detachment of a Stravinsky. Parody was not an intellectual game, irreverent with respect to tradition, but took on a rhetorical and celebratory character for Italian musicians.²⁷ Casella’s *stile littorio*, with its ‘constructive’ rather than ‘ironic’ contact with the past, was an example of this ideologically charged neoclassicism.²⁸ Similarly, comic opera was a national milestone to

²² Theodor W. Adorno launched a politicized critique of Stravinsky’s music in his *Philosophie der neuen Musik* (1949); see also the emblematic title of Taruskin’s more recent article, ‘Back to Whom? Neoclassicism as Ideology’.

²³ Anna Quaranta, ‘Neoclassicismo musicale: Termini del dibattito italiano ed europeo’, in Mila De Santis (ed.), *Alfredo Casella e l’Europa: Atti del convegno internazionale di studi* (Florence, 2003), 93–145. The influence of Stravinsky’s music in Italy has been widely discussed both by contemporaries and by scholars since. See, for instance, Casella, ‘Il neoclassicismo mio e altrui’, and Gianfranco Vinay, *Stravinsky neoclassico: L’invenzione della memoria nel ’900 musicale* (Venice, 1987).

²⁴ ‘We have made Italy, now we have to make Italians’: this Unification clarion call from the late 19th c. is usually attributed to Massimo d’Azeglio.

²⁵ Adriano Seroni, ‘Fascismo e riviste letterarie italiane negli anni Trenta’, *Studi storici*, 3 (1982), 541–54.

²⁶ For Italian discussions of neoclassicism in the contemporary press, see Luigi Rognoni, ‘L’estetica di Stravinsky’, *Bollettino mensile di vita e cultura musicale*, 9 (1935), 198–202; Fernando Ballo, ‘Esperienze della musica moderna’, *La rassegna musicale*, 4 (1935), 245–62; Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco, ‘Neoclassicismo musicale’, *Pegaso*, 2 (1929), 197–204, republished in Giorgio Pestelli and Virgilio Bernardoni (eds.), *Suono, parola, scena: Studi e testi sulla musica italiana nel Novecento* (Alessandria, 2003), 201–11; Mario Labroca, ‘Stravinskij musicista classico’, *Pegaso*, 1 (1929), 61–4, also republished by Pestelli and Bernardoni, 195–99; Massimo Mila, *Compagno Stravinsky* (Turin, 1983).

²⁷ While appreciating his music and disseminating it through Italy, Casella criticized Stravinsky’s excesses of technique and appropriationist attitude towards tradition. Nicolodi, ‘Casella e la musica di Stravinsky’.

²⁸ In the operatic field, Casella’s *La favola di Orfeo*, a one-act opera from 1932, was emblematic of this approach to the past in dealing with the Monteverdian model. See Ben Earle, *Luigi Dallapiccola and Musical Modernism in Fascist Italy* (Cambridge, 2013), 103. Earle underlines how, especially from the *Concerto romano* (1926) onwards, Stravinsky’s ‘ironic distance from the past [was] essentially foreign’ to Casella’s music; *ibid.* 109.

be explored in a cultured way, far from its original service as popular entertainment.²⁹ Against this background, *La pulce d'oro* perfectly accords with wider musical practices of the time in reference to the past. Allusions to tradition recur throughout the opera: as we follow the adventures of the magic flea, the idioms of Mozart, Rossini, and Donizetti, among others, echo and reverberate in Ghedini's music. The opera refers to generic forms and past styles, ranging from direct quotation to imitation and allusion. The reception of the opera has sought to make sense of these references. Did they play within the nationalist rhetoric of *italianità* or rather align with the Stravinskian mode of irony? Critical responses have varied over time: from critics at the premiere (A. R.) noting the 'nostalgic and classicizing allusions' to the melodramatic tradition, to the 'ironic allusions' highlighted in later criticism (Piero Santi).³⁰

The relationship between music and text, repeatedly discussed in the early reviews, is a revealing field to investigate the nature of these allusions and the strongly parodic dimension of *La pulce d'oro* more generally. According to critics, Ghedini's music had the merit of adhering to what happens on the stage, in a 'constant work of representation' of characters, gestures, and settings, as Andrea Della Corte reported on the opera's premiere.³¹ Later on, echoing one of the most frequently recurring characterizations of the opera, the critic Franco Abbiati recognized the score as 'a little treasure' (*gioiello*), capable of following the Asiatic flea and its story 'step by step' and rendering words perfectly intelligible in singing.³² In this close adherence between music and text, *La pulce d'oro* fully complied with some of the main yardsticks of *italianità*. In fact, the music's respect for the text had always been the major concern in approaching and evaluating opera in the Italian context; it represented one of the main hallmarks of musical *italianità*, ever since Monteverdi's *seconda prattica* had declared music the servant of words.³³

However, if we delve into the text of *La pulce d'oro*, considering its form and content, the relationship with the music turns out to be more nuanced. First, Pinelli's libretto, directly derived from the play, is an example of *Literaturoper*. The theatrical text undergoes an obvious process of reduction, but not a metrical adaptation. The prose is primarily reproduced verbatim in the libretto. The writer's intervention is limited to cutting, arranging the distribution of the lines and, only rarely, expanding the text to offer the music some soloistic digressions. The case of a prose libretto was not especially common in Italian opera, apart from a few examples of operas by Franco Alfano (such as *La leggenda di Sakuntala*, 1921) and works based on texts by Gabriele D'Annunzio, whose poetic prestige apparently resisted any further adaptation.³⁴

²⁹ Guido Salvetti, 'Del "ritorno all'ordine": Le diverse ragioni', in David Bryant (ed.), *Il Novecento musicale italiano, tra Neoclassicismo e Neogoticismo* (Florence, 1988); Salvetti, 'L'opera nella prima metà del secolo'.

³⁰ See A. R., 'Al Teatro CARLO FELICE: Una prima ZANETTO di Pietro Mascagni. Due novità L'INTRUSA di Guido Pannain LA PULCE D'ORO di G. Ghedini', *Il Lavoro*, 16 Feb. 1940; Piero Santi, 'Lirica alla radio: Tre opere moderne. La pulce d'oro di G. F. Ghedini', *Radiocorriere*, 7 (1959), 7.

³¹ Andrea Della Corte, 'Novità al Carlo Felice: L'intrusa di Pannain. La pulce d'oro di Ghedini', *La Stampa*, 15 Feb. 1940. In the same vein, the scholar Stefano Parise recognizes in the orchestra a twofold capacity of imitating what is on stage (as in the onomatopoeic description of the initial storm) and excavating the humorous verve of the text. Stefano Parise, 'Profilo di Giorgio Federico Ghedini' (Diss., Università degli Studi di Milano, 1993).

³² Franco Abbiati, 'Alla Fenice di Venezia: Due opere moderne dirette da Ettore Gracis. "Mondi celesti e infernali" di G. F. Malipiero e "La pulce d'oro" di G. F. Ghedini', *Corriere della sera*, 3 Feb. 1961.

³³ Portrayed as a national icon in Gabriele D'Annunzio's novel *Il fuoco* (1900), Claudio Monteverdi became an ideal reference for the renewal of Italian opera in the 20th c., aided by the contemporary rediscovery of his work through transcriptions and revivals, and the publication of his *opera omnia*, edited by Gian Francesco Malipiero between 1927 and 1942.

³⁴ That was the case, for instance, of G. F. Malipiero's *Sogno d'un tramonto d'autunno* (1913–14), unperformed on stage before the late 1980s.

With respect to its content, as already mentioned, Pinelli's libretto displays many staples from the repertory of both opera and fairy tale. Paradoxically, the 1935 play version was already close to the tradition of *opera buffa*, probably because—as we will see—it also drew on Goldoni's theatre, a common source of inspiration for both prose theatre and comic opera.³⁵ If we try to place Pinelli's libretto—disregarding its theatrical origin—within the aforementioned Italian panorama of comic opera in the first half of the twentieth century, we can see how the opera relied on a variety of comic and fantastical trends. *La pulce d'oro*, in fact, combined the realism and satirical wit of the Goldonian model with the seemingly magical element of the flea and a host of stock characters, ascribable not only to the tradition of the fairy tale, but also to the alternative theatrical model of Gozzi and the *commedia dell'arte*. Within a vaguely popular setting, not defined in space and time, but recognizable in the tavern trope, the characters of *La pulce d'oro* act halfway between everyday people and the masks of *commedia dell'arte*: Lupo Fiorino, the wandering trickster, recalls Arlecchino's cunning and the exotic bluster of Capitan Fracassa; Lucilla, playing the innocent, is as duplicitous and sly as Colombina;³⁶ Daghe has the pretentious attitude of Dottor Balanzone. Olimpio is the most ambiguous character, in which different types seem to converge, such as the mask of Ruzante: the rough and ignorant peasant, eventually thief and murderer, who laments his own misery and social inferiority. Olimpio's complaints about his labours, 'Son curvo, son curvo, perché porto le secchie' (I am bent over by the load of buckets), align with the servant's role in the *commedia dell'arte* and echo the repertory of comic opera, from Leporello to Figaro.

