House of Ricordi (*Casa Ricordi*, 1954)

Louis Bayman

dir. Carmine Gallone; prod. Raymond Froment; screenplay Agenore Incrocci, Furio Scarpelli, Vittorio Nino Novarese, Leonardo Benvenuti, Luigi Filippo D'Amico, Carmine Gallone; photography Marco Scarpelli; music Renzo Rossellini, feat. Vincenzo Bellini, Gaetano Donizetti, Giacomo Puccini, Gioachino Rossini, Giuseppe Verdi, Riccardo Zandonai. 35mm, Technicolor, 110 mins. Diana Cinematografica, distrib. Compass Film.

Courtesy of the Everett Collection

One issue among the many raised by the abundant variety of contributions to this book is that melodrama can mean different things in different times and places. In Italy, this ambiguity is even inscribed in the dictionary, which gives the word two distinct definitions. *Melodramma*—especially when shortened, often with a hint of disapproval, to *mélo*—refers to the kind of popular dramatics that form the proper subject of this book. But *melodramma* is also another word for *opera lirica*—opera—a term originating in the 16th century public spectacles that combined music with drama. As several recent studies into the particularities of Italian melodrama have shown, including my own *The Operatic and the Everyday in Postwar Italian Film Melodrama*, and John Champagne's *Italian Masculinity as Queer Melodrama*, this ambiguity is more than just a linguistic quirk. Indeed, we could say that if there is any unifying character to be found in such a varied term as melodrama at all, then this conjunction with opera might provide the key to unlocking it.

This proposition is nicely encapsulated by the 1954 film *Casa Ricordi*, a particularly successful example of *cineopera*, an Italian film genre that features as many performances of opera music as possible within its plot. The film tells the history of the legendary Ricordi sheet-music publishing house, the Casa Ricordi, which the film credits with the creation of a national operatic tradition (with an emphasis on the recording over the live performance, which surely has some relevance to its own status as fil-

med opera). A period drama shot in lush Technicolor, it begins with the establishment of the company in 1807 and spans the musical and political history of 19th century Italy, as founder Giovanni Ricordi (played by Paolo Stoppa) builds up a successful family business that he eventually passes down to his son (Renzo Giovampietro) and then grandson (Andrea Checchi). The film proceeds through vignettes that feature composers including Rossini (played by Roland Alexandre), Donizetti (Marcello Mastroianni), Bellini (Maurice Ronet), Verdi (Fosco Giachetti), and Puccini (Gabriele Ferzetti). Rossini must reconcile the fame he owes to Ricordi with the fact that he has stolen the heart of Ricordi's sweetheart, Isabella (Märta Torén); maestro Donizetti meets his match in Virginia (Micheline Presle), the equally self-absorbed prima donna, as they rehearse for the premiere of his ultimately best-known work, *L'elisir d'amore* (1832); Bellini is kept apart from the woman he loves by a jealous housekeeper; Verdi suffers a creative crisis in response to the innovations of his contemporary Richard Wagner; and Puccini falls in love with Maria (Danièle Delorme), a beautiful, ailing *Parisienne*, while seeking inspiration before the premiere of his *La bohème* (1895). Despite the presence of various divas and muses, the focus of the film remains male, characterized in the romantic image of impetuous genius. This provides an intriguing counter discourse to conventional ideas of gender that would position rational mastery over one's emotions as an integral masculine virtue, for the dramatic weight of *cineopera* depends on the male protagonist's artistic sensitivity in eliciting emotion. But it also tells us something about the relationship of opera to melodrama itself. The stories act as vehicles to incorporate more than thirty excerpts from operas, which might be played in performances on the on-screen opera stage, or sung by characters at home or in public on the street, and also heard as orchestral versions on the soundtrack. This intermingling of extra- and intra-diegetic music imbues the dramatic world with music, at the same time that operatic performance gives expression to, and is made intelligible by, intimate feeling.

The dramatic narratives that connect the musical performances not only concern the nature of artistic inspiration, they are predominantly melodramatic, meaning that the film alternates between the public spectacle of the opera house and the melodramatic expression of private emotion. One particularly climactic example comes in the film's central episode concerning Vincenzo Bellini. A curtain falls to rapturous applause on the premier of his final opera, *I puritani*, but the film cuts to the composer who lies dying at home—his fatal illness caused, according to a doctor, by the cloying jealousy of his keeper, Luisa (Myriam Bru), who has denied him visitors, including the opera's prima donna Giulia (Nadia Gray), to whom Bellini feels an attraction that is mutual. Feeling guilty for having isolated him, Luisa races to the theater in a horse-drawn carriage to fetch Giulia, but by the time they reach him he has died.

