

EXCAVATING OPERA: COMPOSERS AND ARCHAEOLOGISTS IN 19TH CENTURY ITALY

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Abstract.-

This paper investigates the influence of contemporary archaeological discoveries on the historical operas of 19th century Italy, focussing on the destruction of Pompeii (Pacini, *L'ultimo giorno di Pompei*, Naples 1825). Pacini's opera attempted to situate the plot within Pompeii as known from archaeological excavations. Such accuracy might be explained by contemporary politics in Naples, where the ruler Ferdinando di Borbone endorsed the excavations of Pompeii. After this first attempt, it took more than 10 years and the publication of the novel *The last day of Pompeii* by the English author Edward Bulwer-Lytton for the theme to gain popularity in the melodramatic repertoire again, albeit in a very different way.

Riassunto.-

Questo contributo delinea l'influsso esercitato dalle scoperte archeologiche sulle opere liriche di soggetto storico composte nell'Italia dell'Ottocento, e tratta in particolare il tema della distruzione di Pompei, che appare per la prima volta nel 1825 con *L'ultimo giorno di Pompei* di Giovanni Pacini (Napoli). L'opera di Pacini costituì il primo tentativo di conciliare la trama dell'opera con quanto era noto dagli scavi archeologici. Tale accuratezza si giustifica con la situazione della Napoli di Ferdinando di Borbone, il quale promosse gli scavi di Pompei. Ci vollero più di un decennio e la pubblicazione del romanzo *Gli ultimi giorni di Pompei* dell'autore inglese Edward Bulwer-Lytton, prima che il tema raggiungesse nuovamente una grande popolarità nel repertorio melodrammatico, anche se in maniera del tutto differente.

Key words: Opera, Pompeii, Pacini, Vesuvius.

Parole chiave: Opera, Pompeii, Pacini, Vesuvius.

The aim of this paper is investigating the influence of contemporary archaeological discoveries on the mythological and historical operas composed in 19th century Italy. For this purpose, the opera by Giovanni Pacini *L'ultimo giorno di Pompei* will be examined in detail, since it shows an unusual interest in the faithful representation of antiquity, if compared to contemporary developments.

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Building on the strength of the previous tradition in the composition of melodramatic works on mythological or historical subjects, most of the 19th century composers and librettists used to find their inspiration in the written works of the ancient authors, both dramatists and historians. This tradition sometimes became self-referential, since the outlines and scenarios elaborated in the 18th century continued being used and adapted throughout the 19th century.

Such a practice referred to a period when knowledge of classical antiquity was actually limited to written texts and proper antiquarian interests were restricted to amateurs among the elite. But even when at the beginning of the 19th century a number of archaeological discoveries extended the knowledge of antiquity enormously and became part of the current popular culture, the Italian melodrama was apparently resistant to incorporating new data into the traditional scenarios and plots of ancient subjects. This reaction to archaeology occurred in a climate of general excitement about antiquity, at a time when the impact of the newly discovered material cultures on intellectual and artistic life was absolutely impressive.

Thus, operas of mythological or historical subjects continued to draw on the previous tradition and only occasionally were new themes introduced, following the popularity of the archaeological discoveries.

One of these rare new themes was that of the buried city of Pompeii and, in particular, of its destruction by the eruption of Vesuvius in 79 AD.

The subject appeared in the operatic repertoire for the first time in 1825 with the work of Giovanni Pacini, *L'ultimo giorno di Pompei*, libretto by Andrea Leone Tottola. The opera was performed for the first time in Naples on November 19th 1825 at the Teatro San Carlo and turned out to be an unqualified success. Different reasons could have led to such a successful outcome of the performance. The venue was situated in the very city where the discoveries of Pompeii had been creating the greatest enthusiasm and had been producing veritable streams of tourists for at least 20 years. In this climate, everyone cultured enough to attend opera performances knew about the buildings and objects found in Pompeii.