In reading Pinelli's libretto, we can see how Ghedini's music engages with both its prose text and comic content, establishing a singular relationship of both adherence—as the critics praised—and ironic distance. Delving into the score, we can see that the clarity of singing results from the balance between voices and orchestra, while the music's responsiveness to the plot is reflected in the fragmentary nature of the score, in both formal and stylistic terms. Fragmentation and montage were typically Stravinskian techniques; but, while in operas like *Mavra* the musical discourse is autonomous, relying on a formal organization in closed numbers, Ghedini's music is more gestural and variable, closely following the rapid pace of the libretto and its open prose form. As Salvetti states, 'melody is reduced to a gesture' and 'form breaks apart into mutually impenetrable formulas and blocks'.³⁷

This formal fragmentation corresponds to a marked eclecticism and stylistic heterogeneity, the music turning to folkloric motifs, dances, marches, aria-like moments, and what in cinematic terms would be called mickey-mousing, with its recent use in silent films to emphasize the mimic and physical component of comedy.³⁸ Seemingly combining 'the cult of form, onomatopoeic description, the most inventive baroqueism and a romanticizing musical affection', as we can read in a review of the opera's premiere,³⁹

³⁵ Compare *La pulce d'oro* with Wolf-Ferrari's *Il campiello* (1936), a comedy from Goldoni, to find a similar tradition: a small number of characters, the tavern setting, a deception, the final farewells, and a wedding. By his own admission, Pinelli was neither an operagoer nor a connoisseur of the operatic repertory.

³⁶ 'You raised me beautiful and a liar', says Lucilla to her parents, thanking them and taking leave. Tullio Pinelli, *La pulce d'oro: Un atto in tre quadri* (Milan, 1940), 33.

³⁷ Guido Salvetti, 'L'"Antipoetica" di G. F. Ghedini nella musica italiana tra le due guerre', *Studi musicali*, 2 (1972), 371–417 at 415.

³⁸ In this sense, *La pulce d'oro* seems to put into practice Busoni's words: 'the field of opera ranges from simple songs, marches, and dance motifs to more elaborate counterpoints, from singing to orchestra, from the sacred to the profane, and beyond'. Ferruccio Busoni, *Lo Sguardo lieto: Tutti gli scritti sulla musica e le arti*, ed. Fedele D'Amico (Milan, 1977), 119.

³⁹ A. R., 'Al Teatro CARLO FELICE'.

Ex. 2. Giorgio Federico Ghedini, *La pulce d'oro: Un atto in tre quadri* [vocal score] (Milan, 1940), 19

The image shows a musical score for a vocal score. The top system is for the vocal line, labeled 'LUPO FIORINO'. It starts with a 4/4 time signature and a dynamic marking of *mf*. The lyrics are 'È tut - to ve - ro ciò ch'io di - co; an -'. The piano accompaniment is in 4/4 time, starting with a dynamic marking of *pp*. There is an 8-measure rest in the piano part. The bottom system is for the piano accompaniment, starting with a 3/4 time signature and a tempo marking of 'Moderato' with a quarter note equal to 63. The lyrics are 'che se è fal - so!'. The piano part has a dynamic marking of *pp* and a 'string...' instruction. The tempo changes to 'Un poco animato' and the dynamic marking becomes *ff*.

the heterogeneity of *La pulce d'oro* meets Martha Hyde's updated definition of musical parody: a complex form of anachronism brought into being by the creative use of a historical clashing of different styles.⁴⁰ Indeed, several lexical, formal, and stylistic elements coexist eclectically in *La pulce d'oro*, layered in an ahistorical manner. The opera ranges nimbly from modes to tonality, from polytonality to a hint of dodecaphony, bringing together elements that are 'incompatible with each other' (Salveti). This parodic clash serves the comic effect. Returning to the opera's first scene, for example, Ghedini combines the citation from *Otello* with a light-hearted bitonal mazurka, the latter introducing Lupo Fiorino's arrival on the scene. The musical presence of this duplicitous character mainly relies on different passages of atonality, polytonality, and even twelve-note construction, (as in the recurrent dodecaphonic comment on Lupo Fiorino's paradoxical statements ('everything I say is true, even if it is false'). The effect is estranging and grotesque within the comic context of the play and the neoclassical qualities of the music (see Ex. 2).⁴¹

⁴⁰ Martha M. Hyde, 'Neoclassic and Anachronistic Impulses in Twentieth-Century Music', *Music Theory Spectrum*, 2 (1996), 200–35. Hyde ranks parody among the options of musical 'anachronism', as opposed to philological or antiquarian approaches to the past.

⁴¹ This episodic and mocking use of the series to characterize Lupo Fiorino's devious words was probably a sidewise glance at Dallapiccola: the latter's embrace of the twelve-note method, which he was the first to approach in Italy, aroused the hostility of many, including Ghedini. Something similar happens in Petrassi's *Il Cordovano*, where the series matches the line 'Pass me the chamber pot' with an explicitly mocking intent, as the composer himself admitted. See Petrassi's interview in Parise, 'Profilo di Giorgio Federico Ghedini', 571.

Ex. 3. Giorgio Federico Ghedini, *La pulce d'oro: Un atto in tre quadri* [vocal score] (Milan, 1940), 50-1

43
Andante ♩ = 63 FORTUNA *f*

OLIMPIO *ff* *gravemente* I - o non vo - glio, si -
Fer - ma, fer - ma! Si - gno - re, mi - a fi - - glia e u - na ra - gaz - za o - ne - sta!

Andantino ♩ = 63-66

LUCILLA *mf* *p dolce, con finta ingenuità*

Pic - - co - la mam - ma, di che co - sa hai pa - u - ra? Io so be - ne di che
- gno - re!
co - sa hai pa - u - ra. Ma se mi to - glie il sac - co, la pul - ce può fug -
gi - re, e se non me lo to - glie, non c'è nul - la di ma - le. Se mi

In this parodic dimension, the music in *La pulce d'oro* does not assimilate the past so much as emphasize the anachronistic gap, with a sense of distancing irony. The opening storm, for instance, an omen of the drama to come and the inner disturbance of the characters in *Otello*, is downsized and overturned here in the prosaic context of Olimpio's tavern. Ghedini does not here recover older forms or quote from tradition, but rather evokes the spirit of *opera buffa*—that is, in Raymond Fearn's words, a 'subtle atmosphere of wit and irony' beyond mere 'far-fetched plots involving deceit, disguise and comeuppance'.⁴² The allusions to tradition in this ironic context are decontextualized and juxtaposed in a sort of stylistic patchwork, matching as they do the libretto's bromides and acting together as an effective means of comedy. Even the opera's lyrical moments, while alluding to traditional aria forms and to the expressivity of *cantabilità* (the vocal offshoot of *italianità*), become mere instruments of humour.

'Piccola mamma' (*Andantino*, Scene I, rehearsal mark 43), Lucilla's quasi-aria in the first scene of the opera, exemplifies this ironic use of conventions and epitomizes the twofold relation of adherence and distance between music and text. It is a sort of closed number that halts the continuous flow of music with Lucilla's heartfelt song addressed to her parents over a sober accompaniment (see Ex. 3).⁴³ The prose text is set as a kind of aria, but without resorting to established operatic forms. The gap between the previous recitative and more expansive singing is explicitly conventional. But all is not what it seems: a dissociation between music and text takes place. What might seem like a lyrical moment in the music is actually the unfolding of a cold sophistry, with which Lucilla insistently tries to convince her parents to let her spend the night with Lupo Fiorino. 'Non c'è niente di male' ('there is nothing wrong with it') is the refrain continuously repeated in this varied strophic form, matching Lucilla's peroration in her repetitive, pedantic, and increasingly emphatic tone.⁴⁴ The melody sounds simple and monotonous; Lucilla's vocal style is chanting and almost child-like, an *arioso* without any excesses of lyricism and virtuosity. The musical phraseology is regular and periodic, levelling out the continuous prose of the text: consisting of antecedent and consequent, it fits the logic and the structure of the syllogism. The first semi-phrase is generally linear and diatonic, the second more varied and with a chromatic accompaniment: Lucilla's cunning seems to lie in this ambiguity between apparent innocence and hidden malice. Ghedini's music excavates the paradoxical content of the text, while detaching itself from its literal meaning. The situation is reminiscent of the famous prayer, 'Oh mio babbino caro', that Lauretta addresses to her father in Puccini's *Gianni Schicchi*, but in this case, the pathos is lacking in Lucilla's prose text and restrained expressiveness, her cold detachment contrasting with the apparent lyricism of the music.

This typically modernist divorce between music and action was already theorized by Ferruccio Busoni in his aesthetics at the beginning of the century, resulting in what Aleksandr Benois called the 'destruction of the synthesis' of opera.⁴⁵ The music asserts and simultaneously denies the situation on stage, so as to reveal the 'pleasant lie' of art itself,

⁴² Raymond Fearn, *Italian Opera since 1945*, Contemporary Music Studies, 15 (Amsterdam, 1998), 25.

⁴³ 'Piccola mamma' is included as a separate piece in an anthology of arias for soprano taken from 20th-c. operas, published by Ricordi: Maurizio Carnelli (ed.), *Novecento opera: Arte per soprano* (San Giuliano Milanese, 2006).

⁴⁴ Lucilla's words: 'Little mama, what are you afraid of? I know what you are afraid of, but don't worry, the flea will fly if he takes the sack off. And if he doesn't take it off, then there's nothing wrong with it.'

