

Opera and Theatre in a Model Worker Village – Schio’s “*nuovo quartiere operaio*”

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Introduction

Despite being successively on the periphery of the Venetian and Austrian Empires and the new Kingdom of Italy, the tiny city of Schio had long seen itself as part of a transnational political, economic and cultural network. A few miles northwest of Vicenza in the Veneto, sitting at the foot of the Dolomites, its reputation as a wool-making centre was established in the early eighteenth century when its first mill was founded by Nicolò Tron, Venetian Ambassador to London from 1712 to 1717, who imported several English innovations in weaving. By the early nineteenth century, despite periodic economic and political vicissitudes, Schio was home to several mills employing around 4,000 workers in addition to thousands more home weavers.¹ For centuries an outpost of the Venetian terra firma, following the tumult of the Napoleonic occupations the Veneto became part of the Austrian Empire within the Kingdom of Lombardy-Venetia, bringing with it a resurgence of economic activity and more benign political conditions.²

By now Tron’s premises had passed into the hands of Francesco Rossi, himself the lowly son of shepherds and now a wool merchant. His own son, Alessandro, instigated a further revolution in wool-making techniques, again by importing the latest English and French technological innovations from the 1840s.³ By the time that Alessandro Rossi assumed the leadership of Lanerossi, the company destined to become Italy’s leading woollen manufacturer up to the late twentieth century, Schio’s development as a town had already seen a burgeoning middle class inaugurate its first permanent theatre. Now wishing to compete with other provincial towns of the Veneto like Feltre or nearby Bassano del Grappa, the opera lovers of Schio constructed the Teatro Piagno on the site of an old warehouse and staged performances, particularly of Rossini operas.⁴ Unfortunately this building was destroyed following a particularly heavy snowfall that caused its roof to collapse

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¹ Giovanni L. Fontana, *L’industria laniera scledense da Nicolò Tron ad Alessandro Rossi, in Schio e Alessandro Rossi. Imprenditorialità, politica, cultura e paesaggi sociali del secondo Ottocento*, ed. by Giovanni L. Fontana, Vol. 1, Roma 1985, pp. 71–256, here pp. 71f.

² David Laven, *Venice and Venetia under the Habsburgs 1815–1835*, Oxford 2002.

³ Fontana, *L’industria laniera scledense*, p. 72.

⁴ Giuseppe Baice, *Il teatro civico di Schio. Cronistoria con ‘variazioni’*, Schio 1979, p. 4.

in 1829. By 1835 the burghers of Schio had collected a subscription for the city's first *teatro all'italiana*, named the Teatro Sociale, with good acoustics and seats for 400, which was inaugurated with a production of Vincenzo Bellini's *Norma*.⁵ Over the following decades, the Sociale ploughed a familiar course for provincial Italian theatres, still favouring *bel canto* works of the *primo ottocento* over new operas, and coming later to Giuseppe Verdi than his patriotic memorialisation has given credence in most histories of Italian opera.⁶ The local premiere of a Verdi opera was not until 1873 when *I masnadieri* was performed, followed by *Il Trovatore* (1875), *Ernani* and *Rigoletto* (1885), and *Un ballo in maschera* (1888). Similarly the first 'verismo' operas only arrived at the Sociale with *Cavalleria rusticana* and *Pagliacci* in 1904, a decade and more after their worldwide success began.⁷

If this window on the operatic history of Schio feels typically provincial, the greater reason for Schio's value as a case study of the socio-political role of provincial theatre in this period lies in two other theatres, the Jacquard and the Civico, which were constructed in the town under the patronage of the Rossi family. The grander would be the Teatro Civico, inaugurated in 1909 with a production of Arrigo Boito's *Mefistofele*, which achieved significantly wider profile through coverage of the event in Ricordi's house journal *Ars e Labor*.⁸ Firstly, the scale and ambition of the theatre in a town of only 16,000 is striking. It was commissioned by Rossi's grandson (also Alessandro) and designed by *vicentino* architect Ferruccio Chemello, using the most advanced technology and seating 1,500. The design of its *loggione* benefitted from cutting-edge engineering using the Hennebique system of reinforced concrete, recently employed locally by Rossi's competitor in Schio, Alvise Conte, for his mill built in 1906, which enabled the construction of much larger unobstructed interior spaces.⁹ The Teatro Civico's position in the town is also notable, being situated in the heart of the model worker village, or *nuovo quartiere operaio*, which *nonno* Rossi had begun building in the 1860s. Also remarkable is the choice of *Mefistofele*, a daring adaptation of Goethe in which, despite its conventional Catholic apotheosis, the thirst for knowledge causes the pregnancy and death of an unmarried girl.¹⁰ What might an audience from the community of this paternalistic, Catholic, industrial community, either middle class patrons or their workers, read in such a work? *Ars e Labor*'s correspondent

⁵ Ibid.; Franco Mancini/Maria Teresa Muraro/Elena Povoledo, *I teatri del Veneto*, Vol. 2: Verona, Vicenza, Belluno ed il loro territorio, Venezia 1985, pp. 323–328.

⁶ Regarding the more complex reception of Verdi in Italy during and after the Risorgimento see for example Axel Körner, *Politics of Culture in Liberal Italy*, London 2008, pp. 226–230.

⁷ Baice, *Il Teatro Civico di Schio*, pp. 5f.

⁸ [Anon.], Il Nuovissimo Teatro Civico di Schio, in *Ars e Labor*, 15 July 1909, pp. 508f.; Mancini/Muraro/Povoledo, *I teatri del Veneto*, pp. 333–338.