Thomas Elsaesser has identified the attraction of melodrama in its »musicality,« by which he means emotional expressivity, and here it is literally so (74). The scene plays out to the overture from Bellini's best-known work, *Norma*, whose dramatic crescendos occur simultaneously with the thunderous storm outside. The music governs the scene's pace, foregrounding the rhythms that guide the character action as Bellini in his dying agony stumbles around the room repeatedly calling out »Luisa!« intercut with scenes of her too-late dash. Bellini repeats her name with a breathy intonation that constitutes a lyrical performance of the shifting registers of desperation. His gestural acting has him clutching the room's furnishings and the staircase, emphasizing their status as a stage set. Most prominent of all is the music itself, which crashes in

to announce the emotional depth of the sequence. As a form of narrative drama, the scene's overt theatricality indicates (rather than detracts from) the sincerity of expressive sentiment. It is an operatic approach to dramatic recreation, distinct from 19th century ideas of the well-made play and contemporary Hollywood conventions.

This shows how the artistic sensibility underlining Italy's operatic melodrama sees no contradiction between performance and authenticity. After Bellini dies, the film moves to 1848, with the Milanese people in revolt against the occupying Austrian troops. The melodramatic expressivity moves from the pathos of tears to the excitement of action and adventure. The battle for national liberation—the historical movement known as the *Risorgimento*—is performed in as gleefully operatic a way as any other sequence in the film. The camera remains in a fixed longshot on the hastily assembled street barricades, as if it is all happening on an opera stage, while the music to Verdi's *I Lombardi alla prima crociata* accompanies the grapeshot and cries of hurrah. For Italian audiences in 1954, such a scene could not but bring to mind the occupation of Italy by Nazi Germany. For anyone unaware of the analogy, the story moves to the rivalry between the patriot Verdi (played by Fosco Giachetti, who after the war faced accusations of fascist sympathies) and the German Wagner—a competition overcome when Verdi sees the effect his music has on the peasant folk, dramatizing the role of a popular Italian collective united by a common land and cultural tradition as they overcome a German threat. Heroic, idealized, operatic, the lush historical fantasies of *cine-opera* provided a melodramatic reimagination of reality. Italian film historian Vittorio Spinazzola has pointed out that their »magniloquent image of a sublime and blinding passion« appealed more to a mass audience fresh from the »nightmares of war« than the contemporary and internationally better-known social critiques of neorealism (57; my translation). Authenticity is not equated with realism but access to an untutored, communal, and deeply held emotional expressivity.

The melodramatic basis thus given to opera is part of a search for a nationally unifying art whose ideological purpose is achieved by its widespread emotional appeal. *Casa Ricordi* ends on a wistful note with Puccini and the populist, folk-inspired music of *verismo* opera at the dawn of the 20th century. It thus stops conveniently short of fascism, insisting instead on a cultural tradition that less problematically unites folk with nation. It is once again melodrama that enables this populism, by establishing the primacy of feeling as an immediate, overwhelming, and yet simple guarantee of sincerity over the calculating dishonesty of oppressive malefactors. Intertwined with opera, this melodrama proffers forms of sentiment that can transcend class barriers and communicate across history. Melodrama confers upon the music, as it also does upon the enterprising family (as embodied by Ricordi and his sons) and on the common classes of Italy itself, a popularizing emotionality whose expressivity is as moving as it is accessible.

Melodrama is a variable, hybrid form—one that from its very name contains dualities, being a grafting of the ancient Greek words for music and drama. The peculiarities of Italian *melodramma*, and the specificity of its affinity for opera and melodrama, imply a series of dualities that could be posited as important to melodrama in general. *Casa Ricordi* dramatizes these dualities—specifically those between *mélo* and opera, music and drama, performance and authenticity—as not in conflict with each other, but mutually supportive. Principal among them is the interior nature of sentiment and the outward orientation of its expression, suggesting that the overriding purpose of

melodrama, in all its meanings, may in the end turn out to be this: the artistic problem of eliciting and representing—or, perhaps better, the aesthetic requirement of expressively exalting—feeling.

References

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