⁴⁵ Ferruccio Busoni, *The Essence of Music and Other Papers*, trans. Rosamond Ley (London, 1957). Benois is quoted for the anti-operatic tendencies of modernism in Marina Frolova-Walker, 'Russian Opera: Between Modernism and Romanticism', in Mervyn Cooke (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century Opera* (Cambridge, 2005), 181–96 at 181.

according to Busoni—and, in this case, unmasking Lucilla’s lie as well. Something like what happens in ‘Piccola mamma’ occurs repeatedly in Busoni’s *Arlecchino*, when, for instance, the Abbot lyrically sings the praises of Chianti wine from Tuscany within a conventional duet. In Busoni’s opera, traditional forms and situations are recovered in an alienating and neutralizing sense, with the music distancing from and sometimes clashing with the contents of the words. This was the closest model for *La pulce d’oro*’s parodic gap between music and text, as well as between present and past.⁴⁶ Ghedini’s music maintains a relationship of dissociation and complementarity with the scene, exactly as theorized by Busoni.⁴⁷ But, if this alienated doubling of music and stage served Busoni to mark opera’s congenital improbability and its anti-realist distance from life, here in *La pulce d’oro* it assumes a markedly comic value. On the one hand, Lucilla’s aria mocks operatic tradition while alluding to it and turning its sentimentality into ridicule. On the other hand, Ghedini’s music effectively stresses that dissociation between thinking one thing, saying another, and doing yet another, which is a typical comic mechanism. This incongruity, in fact, achieves an ironic effect, approaching the concept of humour as defined by the Italian playwright Luigi Pirandello, that is, as a ‘feeling of contrast’.⁴⁸

Within the multifaceted panorama of Italian neoclassicism, *La pulce d’oro* seems simultaneously to touch on and evade key musical identifiers of *italianità*, such as the references to the past and the music’s commitment to the text, as was pointed out by the critics at the premiere. Yet, its underlying irony dampens any tone of nationalist rhetoric, seemingly embracing the objective aesthetics of Busoni and Stravinskian alienation. The allusions to tradition in the opera do not seem nostalgic, insofar as they do not attempt to resemble the past, but rather exploit it with critical detachment and to comic effect. The composer Luciano Berio, Ghedini’s future pupil, later distinguished between a true neoclassical stance, one properly ironic in maintaining a critical distance from the past—and thus not necessarily reactionary—and the fascist ideal of classicism, which took the past literally as a model of immutable order.⁴⁹ In this sense, Ghedini’s opera sits firmly within the neoclassical stance, the one well represented by Busoni or Stravinsky, while interpreting it in an idiosyncratic manner. Precisely the emphasizing of the libretto’s comedy in Ghedini’s music distances *La pulce d’oro* from both the more celebratory aspects of Italian neoclassicism and the purely musicological recovery of past forms and idioms.⁵⁰ The music’s parodic aspect, expressed in terms of stylistic and historical heterogeneity, not only adheres to the text, but also matches the ambiguous and multilayered meaning of the play. As we will see, drawing on the broader meaning of the term, parody

⁴⁶ The early 1940s were the time for the rediscovery of Busoni as an opera composer, through the staging of his works (*Arlecchino* in 1940, and *Doktor Faust* at the 1942 Maggio Musicale in Florence), the dissemination of his writings, edited by Guido M. Gatti and Luigi Dallapiccola, and the publication of monographs, such as those by Guido Guerrini.

⁴⁷ As has been shown, Busoni also influenced other composers of the time: Bernardoni finds similarities with some of G. F. Malipiero’s works, while the same lineage from *Falstaff* to *Arlecchino* was the key to reading Casella’s *La donna serpente* in its 1942 staging for critics such as Rognoni and Ballo. Virgilio Bernardoni, *La maschera e la favola nell’opera italiana del primo Novecento* (Venice, 1986), 39–53; Luigi Rognoni, ‘Lettera da Milano’, *La rassegna musicale*, 11 (1942), 294–7; Ferdinando Ballo, ‘La stagione di opere contemporanee a Milano’, *Musica*, 2 (1943), 220–35.

⁴⁸ Moreover, as Henri Bergson said in his famous essay *Le Rire*, ‘laughter has no greater foe than emotion’; quoted in John Parkin, ‘The Power of Laughter: Koestler on Bergson and Freud’, in John Parkin and John Phillips (eds.), *Laughter and Power* (Bern, 2006), 113–44 at 118.

⁴⁹ See Patrick Szersnovicz’s interview with Luciano Berio (1996), in Berio, *Interviste e colloqui*, ed. Vincenzina Caterina Ottomano (Turin, 2017), 347–55. In this way, Berio waters down the ideological connection between neoclassicism and fascism.

⁵⁰ In other works, Ghedini displayed a more serious approach to tradition, especially towards the revered Italian pre-classical repertory; thus, some critics defined *La pulce d’oro* as a ‘vacation’, particularly striking in the ominous year 1940.

in *La pulce d'oro* is not only the musical technique that melds past and present, but also embodies the opera's thorny relationship between fiction and reality, as an allegorical means.

HISTORY BEHIND THE LIE

The marriage of the young couple is a conventional end to a seemingly light-hearted story, and yet the libretto leaves us with more questions than answers. Was it all a deception? Were Lucilla and Lupo Fiorino accomplices from the start? Did the flea actually exist? 'If you believed it, it exists; if you didn't believe it, it is just a fairy tale', is Lupo Fiorino's suggestion at the end of the opera. This final remark, as a sort of moral of the story, suspends the narrative and broadens the perspective of the tale, opening a metatheatrical reflection, as happens at the end of many other comic operas, such as *Falstaff*, *La donna serpente*, and *Arlecchino*. The magic flea triggers a multifaceted reflection on what is real and what is fake, or what is believable and what is not, which is left as an open question in the opera. We might then ask, is *La pulce d'oro* indeed just a fairy tale?

Starting from Pinelli's labelling of his production as 'magic realism', we can investigate how the opera interprets the relationship between fiction and reality in the light of this contemporary trend of Italian culture under fascism. Comparisons can be drawn with contemporary literature, and particularly comic journalism, which provided an alternative and pedestrian reading of 'Italianness', compared to the bombastic nationalistic rhetoric of *italianità*. The comedy and the ambiguity of the opera's plot hinges precisely on the blurring of reality and fiction. This dualism underlies not just the fairy tale of *La pulce d'oro*, but also the opera's topicality in 1940, mirroring in a certain satirical sense the regime's strategy of ambiguity. Far from being merely facetious, as we will see, *La pulce d'oro* was interpreted as grotesque by some critics, confirming the unsettling prominence of comedy in times of crisis, as both escapism and disguise of the tragic: 'If humour comes into play in dealing with history, it is almost always when coping with the most serious, even threatening situations: violence, terror, war, social, political, and psychological tensions of all kinds appear to be the preferred subjects for humorous arrangement.'⁵¹

Since the debut of the spoken version of Pinelli's play in 1935, critics had picked up on the semantic ambiguity of the work, drawing reference to wider philosophical trends in twentieth-century thought in the process. One critic wrote: 'It is clear that the symbolic meaning of the comedy rekindles Pirandello's problem of appearance and reality.'⁵² The critic was right: behind the play's jokey surface, the conceptual core resembles one of the recurrent motifs in the works of Pirandello, who was one of the most celebrated Italian dramatists of the time: 'Nothing is true | and everything can be true. | Just believe it for a moment, | and then no more, and then again, | and then always, or never again', the prince says in *La favola del figlio cambiato*, written in the same years as the play of *La pulce d'oro*, as a libretto for music by G. F. Malipiero.⁵³ The union of this modernist philosophical reflection and the comic content of the fairy tale produced a peculiarly modern sense of humour in *La pulce d'oro*, which did not go unnoticed by critics.

⁵¹ Elisabeth Cheauré and Regine Nohejl (eds.), *Humour and Laughter in History: Transcultural Perspectives*, History in Popular Cultures, 15 (Bielefeld, 2014), 7.

⁵² 'Il teatro sperimentale fei G.U.F. inaugurato von "La Pulce d'oro" di Pinelli', *Corriere della sera*, 10 Nov. 1935.

⁵³ 'Ma niente è vero e vero può essere tutto; | basta crederlo in un momento, | e poi non più e poi di nuovo, | e poi per sempre, o per sempre mai più', in Luigi Pirandello and Gian Francesco Malipiero, *La favola del figlio cambiato: Tre atti in cinque quadri* (Milan, 1934), Act III, sc. v.

