

The UNC Italian Opera Libretto Collection

SEMLA presentation by Renée McBride
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In 1983 the Music Library at The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill University Libraries purchased a collection of Italian opera libretti through the British antiquarian Richard Macnutt. According to a description that accompanied the collection, it totals 4,183 libretti and relates to productions in at least 160 theaters in 84 Italian towns and cities. The collection turned out to consist of 4,418 libretti – 51 from the 17th century, 272 from the 18th century, 3,201 from the 19th century, and 709 from the 20th century. These numbers do not add up to the total due to duplicate copies (or so very close to duplicate that I treated them as duplicates, for reasons I can explain during our Q&A).

A few notable aspects of the collection include:

- First editions of Jacopo Peri and Ottavio Rinuccini's *Dafne* [slide 2] and *L'Euridice* [slide 3], both published in Florence in 1600.
- A fine representation of libretti by Pietro Metastasio.
- A substantial group of 18th-century libretti from performances in Rome, where women were then banned from the stage, resulting in many of the great castrati being found in the cast lists; and,
- Synopses of ballets offered with the evening's opera: approximately 230 libretti contain such synopses, forming an important source for the study of dance in Italy.

While most of the composers represented are Italian, there are a number of libretti for works by non-Italian composers, among them – I’m not mentioning them all, nor are they in any particular order – Meyerbeer, Haydn, Mozart, Wagner, Tchaikovsky, Berlioz, Gounod, Massenet, Rimsky-Korsakov, and Richard Strauss.

Additionally, while most of the libretti are for operas, other types of compositions are represented, such as:

- Oratorios **[slide 4]**
- Cantatas, and a variety of choral music
- Zarzuelas
- Some pure synopses, for both ballets and operas **[slide 5: a summary of Wagner’s Ring cycle, written by Gustavo Macchi]**

Three reference sources exist to aid in studying this collection.

- The three-volume *Preliminary catalog of librettos of operas performed in Italy, 1600-1900*, which was prepared by the previous owner of the collection. For the most part, the catalog mentions the name of the theater where the performance was staged and includes full details about the performers. Many of the libretti were printed for the earliest productions of the opera and are noted in this catalog as being first editions.

Not long after the Music Library acquired the collection, two more reference sources were created:

- In 1986, Scott Warfield compiled *A composer index of the Preliminary catalog*, covering the first 2,560 items in the collection. This is the only index of any sort to the preliminary catalog, which is organized by acquisition number.
- In 1987, David Lasocki compiled the *Catalog of librettos numbered 02561-04418*. Lasocki's catalog is arranged by composer and includes indexes by acquisition number, librettist and translator, and title.

All of these reference sources are available online, through links to the Internet Archive in the bibliographic records in our library's catalog. These sources are included on your handout.

As I began cataloging this collection in December 2013, I had to make decisions about which people associated with the works I would trace. It may have been a good idea to make these decisions before I began, but I believe I didn't know, at that point, all the questions to ask. So, my decision-making process evolved, and it sometimes meant I did retrospective work for the sake of consistency. I'll describe the choices I made so you know what type of information you can expect to find in this collection's bibliographic records. By the way, I finished cataloging the collection on April 22, 2019.

The people consistently traced are:

- Librettists
- Choreographers
- Translators
- Costume designers
- Set designers and scene painters
- Illustrators, when it is clear who provided a true illustration (versus decoration)
- Composers, who are traced through an added entry describing the relationship of the librettist's literary work to the composer's musical work, for example, Felice Romani's

Anna Bolena [slide 6]

700 1_ \$i Libretto for (work): \$a Donizetti, Gaetano, \$d 1797-1848. \$t Anna Bolena.

[slide 7] – Note highlighted 700

I did not trace musicians and performers. The authority work involved would have made it very difficult for me to complete the project. In particular, the earlier libretti contain full listings of singers, musicians and dancers. However, if I used copy that listed performers in a note, I left that information in the record, so it is keyword searchable.

Finally, I provided the source of the libretto when I knew what literary work (or works) the libretto was based on. **[slide 8]** – Note highlighted fields. Sometimes the libretto itself identified the source work, but most often I found this information in *Grove Music Online* or Andrea Sessa's *Il Melodramma Italiano 1861-1900* and his *Il Melodramma Italiano 1901-1925*. These sources are also on your handout.

Every record contains a note with the collection name: UNC Italian Opera Libretto Collection.

[slide 9] You can do a keyword search in our catalog of the collection name in quotes and retrieve all the libretti, as well as the associated reference sources.

