

Forum and Reviews

Cultural and Creative Industries



Courtesy of Archivio Teatro Comunale di Bologna

Shots Behind the Scenes of the Teatro Comunale di Bologna

New Directions in Photographic Digital Archives Design

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Digital turn: platforms enabling access to opera documentation

In the early 2000s, a group of scholars from the Alma Mater Studiorum — Università di Bologna investigated how to preserve and exploit the documentary heritage left by opera performances. In the attempt to preserve material artefacts and immaterial memory generated by the performance, the RADAMES project was conceived as a platform for collecting and archiving documents related to performing arts (Bianconi et al., 2004). In the following decade, Corago, the Italian librettos archive took shape from that initial prototype becoming a digital repository collecting information about more than forty thousand performances between 1600 and 1900, the related repertoire of over twenty thousand works and over fifty thousand librettos.

The system is today the reference of the relationship between digital memory, knowledge, technology (Maldonado, 2005) not only for the worldwide community of scholars, but also for the public and institutions. Starting from this knowledge base and expertise in management of documentary materials about opera, the Teatro Comunale di Bologna started the project Scatti d'Opera aiming to the preservation of the photographic archive in collaboration with the International museum and library of music of Bologna and the Research Centre for the interaction with Cultural and Creative Industries (C.R.I.C.C.) of the Alma Mater Studiorum — Università di Bologna.

The project, financed by the Italian Ministry of Cultural Heritage (Mibact) within the Photography Strategy 2020 programme, exemplifies the need to establish today multi-stakeholder and multi-level relationships

to generate new processes of valorisation of Cultural and Creative Heritage, in order to ensure not only their preservation at the material level but also their transformation into knowledge open to a wider public.

If inventory, ordering, and archiving phases can be considered as the basic safeguard of an iconographic heritage of undoubted importance, its publication offers the opportunity to redesign the ways materials are accessed in order to give a wider glimpse of past performances to the contemporary public. The photographs are just one of the many documentary legacies of an opera performance. Librettos, scores, illustrations, preparatory sketches and, from the 19th century onwards, photographs, audio and video recordings are evidence of a performing art that, like few others, has been able to embody the spirit of the times, representing it within a formal framework only apparently devoted to the preservation of its tradition (Coletti, 2017, p. 8).

Digital lyric memory by images: the methodology

If the preservation of this iconographic heritage is the first objective of the project partnership, then granting access to the public becomes the key for its valorisation as cultural heritage. If digitisation is the technical means to enable its entry into the digital ecosystem, then access modalities must be defined together with processes enabling an effective interaction between the materiality of photographs as artefacts and the immateriality of the cultural, performative, and creative factors that they convey (Formia & Zannoni, 2018).

Browsing the collection, more than ten thousand prints, slides, and negatives, from the early twentieth century to the digital era (since 2007 analogue filming has been abandoned) are presented with different forms, styles and identities. Works being performed return season after season, but performers, costumes and stage settings change, following tastes and sensibilities of contemporary audiences, mediated by the creativity of set and costume designers, scenographers and directors.

The size of the collection, the variety of formats and the heterogeneity of the subjects portrayed, require the identification of specific search, indexing and sorting criteria according with users' interests. If, from an archivist point of view, criteria such as dating could allow an effective ordering of historical materials, are they really able to meet the requirements of a user base of enthusiasts and professionals with different skills and interests? What kind of user experience would they offer to the general public?

If we want to transform information heritage into collective memory, it is necessary to design narrative modes that renew the original context following the sensitivity and competence of the user. How can these modes be identified? How to design browsing applications? How to design the user experience? Which purposes should be privileged?

Opera is a narrative that lives in indissoluble bonds: words and music, content and form, interpretation and staging. The photographic archive gives us a glimpse of "behind the scenes", a view of the stage from angles different from those commonly offered to the public. How can this perspective be integrated into the wider documentary heritage of melodrama? How can the materials in the collection interact with the cultural heritage available on the web, with the city and its hinterland?