As mentioned above, there was nothing immediately innovative or timely about the opera's plot. The flea itself belongs to the typical kind of comic expedient, whereby fantastic or magical elements are often combined with daily reality as a way of using cunning and deceit to produce comedy. This is the case—to isolate just two examples—of the magic love potion passed off by the phony doctor Dulcamara in Donizetti's *L'elisir d'amore*, as well as the fake fairies and elves waiting for Falstaff to make fun of him. However, unlike these historical examples, the comedy and even the happy ending of *La pulce d'oro* are neither cathartic nor definitive. As one critic noted, beneath a veneer of bonhomie, the opera's fairy tale betrayed 'wretched and philosophically bitter situations'.⁵⁴ Comic opera, flourishing in the age of Enlightenment, inevitably acquired a different meaning in the twentieth-century context. Resulting from a time of 'ruin and destruction', to borrow Casella's words, straightforward comedy was clearly not possible, with *La pulce d'oro*'s acerbic aftertaste noted as one of the opera's most topical aspects. As another critic remarked: 'the troubled mood of the contemporary public no longer fits the simple and sincere smile capable of soothing our souls; today, comedy is never separated from something acrid and bitter that turns our laughter into a grotesque smirk'.⁵⁵

The critics' isolation of a 'grotesque' element suggests recourse to a specific mode of comedy. A much-theorized term at this time, the grotesque was often construed as the introduction of an unnatural or absurd incursion that is both unsettling and inexplicable.⁵⁶ *La pulce d'oro*'s comedy seemingly accords with these stock definitions. The prodigious insect serves as a comic gimmick, but it is also a somewhat surreal element that interrupts an otherwise more realistic context. The grotesque, in fact, is linked to paradox and a reversal of reality, as a 'force working on the truth, rummaging through it, so as to find the false in the true, the unnatural in the natural, the absurd in the logical'.⁵⁷ In this sense, the comedy of *La pulce d'oro* is at one with the paradoxical combination of reality and fiction, epitomized by the phantom flea of Lupo Fiorino. The opera here leads us to the oxymoronic formula of 'magic realism', as Pinelli defined his narrative approach, that is, a magical and fabulous transfiguration of reality, which runs through his production from the spoken version of *La pulce d'oro* to his later screenplays.⁵⁸

The term magic realism has been used to describe very different artistic expressions in the twentieth century, but ones that are united in having the intrusion of a fantastic element within an apparently realistic situation, with the magical serving as an alternative approach to such reality.⁵⁹ According to Maggie Ann Bowers, magic realism is difficult to delimit due to its encroaching on a variety of genres (such as the fantastic,

⁵⁴ 'Situazioni tristanzuole e filosoficamente amare', quoted in Abbiati, 'Alla Fenice di Venezia', 6.

⁵⁵ 'Il genere comico, che un tempo era rappresentato in musica dalla commedia ed opera buffa gloria e vanto del popolo italiano, trova oggi il suo equivalente nel grottesco. La sensibilità del travagliato pubblico contemporaneo non è più fatta per il sorriso semplice, candido, sincero, che sfocia in una risatona a piena bocca rasserenatrice degli animi; oggi il comico nella vita non va mai disgiunto da un alunché di acre, di amaro che s'annida al fondo del calice giocondo e finisce per mutare la risata in una smorfia grottesca.' Quoted in Stefano Rebaudi, 'Tre opere e tre successi ieri sera al "Carlo Felice": "Zanetto" di Mascagni – "L'intrusa" di Pannain – "La Pulce d'oro" di G. F. Ghedini', *Corriere mercantile*, 16 Feb. 1940. See also A. R., 'Al Teatro CARLO FELICE'.

⁵⁶ See Wolfgang Johannes Kayser, *The Grottesque in Art and Literature* (New York, 1981) and Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Cambridge, 1968).

⁵⁷ Silvio D'Amico, 'La maschera e il volto di Luigi Chiarelli', *Tribuna*, 2 June 1916.

⁵⁸ The 'invention of the authentic' was how Fellini defined this aesthetic attitude. Demetrio Salvi, *Tullio Pinelli: L'interista ritrovata. I misteri della scrittura e quarant'anni del miglior cinema italiano raccontati da un grande sceneggiatore* [ebook] (2014); Federico Fellini, Tullio Pinelli, and Augusto Sainati, *Ciò che abbiamo inventato è tutto autentico: Lettere a Tullio Pinelli* (Venice, 2008).

⁵⁹ Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris (eds.), *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community* (Durham, NC, 1995); Maggie Ann Bowers, *Magic(al) Realism, New Critical Idiom* (New York, 2004).

surrealist, or allegorical) and the evolution of meaning through different translations and contexts.⁶⁰ From the post-expressionist art of the Weimar Republic to Latin American literature of the second half of the twentieth century, magic realism took on different forms and meanings as a transnational phenomenon. In Italy, the term *realismo magico* was introduced by the writer and composer Massimo Bontempelli, who in 1927 theorized this literary mode on the pages of his well-known cultural magazine «900», defining it as a means of revealing the deepest universal meanings of reality, precisely through the disruption and estrangement effect of magic.⁶¹ The artist's purpose was to invent new collective myths. Playing on the interface between fiction and reality, Bontempelli's works came close to Pirandello's themes, although without metatheatrical implications. For Bontempelli, the magic element served to express the existential alienation of modern man and the absurd, extreme consequences of this; such is the case with *Nostra Dea* (1925), in which the protagonist models her behaviour on the clothes she wears, and *Minnie la candida* (1927), who commits suicide in the tragic impossibility of distinguishing real human beings from robots.⁶²

However, even the case of Italian magic realism is not univocal and limited to Bontempelli's work. Its main ingredient—the mix of the mundane and the extraordinary—could be found in different forms, from Giorgio De Chirico's metaphysical art in the First World War period to Italo Calvino's narratives of half a century later. In navigating among such different expressions, magic realism should be addressed—according to Bowers—by evaluating, case by case, how and with what kind of reality a magic realist work engages, in which perspective it presents the magical element, and what role it attributes to this. From these assumptions, we can see how, in a slightly different manner from Bontempelli's mythographic ambition, Pinelli's magic realism in *La pulce d'oro* seemingly deals with reality in a more concrete, rather than metaphysical or existential way. The comic tone of the opera dampens the philosophical commitment of Bontempelli's magic realism. The situation portrayed by Pinelli at Olimpio's tavern is quotidian and recognizable until the incursion of Lupo Fiorino and his magic flea. Unlike in other forms of magic realism, where the supernatural element is included and unanimously accepted as an ordinary occurrence within the fictive reality, the existence of the flea is questioned by the characters themselves within the fairy tale and always remains on the verge of illusion and trick. In this sense, *La pulce d'oro* gets closer to the fantastic genre, which relies precisely on a wavering between belief and non-belief in the extraordinary event, leaving the public in doubt about the fictional element.

In Ghedini's opera, opposing perspectives on the magic power of the flea, that of the sceptical Verna and the credulous Olimpio, coexist. The intrusion of the magic flea plays

⁶⁰ Bowers lists the German *Magischer Realismus*, the Italian *realismo magico*, the Latin-American *Lo real maravilloso* and *realismo mágico*. Consequently, she distinguishes between 'magic realism', 'magical realism', and 'marvellous realism'. Bowers, *Magic(al) Realism*.

⁶¹ Bontempelli (1878–1960) played a key role in fascist culture. His «900» was intended as part of the fascist project of renewal, as a 'return to order' after decadence and futurism, which were both considered expressions of the *fin de siècle* crisis of modernity, based on formalism, materialism, nihilism, and bourgeois individualism. Bontempelli's «900» became the centre of the most internationalist and progressive instances of fascist culture, in opposition to the nationalism of *Strapaese*, as represented in the rival magazine «*Il Selvaggio*». Patricia Gaborik, 'La Donna Mobile: Massimo Bontempelli's *Nostra Dea* as Fascist Modernism', *Modern Drama*, 50 (2007), 210–32.

⁶² See Alberto Asor Rosa (ed.), *Letteratura italiana del Novecento: Bilancio di un secolo* (Turin, 2000); Casadei and Santagata, *Manuale di letteratura*; Massimiliano Tortora, 'Modernismo e modernisti nelle riviste fasciste', in Edoardo Esposito and Caroline Patey (eds.), *I modernismi delle riviste: Tra Europa e Stati Uniti*, Testi e Testimonianze di Critica Letteraria, 3 (Milan, 2019), 73–93; Ruth Ben-Ghiat, *Fascist Modernities: Italy, 1922–45* (London, 2001).

a role similar to that of the exotic or strange animals—such as crocodiles and turkeys—bursting into the middle-class living rooms portrayed by the contemporary Italian writer Alberto Moravia in his *Racconti surrealisti e satirici*.⁶³ In the latter, the mix of everyday life and surreal elements acquires a satirical value: after an initial surprise, the characters accept the absurd presence of these animals in order to be integrated into society and not risk looking stupid or provincial. The live crocodile worn as a coat or the turkey as a suitor for the daughter of a small trader—embedded in reality and social norms as they are and forcibly assimilated by the characters—reveal all the absurdity of contemporary society and ridicule people's intellectual limitations, their conformism and ambition of social climbing.⁶⁴ Written between 1935 and 1945, Moravia's tales were contemporary with Pinelli's *La pulce d'oro* and referred to Italian society in the veiled form of the apologue. This comparison within the same late-fascist context also brings the fairy tale of *La pulce d'oro* closer to the categories of satire and allegory.