Regarding subject headings, most records have the subject heading **Operas—Librettos**, but, as I mentioned earlier, other types of compositions are represented. Examples of other subject headings include:

- Oratorios
- Cantatas, Sacred or Secular
- Song (Low voice or High voice) with orchestra
- Zarzuelas
- Pantomimes with music
- Monologues with music
- Choruses

These headings are all subdivided by either —**Librettos** or —**Texts** as appropriate. Another frequent subject heading is **Ballets—Scenarios**. Additionally, I added topical subject headings as appropriate. **[slide 10]**

Regarding genre headings, all records in our library catalog have the genre heading **Librettos**, even when it isn't entirely appropriate. **[Refer to 655 in Slide 10]** Because this is touted as a libretto collection, I chose to give every record the genre heading **Librettos** in order to provide another way of collating the records for our users. However, when it wasn't truly appropriate, I did not include the genre heading **Librettos** in the WorldCat record when enhancing a record or contributing an original record.

A number of other genre headings appear, reflecting the variety of types of compositions mentioned earlier, for example:

- Dance programs (which I used for ballet scenarios, whether stand-alone or as part of an opera libretto) **[slide 11: keep up for plot summaries]**
- Plot summaries (which I used for ballet scenarios and pure synopses of operas)
- Zarzuelas **[slide 12]**
- Pantomimes (Music) **[slide 13]**
- Musical texts (which I used for texts of works such as choral music and solo voice with orchestra) **[slide 14]**

I hope this gives you a good idea of the type of information you will find in the collection's bibliographic records. The only place you will find all of this information is in our library catalog, because I did not enhance perfectly good copy, when it was only a matter of upgrading from AACR2 to RDA. Although, in effect, I **did** upgrade for the sake of consistency in our catalog by, for instance, making the librettist the main entry, and providing an added entry describing the relationship of the literary work to the musical work.

I'd like to mention two further aspects of my cataloging experience before moving on.

- First, included on your handout are the resources I found to be most useful in the cataloging process. There are many more, of course, but these – especially Sessa – were most useful to me.
- Second, two libretto collections whose copy I frequently used – and rarely enhanced – were:
 - The Taddei Libretto Collection at UC-Berkeley, and;
 - The John Milton and Ruth Neils Ward Collection in the Harvard Theatre Collection.

I mention these collections because they are also important resources for the study of Italian opera. While there is some overlap among these collections and ours, approximately 1/3 of our collection required original cataloging.

The fact that 1/3 of the *UNC Italian Opera Libretto Collection* required original cataloging is in and of itself an indicator of the significance of this collection. Several ways in which the collection can be studied are:

- Gaining an overview of the towns and theaters in which operas were produced, and identifying the repertoires of theaters.
- Studying the libretti of Metastasio, who lived from 1698 to 1782 and wrote 27 *opera seria* and 8 oratorio libretti, as well as numerous other poetic works. By my count, we have 70 libretti by Metastasio, representing about 35 titles.
- Following the careers of castrati through 18th-century libretti from performances in Rome, where women were banned from the stage at the time.
- Studying dance through libretti containing ballet scenarios and lists of dancers and choreographers. Libretti are often the only source of information about operatic dance.
- Studying the details of stage movement through stage directions, which most of the libretti contain.
- Learning about singers' mobility, careers and repertoires.
- Tracking textual variants between different productions of operas.
- Following the careers of costume and set designers.

Libretti are important not only as texts, but also as documentary evidence of various aspects of operatic history – musicological, literary, dramatic, balletic, and sociological.

After an unexpected hiatus in digitizing, we began anew in Fall 2018. At last count [Oct. 1, 2019], the Internet Archive contained 1,367 libretti. Eventually the entire collection will be available via the Internet Archive.

In September 2018 we were pleased to receive an inquiry about the collection, from an author who contacted Diane Steinhaus to get permission to use one of our images in a forthcoming article. **[slide 15]** For fun, I've included the citation for the article in which our image appears on your handout. We hope that researchers will become increasingly aware of this important collection and find it useful in their work.

I'll close with a few more slides, just to show you some nice illustrated covers:

- *A fiaba coreografica* (ballet scenario): libretto by Giuseppe Adami; music by Victor De Sabata **[slide 16]**
- *Iris*: libretto by Luigi Illica; music by Pietro Mascagni **[slide 17]**
- *Il re delle spelonche*: libretto by Elio Predonzani; music by Mario Martinelli **[slide 18]**
- *Turandot*: libretto by Giuseppe Adami and Renato Simoni; music by Puccini **[slide 19]**

Thank you. Do you have any questions?

Explanation about “duplicates”: The reason I sometimes treated copies as duplicates when they weren't exactly identical is that there weren't enough differences, or differences in fields that mattered, for OCLC to consider them different. Which means that sometimes OCLC would

merge records when they really shouldn't have. I had it happen enough times that I simply started treating such situations as duplicate copies, noting differences in our local bibliographic records.

Multiple composers: In the case of multiple composers, I traced the primary composer through an added entry describing the relationship of the librettist's literary work to the composer's musical work, and traced secondary composers with an added entry containing only the name and function of composer. In other words, the full tracing is for the authorized form of the work as it's found in the LC Name Authority File.