The first period of Borbonic exploration of the Vesuvian towns was mostly perceived as a private enterprise of the Regno—the kings of the Two Sicilies, jealous of their treasures, did not allow anybody except their officials to study or draw the ruins, so that artists such as Piranesi and travellers such as the abbot of Saint Non, author of the *Voyage Pictoresque*, had to draw from memory. Even though Charles I had opened the buried towns and the first museum of Portici to occasional visitors who desired to see the sites and the collections, knowledge of the findings spread slowly. It was only after the arrival of Giuseppe Bonaparte in 1806 and throughout the French occupation that the buildings and objects of Pompeii and Herculaneum were given public exposure. After the return of Ferdinand I to Naples, the systematic

publication of the ruins of Pompeii could not be stopped and it was the king himself who started colossal projects such as the 16 volumes of the Real Museo Borbonico.

The choice of representing live on stage the last day of Pompeii, the day of the eruption of the Vesuvius, must have been particularly exciting for a number of reasons:

The discovery of the bodies of a mother, her two girls, and a baby, who were killed during the eruption still holding each other, which came to light in the excavations outside the west gate of Pompeii in the via dei Sepolcri in 1812. This find made a deep impression on the greater public, an example being the slightly later painting ‘scene during the eruption of the Vesuvius’ by Joseph Franque, in which the scene is reproduced with its archaeological details, such as the jewellery described in the excavation reports (“Fouilles faite à Pompei en présence de S.M. La reine des Deux Sicile, le 18 Mars 1813, April 4, 5, 6 and 7”, *Journal Français de Naples* 1813).

Further interest for the theme could also have been prompted by the massive eruption of the Vesuvius in 1822.

Finally, the Teatro San Carlo was completely destroyed by fire in 1816, which was apparently devastating for the Neapolitans, who were eventually overjoyed by the resurrection of the building under Ferdinand I in 1817. Nevertheless, the catastrophe had left an impression. Stendhal, who visited Naples in 1817, reports in his fascinated description of the interior how terrified by the fire the spectators still were: seeing a hint of smoke coming from the boxes, a beautiful duchesse exclaimed “Santissima Madonna the hall is on fire! The same people whose attempt failed the first time have started it again”. In such an atmosphere, the choice of representing the eruption of Vesuvius was a *coup-de-theatre* in the style of the grand opera: the newspapers of the time such as il Giornale delle due Sicilie report: “colpí, poi, in modo straordinario l’ultima scena presentante un quadro grandioso e desolante della città sotto la pioggia di lapilli in mezzo all’inondamento delle fiamme di fuoco che traboccavano dal Vesuvio. L’effetto illusionistico gettò nel panico gli spettatori che pensavano il teatro intero bruciasse e crollasse” (Giornale delle due Sicilie, n. 269, 21 novembre 1825).

Beside the historical climate favorable to the choice of subject, the opera shows also a previously unattested desire to provide the spectators with a good archaeological reconstruction of place and time. The review of the abovementioned Giornale delle due Sicilie added: “Negli scenari di questa produzione abbiamo osservato il vero incantesimo dell’arte scenografica. La massima conformità in taluni punti della copia con l’originale nella raffigurazione di varie parti della città di Pompei” (Giornale delle due Sicilie, n. 269, 21 novembre 1825).

The plot and libretto were typically in the romantic taste of the time: the story takes place in Pompeii a few hours prior to the eruption. The tribune Appio is in love with the wife of the first magistrate Sallustio, who rejects him. Appio therefore plans

his vengeance against Ottavia and accused her falsely of having an affair with a boy disguised amongst her servants. Ottavia is publicly accused and Sallustio, as first magistrate, must condemn her to death in the worst possible way: to be buried alive. The final eruption of the volcano represents the divine retribution for the sordid plotting against the virtue of the heroine.

Unfortunately, the stage set designs for the opera are now lost, but the libretto reveals the intervention of a personality well acquainted with Pompeii.