If we read the opera in an allegorical key, *La pulce d'oro* has many points of contact with the contemporary Italian situation. Written as it was in 1935, the fairy tale was conceived at the peak of both the bombastic propaganda and the mass consensus regarding fascism, the same year the regime had fundraised for its colonial enterprise in Africa, asking Italians to sacrifice the gold of their wedding rings for the imperialist cause and promising glory and exotic treasure in exchange. The consequences, as already mentioned, were disastrous. 'È morto alla guerra | È morto alla guerra | L'uomo più ricco | Di tutta la terra | Non torna mai più' (he died in the war, the richest man on earth, never to return), is the grotesque and ominous refrain that Olimpio and his hosts sing in unison, as they dream of getting rich through the magic power of the exotic flea.⁶⁵ As happens in Pinelli's fairy tale, Italians at the time pleaded poverty, deceived by the promises of a charismatic individual, who actually happened to be a swindler. Lupo Fiorino's far-fetched story, promising wealth through his magic flea, brings out the worst in people. Nobody sees the flea, but everyone wants it at any cost, obstinately believing the incredible as long as it is attractive. Any discordant voice, such as that of Verna, is silenced by force.

While *La pulce d'oro* could be read, then, as an apt metaphor for the contemporary situation and the regime's lies, the satirical charge of Pinelli's text, as in Moravia's stories, targeted Italian society under fascism more than the regime itself in a sense of overt political opposition—Olimpio's credulity more than Lupo Fiorino's profiteering astuteness. Pinelli's idiosyncratic magic realism brings out not the naivety of Bontempelli's special characters in the face of a paradoxical reality, but the ignorance and guile of common people, with Lucilla as a sort of parodic version of the candid Minnie.⁶⁶ The characters of *La pulce d'oro* are indeed ordinary people, recognizable types of Italian society, comical in their very being. In the earlier play version, the parodic allusions to fascist Italy and its contradictions are even more explicit. The merchant Daghe, one of the patrons of Olimpio's inn, for example, plays the role of the Enlightenment thinker, in defence of reason and freedom, but his behaviour completely contradicts his principles:

⁶³ Alberto Moravia, *Racconti surrealisti e satirici*, Tascabili Bompiani, 296 (Milan, 1982).

⁶⁴ Irena Prosenec, 'Moravia e il realismo magico', in Patrizia Farinelli (ed.), *Bontempelliano o plurimo? Il realismo magico negli anni di "900" e oltre*, Saggi, 154 (Florence, 2016), 163–73.

⁶⁵ Pinelli, *La pulce d'oro*, 24.

⁶⁶ The protagonist of Bontempelli's *Minnie la candida* is jokingly made to believe that everyone is a robot, hewing to the idea tragically to the point of insanity and suicide. Silvana Cirillo, 'Fantastici, surrealisti e realisti magici', in Nino Borsellino and Walter Pedullà (eds.), *Le forme del realismo: Dal realismo magico al neorealismo* (Milan, 2000), 146–221.

‘Voi non potete, sol perché siete forte, impedire la libertà di critica’ (Just because you are strong, you cannot prevent freedom of criticism), he claims of Lupo Fiorino, while he is complicit like all the others in the misdeeds of the story.⁶⁷

The parodic intermingling of magic and the mundane in *La pulce d’oro* thus triggers a reflection on the nature of being Italian, an identity that could deflate the conceited version of fascist rhetoric. Take the example of Olimpio, a simple man—‘a good-natured person’⁶⁸—but in fact not innocuous, ready as he is to floor a man in defence of his own interests. His being narrow-minded and uncritical is potentially dangerous. Olimpio’s stick, as the fascist *manganello* (truncheon), could be read as the expression of a deep-rooted aptitude to violence in Italian society, something repressed but ready to emerge at any moment, especially in difficult times.⁶⁹ Olimpio is representative of the Italian type, as the journalist Leo Longanesi described it in 1941: a ‘ferocious and domestic animal’,⁷⁰ whose beliefs could be stronger than reality itself. ‘And how could it be otherwise?’—Olimpio states in Pinelli’s spoken original—‘Because, if it were otherwise, I would be the silliest man in the world, and the power of the golden flea would be a fairy tale.’⁷¹ He acknowledges the truth without believing it. The mundane and yet dangerous authoritarianism, as well as the slowness of late-fascist society, are condensed in the caricatural character of Olimpio, a clumsy and frustrated *pater familias*, the master who is also a servant: ‘Io sono il padrone e io porto le secchie’ (I am the master and I carry the buckets). At the opera’s end, while everyone resumes their wandering, Olimpio proudly remains at home and ‘that’s what matters’, to sanction the uselessness of any experience and the resignation to utter immobility.⁷²

This critical reading of fascist Italy in *La pulce d’oro* is in keeping with some of the main theoretical and literary interpretations of Italian fascism from that time.⁷³ For many theorists and writers, direct witnesses of the events, fascism was not only a temporary political phenomenon, but also (if not primarily) a human and social one—one that indelibly marked the Italian character. Accordingly, Italians themselves had to answer for the dictatorship, as if fascism was a way of being and living rather than a political ideology, the most acute manifestation of Italians’ chronic diseases and vices (such as transformism, individualism, cultural small-mindedness and social immobility), following Piero Gobetti’s conception of fascism as ‘the autobiography of the nation’.⁷⁴ Novels such as *Fontamara* (1933) by Ignazio Silone or *Il Conformista* (1951) by Moravia fit into this interpretation, depicting on the one hand the ignorance and backwardness of fascist Italy, and on the other Italians’ desire for conformity and repressed violence.

⁶⁷ Pinelli, *La pulce d’oro, I padri etruschi, Lotta con l’angelo, Il ciarlatano meraviglioso, La sacra rappresentazione di Santa Marina* (Rome, 1996), 18.

⁶⁸ ‘Bonaccione e accomodante’, quoted in Della Corte, ‘Novità al Carlo Felice’.

⁶⁹ The repressed violence of Italian society is a cornerstone of another work on fascist Italy: Moravia’s novel *Il conformista* (1951).

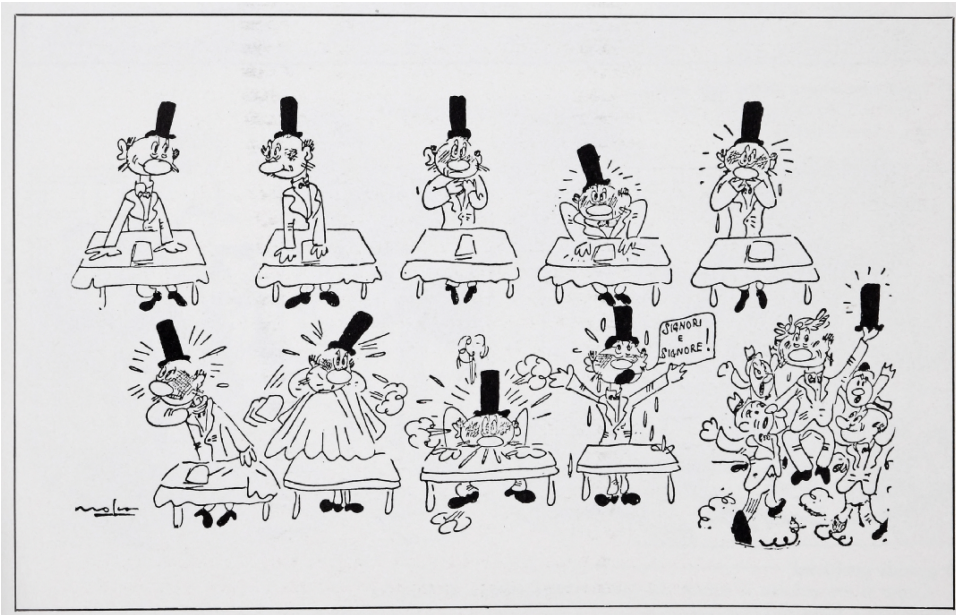
⁷⁰ Leo Longanesi (1905–57), journalist and caricaturist, quoted in Mino Argentieri (ed.), *Risate di regime: La commedia italiana, 1930–1944* (Venice, 1991), 71.

⁷¹ ‘E come potrebbe essere diversamente? Ché, se fosse diversamente, io sarei l’uomo più sciocco del mondo, ed il potere della pulce d’oro sarebbe una favola.’ Quoted in Pinelli, *La pulce d’oro*, 27.

⁷² *Ibid.* 42.

⁷³ See, for example the historical interpretations of Gaetano Salvemini and Piero Gobetti, as well as the reflections and work of a diverse range of Italian novelists, such as Ignazio Silone, Alberto Moravia, Vitaliano Brancati, Carlo Levi, Carlo Emilio Gadda, and Giorgio Bassani. See Antonio Tricomi, ‘Fascistissimi sempre: Il fascismo nella letteratura italiana’, *E-Review: Rivista degli Istituti storici dell’Emilia-Romagna in Rete*, 6 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.12977/ereview143> (accessed 11 Nov. 2021).

⁷⁴ Marco Salotti, *Al cinema con Mussolini: Film e regime 1929–1939* (Recco, 2011).



PL. 1. Cartoon by Giovanni Mosca, *Marc'Aurelio* (1935), representing a speaker in difficulty who, after much hesitation, manages to win an ovation with a simple 'Ladies and Gentlemen!'