These questions underline the topicality of the theme of the relationship between digital humanities, music history and memory, overwhelmed by the need for the digital turn (Vinti, 2020), irreversibly accelerated by the current pandemic. The crisis in cultural and creative sectors — caused by the impossibility of staging live performances (European Parliament, 2021) — has also brought back to the centre the value of experimentation, of the hybridisation of skills, disciplines (humanistic, technical and design) and cultures. For the first time, performing arts producers have been asking themselves how to exploit materials usually considered as by-products of their artistic activity.



Fig. 1
Un ballo in maschera by
G. Verdi, season 1988/89,
rehearsals. Courtesy of
Archivio Teatro Comunale
di Bologna.

Fig. 1

Tools and process

Gathering and organising the heterogeneous evidence of opera performances is a primary necessity for reconstructing at least a basic aesthetic awareness of the phenomenon. The complexity of this task requires the use of reading perspectives constantly adapted to the needs, interests, and access modalities to be offered to users. This is the only way to let the readings and interpretations produced by historical-critical analysis become an effective narrative for the transmission of opera as a cultural and social phenomenon.

The conceptual model of the repository organises contents along three main dimensions. The RADAMES project (Pompilio et al., 2005) and the Corago project then (Bonora & Pompilio, 2019) identified the repertoire of works, the chronology of performances and the documentary archive as the three main paths for navigating the universe of *melodrama*. What we commonly call Opera Theatre, in fact, is based on an essentially stable repertoire that is repropounded season after season: each production bringing new readings and new interpretations. Against the stable dimension of the repertoire, performances, actors, and documents are the dynamic dimensions that connect the dramatic content of the work to the contemporary performing context. It is a system of coordinates that converge on the performance and from that opens to multidimensional explorations following different narrative threads.

The repertoire thus becomes the atemporal dimension to order the materials around the thematic nucleus of the work: contents, characters, action and settings. In this way, a gallery of tastes and sensibilities emerges, where each staging tries to intercept in the contemporary public to convey the thematic content of the work. Only this diachronic perspective, rendered through images, can plastically restore this adaptation of a traditional repertoire to the contemporary.

The chronological sequence of performances, on the other hand, allows to read the interaction of the world of opera with the history of audience and artists. Each performance, each replica, or happening is related to the historical context experienced by the public and the performers. It then represents the junction through which performing arts

history interacts with civic history and social reality in which it is embedded.

Each photo is in turn a vector of information directly related to each of the mentioned dimensions. A relation that depends on the reading perspective. It may simultaneously depict a character and his or her performer, the costume worn and the stage setting of the act, an emotion, or an artistic gesture. It therefore refers not only to the work, or to the performance, but also to further interpreting keys of the phenomenon as sartorial styles, scenic arrangements, or acting proxemics. These may become newer dimensions to sort photos, allowing them to establish a deeper network of relations between repertoire and chronology. Fig. 3

The introduction of multiple dimensions allows to target the communication and its purposes to the audience. At the same time, sharing the repertoire with other digital archives extends the navigation well beyond the boundaries of the collection. This gives a direct alignment with historical archives such as those of the Teatro alla Scala in Milan, the Teatro La Fenice in Venice or the Ricordi archives. Besides, the chronological dimension allows to reference to different historical sources: from periodicals archives to civic and state archives, to museum catalogues.

The design of the conceptual model of the archive must also be reflected in the implementation of applications. The objective is to exploit the relationships between contents to model the user experience. In this sense, different visual metaphors should be used, depending on the type of perspective to be proposed. Alongside traditional metaphors based on fields and textual facets for entering search criteria, sortable and filterable lists for displaying results, we can introduce metaphors based on cartography and timelines to convey the geographical and historical dimensions (Bonora & Pompilio, 2021). Or we could design interactive storytelling sequences to address vertical themes as the opera buffa. In both cases, the aim is to provide the user with a coherent and uniform representation of contents even when derived from heterogeneous sources. Fig. 4



Fig. 2

Fig. 2
Un ballo in maschera by G. Verdi, season 1988/89, Sonja Frisell (stage director) and Luciano Pavarotti (Riccardo) during rehearsals. Courtesy of Archivio Teatro Comunale di Bologna.