The protagonist Sallustio is elected magistrate by the people in the opening scene of the first act, which is staged in the house of Sallustio at Pompeii: the house of Sallustio was discovered in 1807 under the French government and was given the name after an electoral graffito seeking votes for a Sallustio, which was found on its entrance wall (fig. 1). Accordingly, the electoral graffiti appearing in greater and greater number on the walls of Pompeii and the recent discovery of the house of Sallustio would have inspired the name of the magistrate and the entire scene of the election.

Furthermore, the other scenes listed in the libretto are all described very accurately and denote a full knowledge of the most recent excavations at Pompeii: the *strada dei sepolcri* and *porta Ercolano*, where the triumphal procession starts its march to the forum, were among the earliest Pompeian monuments to be known (fig. 2)—together with the great theatre illustrated first by Piranesi. Ever since the late 18th century they constituted a source of inspiration for artists. The forum was explored from 1813 onwards, towards the end of the French period, and the *tempio di Giove*, where the election of Sallustio is celebrated, and the basilica, where the trial of Ottavia takes place, came to light in the following years until 1825 (fig. 3). A note to the libretto, in particular, adds that: “Il foro e la basilica sono state in parte modificate per necessità di restringere l’azione e la rappresentanza degli oggetti nello spazio che può dare il teatro. In queste due scene si dimostra lo stato di restauro in cui trovavasi gli edifici di Pompei al tempo dell’eruzione a causa del terremoto che li aveva scossi e rovinati pochi anni prima”. This demonstrates not only a precise knowledge of the sequence of events before the eruption, but also of the actual state of the monuments, since the excavations were revealing that the *tempio di Giove*, for example, was being restored at the time of the eruption.

The garden of the house of Diomede and the *via dei sepolcri* constitute the background of the tragedy: the garden of Diomede, excavated between 1771 and 1774 and sadly famous for the discovery of more victims of the eruption in a *cryptoportico*, is where Appio is tormented by his remorse (fig. 4); one of the tombs of the *via dei sepolcri* is finally the place where Ottavia will be buried alive.

To end with I would like to note two further elements:

Among the characters of the opera appears a guardian of the Baths named Publio: this is particularly interesting because the first baths to be discovered in Pompeii and

the only ones in use at the time of the eruption were the terme del foro, brought to light in 1824, only one year prior to the performance.

In the scene of the ceremony in honour of the newly elected Sallustio, the magistrate is given a *bisellium*, a special seat of which no mention exists in the written sources (except briefly in Varro), known in its shape and function exclusively from the inscriptions and excavations of Pompeii.

From this brief overview it appears clear that the outline and scenario of Pacini's *l'ultimo giorno di Pompei* were indebted to the most up to date knowledge of the site of Pompeii. But who provided this knowledge: Giovanni Pacini, prolific and flexible composer, able to adapt to the most diverse tastes of the time? The librettist Andrea Leone Tottola, whose quite absurd plot was not particularly informed regarding Roman customs? The answer is provided by Pacini himself in his autobiography:

“Nel mio Ultimo giorno di Pompei impiegai molta accuratezza nella parte dei pezzi concertati e cercai qualche forma nuova (...) a un apparecchio scenico magnifico! Il cavalier Niccolini immaginò l'argomento, ed il poeta Tottola compose i versi”.

The cavalier Antonio Niccolini was one of the most significant personalities of the cultural life of Naples in the first half of the 19th century. As an architect he worked directly for king Ferdinand on the reconstruction of the Teatro San Carlo after the fire. He was also responsible for the restoration of the villa della Floridiana al Vomero and acted as soprintendente e architetto dei reali teatri for over 40 years. Beside his illustrious career in the royal theatre he was a member of the Reale Istituto di Belle Arti and as such authored a number of archaeological publications, among them the first edition of the mosaics from the casa del Fauno at Pompeii; a *Descrizione della gran terma puteolana volgarmente detta Tempio di Serapide*; and edited the monumental volumes of the *Real Museo Borbonico*. It was this illustrious and multi-tasking intellectual who produced an up-to-date draft of Pompeian flavour and thought out the scene of the Vesuvius' eruption, placed strategically at the end of the performance and destined to become the most famous element of an otherwise unremarkable opera. Since no documentation of his direct intervention is left, we can only speculate whether he was prompted to propose the scenario because of his personal tastes, to promote the cultural policy of the Regno of slowly unearthing the Vesuvian towns, or simply to test a scene involving a catastrophe on spectators still traumatized by the fire of the San Carlo.