The way *La pulce d'oro*'s satire recast the contradictions and stereotypes of Italian society via comedy mirrored the contemporary humorous press. After the suppression of press freedom in 1926, satire and direct criticism of the regime became impossible. Humorous journalism, however, continued to develop with great public success,⁷⁵ carving out a space not so much for blatant opposition, but rather an alternative to the rhetoric of propaganda—in a manner very similar to *La pulce d'oro*. As Adolfo Chiesa put it, such journalism offered 'an oasis of reality in a world dominated by the rhetoric of heroism, monuments, imperial eagles',⁷⁶ in which the contradictions of society were presented under the banner of caricature and paroxysm.⁷⁷ This was the case of the humour of Giovanni Mosca, Cesare Zavattini, and Achille Campanile—to mention a few—who used a certain surrealism to transfigure a reality that could not be talked about directly, demonstrating its absurdity through irony, just as happens in Moravia's stories and Pinelli's fairy tale.⁷⁸ The vicious circle of rhetoric within fascist society was itself the object of satire: in the cartoon from the popular journal «*Marc'Aurelio*», Mosca ridiculed both the emptiness of the clumsy rhetorician's speech and the complicity of his audience, ready to get excited no matter what he says (see Pl. 1). Similarly, the story of the flea in

⁷⁵ Consider the growing circulation of humorous magazines such as «*Bertoldo*» or «*Marc'Aurelio*».

⁷⁶ Adolfo Chiesa, *La satira politica in Italia* (Rome, 1990), 89.

⁷⁷ Leonardo Battisti, 'Ridere nel "regno Della Noia": Intrattenimento e umorismo nella pubblicitaria del ventennio fascista', in Francesca Castellano, Irene Gambacorti, and Giulia Tellini (eds.), *Le forme del comico: Atti delle sessioni parallele del XXI Congresso dell'ADI. Firenze, 6–9 settembre 2017* (Florence, 2019), 686–95, and Leonardo Battisti, *Il romanzo umoristico negli anni del fascismo: Affermazione e crisi di un genere letterario* (Canterano, 2019). See also Stephen Gundle, 'Laughter under Fascism: Humour and Ridicule in Italy, 1922–43', *History Workshop Journal*, 1 (2015), 215–32, <https://doi.org/10.1093/hwj/dbv007> (accessed 11 Feb. 2021); Elharris Mascha, 'Mocking Fascism: Popular Culture and Political Satire as Counter-Hegemony', in Villy Tsakona and Diana Elena Popa (eds.), *Studies in Political Humour: In between Political Critique and Public Entertainment* (Amsterdam and Philadelphia, 2011), 191–213.

⁷⁸ Ernesto G. Laura, 'I percorsi intrecciati della commedia anni'30', in Argentieri (ed.), *Risate di regime*, 109–40.

Ghedini's opera satirically reveals the credulity of the others more than Lupo Fiorino's own prowess, and that was what could be laughed at and reflected upon, allowing the public to laugh at themselves. As Fellini later declared about the same «*Marc'Aurelio*»: 'the anti-fascist aspect was not so much in the idea, but in the desecration of language which aimed blatantly to contradict the bombastic rhetoric of the regime'.⁷⁹ The presentation of a prosaic reality was in itself an alternative to the grandeur of official propaganda, with Olimpio serving as a dampening counterpart to the image of the Italian hero and genius. 'Sordid, cowardly, superficial, and ignorant characters' were depicted to embody the mismatch between the haughty rhetoric of the regime and the lived situation.⁸⁰

The comedy of this humorous vein was based on the rampant cynicism of Italian society under fascism, coming from the continuous mismatch between words and facts, desires and their failure to come true.⁸¹ Like the protagonist of Moravia's *Il conformista*, who is forced to choose between 'verità e pane' (truth and bread) in the context of late-fascist Italy, the characters of *La pulce d'oro* are forced to believe the absurd out of necessity.⁸² Faced with the tale of the flea, both Verna's stubborn disbelief as well as the equally stubborn Olimpio come out somewhat defeated. In Pinelli's magic realism, the magic flea bursting into everyday life remains stuck between mistrust and credulity, as typical of the fantastic genre in literature, but also—allegorically—as recurring in a society, such as the contemporary Italian one, constantly immersed in the ambiguity between what is real and what appears to be, or, more precisely, between what could be true or fake.

Following this allegorical reading, the fairy tale of *La pulce d'oro* stages the core mechanism of totalitarian society, as described by Hannah Arendt: a 'mixture of gullibility and cynicism', where totalitarian mass leaders could make people believe that 'everything was possible and nothing was true'.⁸³ The magic insect of *La pulce d'oro* epitomizes the lie of totalitarian propaganda, as an instrument of power and domination over people, and exposes the contradictions and paradoxes it generates in society as in the fairy tale. Cheating, hypocrisy, and inconsistency, in Arendt's words, do not aim to replace the real world with a totally fake one, but rather to destroy the common sense of truth versus falsehood. So too does Lupo Fiorino blur the boundary between fiction and reality. In *La pulce d'oro*, pretence is the recurring theme, as it is in other works of the fascist period: just think of Moravia's *La mascherata* (1941), a novel about power as a contagious disease, set in a phantom South American dictatorship,⁸⁴ or Thomas Mann's *Mario and the Magician* (1929), a short story that condenses fascist Italy into the grotesque spectacle of an illusionist, Cipolla, a charlatan who comes from afar, capable of hypnotizing everyone with his silver tongue and tricks, just like Lupo Fiorino.⁸⁵

⁷⁹ Chiesa, *La satira politica*, 103.

⁸⁰ Ibid. 101.

⁸¹ Mino Argentieri, 'Dal teatro allo schermo', in Argentieri (ed.), *Risate di regime*, 65–96. Franco Ferrarotti, 'Sogni di potenza e amnesia sociale indotta', *ibid.* 3–18.

⁸² Alberto Moravia, *Il conformista* (Milan, 2011), 10.

⁸³ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York, 1968), 382.

⁸⁴ Moravia represents a cynical and corrupt world at all levels, where paradoxically the tyrant, Teresio, makes a better impression than his subjects. Similarly, in *La pulce d'oro* almost all in Olimpio's tavern are worse than Lupo Fiorino: they are greedy, hoodwinked, and violent. Alberto Moravia, *La mascherata*, ed. Marino Biondi (Milan, 2012).

⁸⁵ 'Perhaps more than anywhere else the eighteenth century is still alive in Italy, and with it the charlatan and mountebank type so characteristic of the period. Only there, at any rate, does one still encounter really well-preserved specimens'; thus does Thoman Mann introduce Cipolla in *Death in Venice, and Seven Other Stories*, trans. Helen Tracy Lowe-Porter (New

At this point, the question arises whether this double reading of *La pulce d'oro* is reflected in any of the contemporary sources or—if it is not a forced interpretation—it could only be made explicit in retrospect. While identifying the opera's intermingling of reality and appearance, critics of the time made no mention of any concrete reality external to the fairy tale, let alone the contemporary one. Furthermore, not only did the censor approve Pinelli's text, but its play version was successfully performed in one of the spaces officially promoted by the regime, that of the GUF (Gruppi Universitari Fascisti, or Fascist University Groups, the student wing of the PNF), which ran an experimental theatre in Florence at that time. If we consider that Pinelli came from a Turinese milieu of renowned anti-fascist intellectuals, things apparently do not add up.⁸⁶ The playwright declined all the obligatory signs of formal adherence to fascism (including refusing his wedding ring for the African campaign), at first as a passive dissident, and later becoming actively involved in the Resistance.⁸⁷ Ghedini was himself never openly supportive of fascism and became particularly intolerant in the regime's last years. 'The great phrases and maxims have often led nations to ruin', Ghedini stated in 1943 by quoting Cavour, aware of the harmful power of the regime's propaganda, in a way particularly relevant for our argument about *La pulce d'oro*.⁸⁸

The reasons for these seeming contradictions could be found in the complex relationship between culture and the regime, from which it is possible to reconcile the dictatorial context with the critical reading of the opera here proposed, and the unfavourable political positioning of its authors. If we deal with the reception in a wider perspective, for instance, we should recognize that the critics' disregard of any allegorical implication was not just due to obvious reasons of political expedience and censorship, but also to the philosophical background underlying their critical judgement. Benedetto Croce, the father of Italian neo-idealism that was in vogue for almost half a century, invited critics to evaluate art from a purely aesthetic point of view, regardless of any historical, technical, or stylistic element.⁸⁹ Crocean aesthetics left no room for allegory in its ideal of authentic art, one based on unity, intuitive expression, and autonomy. Establishing that there was 'no double bottom in art, but only one', satire and irony were also excluded, as false aesthetic labels as much as allegory.⁹⁰ In his later critique of Vladimir Propp's essay on 'The Historical Roots of Fairy-tales' (1946), Croce argued that it made no sense to seek the origin of folk (and fairy) tales in history.⁹¹ Therefore, following this precept of aesthetic purism, critics could only take the fairy tale of *La pulce d'oro* at face value.

York, 1989), 147. One of the magician's powers is his verbose rhetoric: "*Parla benissimo*", asserted somebody in our neighbourhood. So far, the man had done nothing; but what he had said was accepted as an achievement, by means of that he had made an impression.' Quoted in Mann, *Death in Venice*, 151.

⁸⁶ Pinelli was a friend of the writer Leone Ginzburg, the musicologist Massimo Mila, the philosopher Norberto Bobbio, and the poet Cesare Pavese.

⁸⁷ Pinelli never took up party membership, thus renouncing his right to vote; he did not send his children to state schools, so as to prevent them from taking part in fascist youth groups.

⁸⁸ Quoted in Ghedini's letter to Carlo Pinelli (4 Sept. 1943) in Parise, *Giorgio Federico Ghedini*, 208.