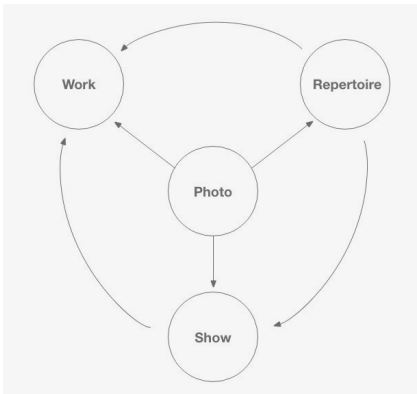


Fig. 3

Fig. 3
 Network of relations.

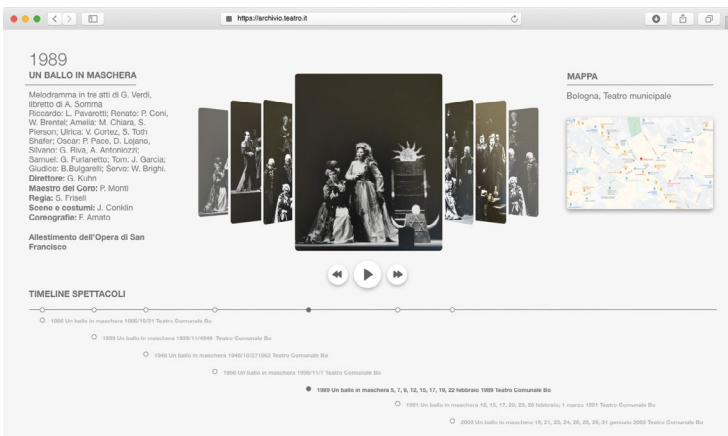


Fig. 4

Fig. 4
 Archive navigation UI prototype, by Marco Pezzi.



Fig. 5

Fig. 5
Armide by C.W. Gluck,
season 1984/85, Raina
Kabaivanska (*Armide*)
and Robert Gambill (*Re-
naud*). Photo by: Lorenzo
Capellini, courtesy of
Archivio Teatro Comunale
di Bologna.



Fig. 6



Fig. 7

Fig. 6, 7
Capriccio by Luca Ronconi,
season 1986/87. Courtesy of Archivio Teatro
Comunale di Bologna.

The Link'n'Opera project, promoted by C.R.I.C.C., aims at making the variety of digital resources related to opera accessible through a single access point. This is to allow the public to browse materials produced by public and private entities through transversal paths. In this perspective, the realisation of digitisation projects of historical collections, as well as the production of new contents, finds a reference model to promote their dissemination in a historical moment in which Cultural Industries have a particular need to reconnect their audience.

Conclusions

Almost twenty years since first methodological studies on the adoption of IT for the management of historical knowledge about opera, it is now necessary to implement what has been learned in order to revitalise the extremely rich documentary heritage collected by Italian theatres. Any project to safeguard this heritage can no longer disregard the definition of the most effective way to publish these materials on the web to reach a full exploitation of their cultural value. The design of end-user applications must adopt the functional perspective and organize knowledge through a conceptual model fulfilling to the specific access criteria for the domain. At the same time, the need to interact with the growing digital ecosystem of cultural heritage — catalogues, archives, and knowledge bases — has become unavoidable. In this sense, the adoption of technologies aimed at interoperability between contents is becoming a must. However, this has to be accompanied by a convergence towards a shared strategy between all the involved actors: the public institutions engaged in the conservation, valorisation and study of Cultural Heritage and the universe of Cultural and Creative Industries that constitute its productive base (Vai, 2017). In this sense, the Scatti d'Opera project is an example of collaboration between institutions with complementary skills and roles aimed at revealing to the public a small slice of history that has remained hidden behind the scenes for too long.