After this first and isolated attempt, it took over ten years and the publication (and enormous success) of the novel of the English author Edward Bulwer-Lytton for the motif of the destruction of Pompeii to attain popularity again. A number of operas and *balli* in various languages were composed after the novel. There was no archaeological accuracy though: all these works, rather than dealing directly with the archaeology of Pompeii, aimed to recreate the romantic atmosphere of Bulwer-Lytton's story and used the English novel like a historical source. In the libretto by Peruzzini for the opera *Jone o gli ultimi giorni di Pompei*, for example, the following footnote is included:

“la scoperta di Pompei distrusse l’erronea opinione degli antiquari che le finestre coi vetri fossero sconosciute ai Romani” and as a bibliography the novel of Bulwer-Lytton is quoted. It is hardly surprising that when this opera was performed at La Scala in 1858, it was accompanied by the following review in the journal *il trovatore*:

“Ciò che è veramente imperdonabile in un teatro come La Scala è la decorazione, non già per la povertà, ma per gli anacronismi badiali di vesti e scene. I pittori invece delle vie di Pompei ci fecero vedere le contrade de’ nostri tempi. Ridicole sono quelle fontane e zampilli altissimi e altre castronerie di tal fatta. Eppure la biblioteca di Brera non è poi tanta lunga dalla Scala da andarvi a studiare e consultare le illustrazioni di quella città mezza scavata dalla cenere. E tutte queste bestialità sono permesse dalla dotta Commissione, composta di artisti e archeologi” (*il Trovatore*, 1858, no. 11, p. 2).

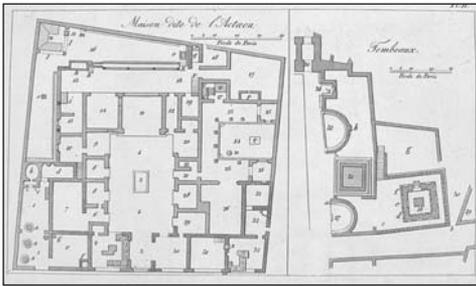


Fig. 1. Plan of the Casa di Sallustio (De Jorio, A., *Guida di Pompei*, Napoli 1936, pl. II).



Fig. 2. View of the Porta Ercolano and the necropolis (Mazois, F., *Les Ruines de Pompéi, dessinées et mesurées par F. Mazois, pendant les années MDCCCIX, MDCCCX, MDCCCXI*, Paris 1812 – 1838, pl. II).



Fig. 3. Pompei: the forum, basilica and templo di Giove (Rossini, L., *Le Antichità di Pompei delineate sulle scoperte fatte sino a tutto l’anno MDCCCXXX*, pl. XXXIV).

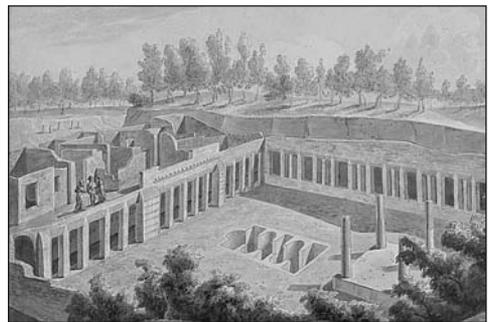


Fig. 4. Villa of Diomede (Wilkins, H., *Suite de vues pittoresques des ruines de Pompeii et un précis historique de la ville avec un plan des fouilles qui ont été faites jusqu’en Février 1819 et une description des objets les plus intéressants*, Roma 1819, pl. III).