⁸⁹ For Croce, poetry and art lived in a meta-historical and eternal dimension. According to the Italian philosopher Cesare Luporini, 'in Italy there was not only the fascist dictatorship, but also the dominance of idealism ... Croce controlled Italian culture, and this was a real paradox with respect to fascism.' Cesare Luporini, quoted in Stéphanie Lanfranchi, 'Fascismo e resistenza della critica letteraria', *Textes et contextes* [Online], 6 (2011), <http://preo.u-bourgogne.fr/textesetcontextes/index.php?id=301> (accessed 18 Dec. 2021). Croce's hegemony lasted until the 1950s, thanks to his reputation as an anti-fascist intellectual. See also Casadei and Santagata, *Manuale di letteratura*, 66.

⁹⁰ Benedetto Croce, *Breviario di estetica* (Bari, 1913), 39.

⁹¹ Propp's essay was translated into Italian as early as 1949. See Alberto M. Cirese, 'Introduction to the Historical Roots of Fairy-tales by Vladimir Ja. Propp', *Russian Literature*, 1 (1982), 33–44.

The Crocean principle of the autonomy of art may have served as a form of resistance, protecting culture from the interference of fascism and the danger of its politicization, but at the same time it justified the isolation and recurring disengagement of Italian intellectuals from contemporary political life.

This margin of ambiguity was where a certain pact of non-aggression between culture and the regime developed, such that an equivocal work like *La pulce d'oro* could evade censorship.⁹² The ‘fuzzy’ ideology of fascism—as Umberto Eco defined its ambiguity—and the contradictory nature of its politics (an ‘imperfect totalitarianism’), were among the reasons for the regime’s success in lasting twenty years.⁹³ The tortuous strategies of fascism were particularly evident in culture: a fundamentally pluralistic policy attempted to reconcile different tendencies and to blend modernity with tradition.⁹⁴ The regime’s totalitarian control of culture was effectively guaranteed not only by repression, but also by economic subjugation and promotion. A certain strategic tolerance was not foreign to a desire for control, but rather a means of achieving it in a totalizing way, incorporating and thus disarming even dissidents. The regime aimed as much to shape the masses as to co-opt the intellectual elites, granting them small-scale concessions, which gave the illusion of a certain liberty without undermining the mass consensus. Cultural initiatives were targeted as either mass entertainment or elite art, and the same work could have two distinct and possible levels of interpretation, despite the prejudices of Crocean aesthetics.⁹⁵ The regime succeeded in absorbing diverse intellectual forces within its dense and capillary network of institutions. The ‘container’, that is, the fascist institution, was often more relevant than its content, as in the case of the spoken version of *La pulce d'oro* being premiered precisely at the GUF theatre, despite Pinelli’s well-known aversion to fascism.⁹⁶ The GUF itself usefully served the regime as a controlled relief valve for the younger and more critical forces of Italian culture: university students were encouraged to express their ideas as long as they took on the fascist label.⁹⁷ As a result, the intellectual elites, even the regime’s opponents, were rendered socially isolated, economically dependent, and thus to an extent politically neutered.

In this complex scenario, we can understand how the ambiguity of *La pulce d'oro* was at one with that of the late-fascist context, where precisely the regime’s strategy of ambiguity allowed a similarly ambiguous opera to survive and be successful. The two possible

⁹² Lanfranchi, ‘Fascismo e resistenza’.

⁹³ Umberto Eco, *Il fascismo eterno* (Milan, 2018). The literature on the ideology and policies of fascism and its contradictions is huge. In particular, with regard to fascist cultural policies, comedy, and censorship, see Falasca-Zamponi, *Fascist Spectacle*; Nicola Fano, *Tessere o non tessere: I comici e la censura fascista* (Florence, 1999); Argentieri (ed.), *Risate di regime*; Alessandro Faccioli, *Leggeri come in una gabbia: L'idea comica nel cinema italiano (1930–1944)* (Turin, 2011); David Bruni, *Commedia anni trenta* (Milan, 2013); Steven Ricci, *Cinema and Fascism: Italian Film and Society, 1922–1943* (Berkeley, 2008); Gundle, ‘Laughter under Fascism’.

⁹⁴ A chameleon-like manner which Gaborik also sees reflected in *Nostra Dea*’s mania for changing clothes. Gaborik, ‘La Donna Mobile’.

⁹⁵ A better-known example of these two distinct levels of reading—from which the regime strategically benefited—was *Nerone* (1930), a film by the comedian Ettore Petrolini. It was a parody of imperial Rome and its notorious emperor, but the clear fame of the actor and his formal party membership allowed its release. For the mass consensus, it was apparently an exaltation of fascist rhetoric linked to the myth of Rome; for the few who could access a deeper level of interpretation, it was a demonstration of liberalism on the part of the regime.

⁹⁶ Pinelli himself recounted the significant episode of his debut in Florence with *La pulce d'oro*, when Giorgio Venturini, director of the GUF experimental theatre, had to provide him with a veteran badge in place of fascist party membership.

⁹⁷ As the journalist Ruggero Zangrandi recalled in his famous *Il lungo viaggio attraverso il fascismo*, ‘for us [in the GUF] there could be everything in fascism’. Quoted in Giuseppe Gigliozzi, ‘Cultura e letteratura nel ventennio fascista’, in Borsellino and Pedullà (eds.), *Le forme del realismo*, 282–307 at 295. Actually, the GUF became the cradle of antifascism, where ‘antibodies to the regime developed’; in Gigliozzi’s words: ‘the revelation starts precisely within the fascist stage’.

readings of the opera, alternatively disengaged and satirical, exemplify the dual role that comedy could play under fascism.⁹⁸ First, the light-heartedness of the opera's plot, rather than clashing with the troubling times, instead responded to an increased need for diversion and entertainment.⁹⁹ This was also the period in which 'light' genres were rampant more than ever in Italian cinema, such as with the boom of the so-called *Telefoni bianchi* films—playful comedies, set at a remove from the difficult daily life of Italy.¹⁰⁰ *Panem et circenses* (literally, 'bread and circuses') was the winning formula for the alliance between power and people, via sustenance and distraction, just as the Romans had first foretold and fascism also learned. The more *panis* became scarce, the more *circenses* became indispensable. At the end of the 1930s, the regime asked cultural and media outlets to provide as much light entertainment as possible, to provide diversion from current hardship. Fiction was more effective than any explicit propaganda, such as that provided by the Istituto Luce's documentaries.¹⁰¹ Reality had to be disguised and sweetened: encased in an exotic, fantastic, or historical elsewhere. Comedy, fun, and laughter were fundamental allies of power for its survival, and *La pulce d'oro*, with its comedic fairy tale, abstract enough and devoid of any concrete reference to the present, fitted this official and advantageous role of comedy under the regime.

Second, laughter and fairy tales could also symbolically deal with a thorny reality that could otherwise not be questioned, thus serving as a useful outlet. Allegory afforded one of the few possible means of expressing any form of criticism or dissent under the dictatorship, tolerated by the regime to the extent that it remained harmless.¹⁰² As a critic commented on another allegorical work of the time, Vittorini's *Conversazione in Sicilia* (1941), 'deciphering is not essential to a naïve reader', that is, to that mass audience on which the regime's consensus was built.¹⁰³ In a similar way, the 'fine and effective humour' of *La pulce d'oro* disguised any possible allegorical implication of the opera in a subtle and elitist manner.¹⁰⁴ In sum, *La pulce d'oro* met important prerequisites for politically correct comedy under fascism, being openly amusing, subtly satirical, concretely harmless. 'There is only one moral; what I say is all true, even if it is false!', was the metatheatrical gist of the opera, echoing the regime's rhetoric in an inevitable if unintentional way.

⁹⁸ Vito Zagarrò, 'La commedia non riconciliata', in Argenterì (ed.), *Risate di regime*, 275–88.

⁹⁹ The production of comic films and operetta increased under fascism and both were the most popular genres in Italy between 1930 and 1945. Supposedly apolitical, entertainment was a fundamental part of the propagandistic imperative to distract and depoliticize the Italian people. See Faccioli, *Leggeri come in una gabbia*; Gianfranco Casadio, Ernesto G. Laura, and Filippo Cristiano, *Telefoni bianchi: Realtà e finzione nella società e nel cinema italiano degli anni quaranta* (Ravenna, 1991).

¹⁰⁰ Flourishing precisely in the late 1930s, the *Telefoni bianchi* comedies usually had mechanical plots, modelled on foreign works or remakes that set marital infidelity in fictitious environments (often in Budapest). The 'elsewhere' represented in those films justified any immorality shown because it was taking place somewhere far from Italy, while also offering an escape from reality. Salotti, *Al cinema con Mussolini*.

¹⁰¹ An overview of film production under fascism shows that entertainment for leisure greatly predominated over explicit ideological propaganda. Paolo Russo, *Breve storia del cinema italiano*, Strumenti, 15 (Turin, 2002).

¹⁰² Fano, *Tessere o non tessere*.

¹⁰³ Giaime Pintor, 'Nome e lagrime', *Prospettive*, 16/17 (1941), 20–21.

¹⁰⁴ 'Non è una grossa comicità che ne consegue, ma piuttosto un genere di "humour" di sottile presa e di immancabile effetto'; quoted in Abbiati, 'Alla Fenice di Venezia', 6.