Acknowledgment

The project is supervised by Maurizio Tarantino, Office Marketing and Communication Head at Teatro Comunale di Bologna; Prof. Flaviano Celaschi, Scientific Director of the Research Center for the Interaction with Cultural and Creative Industries (C.R.I.C.C.) and Prof. Guglielmo Pescatore are scientific coordinator for the Department of Arts, Alma Mater Studiorum — Università di Bologna; the coordination of the project is by Jenny Servino, Director of the International Museum and Library of Music | Istituzione Bologna, and Elena Vai, project coordinator at C.R.I.C.C. — Università di Bologna; the coordination of the research group is by Paolo Bonora (University of Bologna); the supervision of the conservation and cataloging activities is by Roberto Marchi (Museum of Music).

Thanks to Lorela Mehmeti, research fellows at C.R.I.C.C., for call inquiries.

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Fig. 8

Fig. 8
Così fan tutte by Gianfranco De Bosio, season 2000/01. Courtesy of Archivio Teatro Comunale di Bologna.



Fig. 9
Carmen by Alberto
Arbasino, season 1967,
direction. Courtesy of
Archivio Teatro Comunale
di Bologna.

Fig. 9



Fig. 10
Carmen by Alberto Arbasino, season 1967,
backstage. Courtesy of
Archivio Teatro Comunale
di Bologna.

Fig. 11
Carmen by Alberto Arbasino,
act II scene. Courtesy of
Archivio Teatro Comunale
di Bologna.

Fig. 10

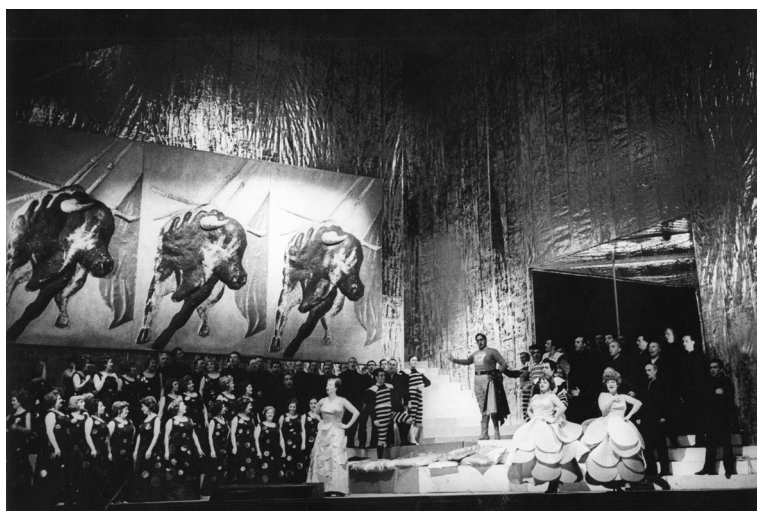


Fig. 11



Fig. 12, 13
Die Walküre, direction,
sets and costumes by
Pier'Alli, season 1988/89.
Photo by Maurizio
Buscarino, courtesy of
Archivio Teatro Comunale
di Bologna.

Fig. 12



Fig. 13

Fig. 14
Il barbiere di Siviglia by
Luigi Squarzina, season
2001/02, act I ending.
Photo by Primo Gnani,
courtesy of Archivio
Teatro Comunale di
Bologna.



Fig. 14



Fig. 15
Il barbiere di Siviglia
by Luigi Squarzina,
season 2001/02, Carlos
Chausson. Photo by
Primo Gnani, courtesy of
Archivio Teatro Comunale
di Bologna.

Fig. 15