NOT JUST A FAIRY TALE

In the words of the writer Italo Calvino, fairy tales are needed to reveal, explain, and make sense of the world.¹⁰⁵ Comedy is intrinsically linked to the present, as a ‘geographically and historically determined’ genre, able to grasp and represent its contradictory and paradoxical aspects.¹⁰⁶ *La pulce d’oro*, as a comic fairy tale, was no exception. Like Verdi’s *Falstaff*, with its modern take on the tradition of comic opera, *La pulce d’oro* faced the crises of the genre and of the historical moment. According to the reading of the opera put forward here, *La pulce d’oro*’s comedy did not flourish despite the contemporary moment but precisely because of it. As suggested in this article, the apparent mismatch between the lightness of the opera and its troublesome context can be understood with the opera’s critical stance being reconcilable with fascism under the common denominator of ambiguity. The parodic heterogeneity of the music and the overlapping of fiction and reality in the text matched the cultural heterogeneity and political ambiguity of the contemporary moment, setting forth ‘the destruction of the opera’s cohesion and the moral coherence it represented, no longer sustainable in the historical situation of the twentieth century’.¹⁰⁷

La pulce d’oro brings together the tradition of comic opera with contemporary issues and cultural trends. Neoclassical references to the past and the most modern sense of the grotesque emerge through the contours of the fairy tale. The opera recovers what Fearn defines as ‘the essence of opera buffa’, that is, a ‘lightness of touch which is capable of conveying the spectator through an otherwise quite absurd narrative’.¹⁰⁸ At the same time, the twentieth-century themes of illusion and theatricality—the controversial relationship between reality and its representation—are at the centre of the opera, cast in the light of allegory and satire. *La pulce d’oro* is not so much concerned with questioning the ontological boundaries of reality itself so much as with investigating history through its comic and fantastic transfiguration. If the recourse to the unlikely and unbelievable, according to Beatrice Alfonzetti, is the ‘banner of twentieth-century theatre, expressed through the short circuit of the grotesque, humour, lyricism, magic realism, satire’, *La pulce d’oro* epitomizes some of these contemporary concerns and attitudes in an idiosyncratic way.¹⁰⁹

Parody served as a synthetic definition of the opera’s engagement with both contemporary reality and tradition. *La pulce d’oro* touches on and interprets currents of contemporary culture, blurring their edges in way that makes the opera difficult to categorize under simplistic labels, and that in a sense is both the result of and reflects the complexity of the late fascist moment. Neoclassicism in music and magic realism in literature come into contact in *La pulce d’oro* under the banner of comedy and emerge in a nuanced form. Against the backdrop of cultural nationalism, Ghedini’s music turns to tradition via an ironic lens, while Pinelli’s magic realism intersects with the fantastic

¹⁰⁵ Quoted in Asor Rosa (ed.), *Letteratura italiana del Novecento*, 421.

¹⁰⁶ See Cheauré and Nohejl (eds.), *Humour and Laughter*; Fabrizio Cassanelli and Guido Castiglia, ‘Una plausibile didattica della comicità’, in *Il teatro del fare: Educazione-teatro-comicità per l’infanzia e le nuove generazioni. Appunti e idee per la formazione teatrale nella scuola* (Corazzano, 2011); Faccioli, *Leggeri come in una gabbia*; Fano, *Tessere o non tessere*; Zagarrò, ‘La commedia non riconciliata’.

¹⁰⁷ Quoted in Guido Salvetti, ‘L’“Antipoetica” di G. F. Ghedini’, 415.

¹⁰⁸ Fearn, *Italian Opera since 1945*, 25.

¹⁰⁹ Beatrice Alfonzetti, quoted in Emanuele Franceschetti, ‘Un senso d’eccitato tramonto: Il teatro musicale in Italia nel secondo dopoguerra (1945–1961)’ (Ph.D. diss., Sapienza, 2021), 136.

genre, allegory, and social satire. From both Ghedini's music and Pinelli's text, an alternative version of *italianità* emerges, less celebratory than that flaunted by the contemporary fascist rhetoric.

In this sense, as in a game of distorting mirrors, comic opera not only confronts twentieth-century history, but enacts it metaphorically. *La pulce d'oro* unmasks the somewhat absurdist and darkly comic side of late-fascist Italy in trouble, with reality almost exceeding fiction. As Chiesa notes, 'the maximum of ridicule, to compete with the best humorous journal, was reached by the official attitudes of the regime', the ridiculousness residing in the failure of its rhetoric when faced with historical reality.¹¹⁰ The satirical comedy of *La pulce d'oro* stages precisely the intrinsically grotesque—and thus comic—essence of fascism, whereby what would be ridiculous inspired respect and fear, and what would be fake became true. In *Il comico nei regime totalitari* (1954), the Italian writer Vitaliano Brancati argued that not recognizing the comic in the dictatorship was the definitive test to measure the intoxication of a people, while laughter was a punishment for those few who remained sober.¹¹¹

In conclusion, resuming Casella's pessimistic words with which we began, we can assert that Italian comic opera did not die out despite the tragic course of the twentieth century; in fact, comedy and opera both survived on the Italian stage throughout the twenty years of dictatorship and beyond, to yet another global war. *La pulce d'oro* continued to be staged and, if we look at new theatrical works in the twenty years following its premiere, we can see emerging commonalities: the 'concern with the perfection of musical craftsmanship' that Fearn detects in Goffredo Petrassi's *Il Cordovano* (1949); the parodic references to operatic conventions in Mario Peragallo's *La gita in campagna* (1954); the recourse to stylistic heterogeneity for the purposes of social satire in Gino Negri's *Il circo Max* (1959); the recurring sense of the grotesque and the faltering line between fiction and reality as in Giulio Viozzi's *Allamistakeo* (1954). While Pinelli's magic realism continued to flourish in Fellini's films, opera encountered magic realism again in two works by Riccardo Malipiero, based on plays by Bontempelli: *Minnie la candida* (1942) and *La donna è mobile* (1954, from *Nostra Dea*).¹¹²

Just as in *La pulce d'oro*, with parody and comedy going hand in hand, the ironic use of the past and the absurd remained effective means to look critically at the troubles and contradictions of the post-war present. Twenty years after *La pulce d'oro*, against a dramatically different background, the premiere of a new work—Berio's *Allez Hop!* (1959)—displayed strikingly affinities with Ghedini's opera, combining as it did magic realism, musical eclecticism, and a parodic and satirical air. In Calvino's libretto, another special flea, on the run from a circus, paradoxically turns the world upside down, epitomizing the contemporary moment of post-war crisis.¹¹³ This transparent parody matches a musical collage of old and new, high and low, where the mannerism of operatic conventions becomes an object of and not only a means of irony. The words of the critic Fedele D'Amico in his review of *Allez Hop!*, 'I compiti delle pulci' (The tasks

¹¹⁰ Chiesa, *La satira politica*, 81. The 'unmasked fiction' is at the centre of the main tragi-comical readings of fascist Italy. See also Sara Laudiero, 'Ridere del fascismo: Allusioni e demistificazioni narrative', in Simone Magherini, Anna Nozzoli, and Gino Tellini (eds.), *Le forme del comico: 21. Congresso nazionale. Atti delle sessioni plenarie* (Florence, 2019); Walter Pedullà, 'Comico e grottesco nella narrativa del Novecento', in Borsellino and Pedullà (eds.), *Le forme del realismo*, 107–45.

¹¹¹ Battisti, *Il romanzo umoristico negli anni del fascismo*.

¹¹² Here, dodecaphony—the emblem of commitment in the post-war period—took on a typically grotesque connotation within the comic context.

¹¹³ Harriet Boyd[Bennett], 'Staging Crisis: *Opera aperta* and the 1959 Venice Biennale Commissions', *Opera Quarterly*, 30 (2014), 49–68.

of fleas), apply equally well to Ghedini's flea: 'Even if the deeds of the flea arrived on stage with perfect clarity, this sort of music kept them in a problematic state, reminding us that a great uncertainty still reigns, even among moralists, about the tasks of fleas in history.'¹¹⁴ Premiering at one of the turning points in the Italian twentieth century, *La pulce d'oro* simultaneously looked back on the tradition of *opera buffa* while also exemplifying the contemporary moment and auguring the future, the prodigious flea's work still incomplete.

ABSTRACT

At first glance, *La pulce d'oro* (1940), a one-act comic opera by Giorgio Federico Ghedini, might seem at odds with the turmoil of late-fascist Italy on the brink of war. A new opera in 1940 was itself anachronistic: a genre mired in unending crisis, resurfacing now at one of the darkest moments in the nation's history. However, on closer inspection, *La pulce d'oro* demonstrates a peculiar timeliness and—in the tradition of Verdi's *Falstaff*—offers pertinent insight into its contemporary and much overlooked moment. This article proposes a reading of the relevance of Ghedini's opera through its twofold use of parody: as a musical technique and as an allegorical means, connecting past and present, fiction and reality, fairy tale and history. Encompassing some of the key cultural currents of the time—neoclassicism, magic realism, and social satire—*La pulce d'oro*'s parody unexpectedly brings together comic opera and fascism at a moment of cultural and political apotheosis.

¹¹⁴ Fedele D'Amico, *I casi della musica* (Milan, 1962), 310.