⁹ Baice, *Il Teatro Civico di Schio*, pp. 5f.

¹⁰ On the complex reception of *Mefistofele* in Italy in this period see Andrew Holden, From Heaven and Hell to the Grail Hall via Sant'Andrea della Valle. Religious Identity and the Internationalisation of Operatic Styles in Liberal Italy, in *Italian Opera in Global and Transnational Perspective. Reimagining Italianità in the Long Nineteenth Century*, ed. by Axel Körner/Paulo M. Kühl, Cambridge 2022, pp. 167–191, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108920636.010>, here pp. 177–183.

perhaps answered some of these questions by highlighting the technical abilities of the new theatre and the range of fantastical scenes in *Mefistofele*, which the theatre was clearly able to represent in a more dramatic way than many a provincial theatre.¹¹ Following *Mefistofele* the Civico's seasons up to the First World War read like a more standard provincial theatre with significant resources, including *Tosca* and even *Aida* but also combining operetta with the advent of cinematic projection.¹²

Nineteenth-century industrial paternalism and workers' theatres

The scale of investment by the dynasty of this wool-making business in Schio's theatres and other social and cultural amenities can be read within its leading role in Italy's wider history of industrial paternalism, as Schio became a model for other corporate initiatives across northern and central Italy in the late nineteenth century.¹³ The rich history of Schio's *nuovo quartiere operaio* and its factory system was explored by historians led by Giovanni Luigi Fontana from the late 1970s, work that resulted in their two-volume work on aspects of the Rossi establishment drawing on its rich archives.¹⁴ However, this and other works on Italian worker villages pay cursory attention to the detail or significance of the cultural activities of the workers, including music and theatre, as opposed to urban planning, factory production, housing or other social amenities.

Of course, Rossi's innovations took place within a strong transnational market for wool that stretched back centuries and across the globe.¹⁵ Its networks furnished the company not only with technical innovations to drive productivity but also the managerial models to organise, control and motivate its workforce. Rossi's *nuovo quartiere* took direct inspiration from the Alsatian *cité ouvrière* in Mulhouse, first laid out in the 1850s. In turn the Calvinist burghers of Mulhouse behind this scheme had looked to the recent construction of Saltaire in West Yorkshire, the Congregationalist Titus Salt's purpose-built worker village and cotton

¹¹ [Anon.], *Il Nuovissimo Teatro Civico di Schio*, p. 508.

¹² Baice, *Il Teatro Civico di Schio*, pp. 39–71.

¹³ Ciuffetti maps the Italian sites and sets them in the context of the wider industrial movement: Augusto Ciuffetti, *Casa e lavoro. Dal paternalismo aziendale alle comunità globali*, Perugia 2004; see also Luigi Guiotto, *La fabbrica totale. Paternalismo industriale e città sociali in Italia*, Milano 1979; *Villaggi operai nell'Italia settentrionale e centrale tra 19. e 20. secolo*, ed. by Renato Covino, Narni 2002; *Villaggi operai in Italia. La Val Padana e Crespi d'Adda*, ed. by Renato Covino, Torino 1981.

¹⁴ *Schio e Alessandro Rossi. Imprenditorialità, politica, cultura e paesaggi sociali del secondo Ottocento*, ed. by Giovanni L. Fontana, 2 vols., Roma 1985–1986.

¹⁵ *Wool. Products and Markets. 13th to 20th Century*, ed. by Giovanni L. Fontana/Gérard Gayot, Padova 2004.

mill outside Bradford.¹⁶ Further north in France from Mulhouse, the anticlerical Jean-Baptiste Godin, inspired by the utopian *Phalanstère* of Charles Fourier, constructed the *Familistère*, a collectivist model of housing for the workers of his cast-iron stove factory in Guise. The second phase of this development, which opened in 1870, included a horse-shoe theatre.¹⁷ Even earlier, Robert Owen had fought against considerable opposition to his housing and welfare schemes at New Lanark in Scotland before moving to the United States to found another worker colony at New Harmony, Indiana.¹⁸ In all these case studies, the scope and design of recreational and cultural activities reflected the philosophical, political and religious proclivities of their owner-patrons and local cultural traditions, but the imperative of channelling spare energies into regulated, decorous, communal activity was paramount. For example, at New Lanark, instruction in singing and dancing (to the consternation of much local Presbyterian sentiment) was given alongside military drilling, and comments by spectators continually referenced the ‘correctness’ of workers’ artistic accomplishments rather than any sense of creativity or individuality – recreation was, in a sense, another manifestation of the ideal productive worker.¹⁹ At Saltaire from 1879, choral singing was the fulcrum of artistic activity among the workers.²⁰ In the *Familistère*, the theatre, in addition to being a space to encourage collective music making and drama, functioned more as the secular church for ceremonies, festivals and lectures.²¹

It was not only Rossi benefitting from these international networks. Similar innovations began to be replicated in different industrial sectors across northern and central Italy. Just within the Veneto, southwest of Schio at Valdagno, the Marzotto woollen business was building its own Fabbrica Alta with associated worker housing and social amenities, including a workers’ musical band.²² Between Vicenza and Padova at Piazzola sul Brenta, the Camerini family made huge investments in its chemical fertiliser business. Having acquired the Palladian Villa Contarini from Venetian aristocratic families, they set about redesigning the whole village to support their vision of a ‘utopian agro-industry’ while

¹⁶ Giovanni L. Fontana, *L’Europe de la laine*. Verviers, Biella et Schio, in *Wool. Products and Markets. 13th to 20th Century*, ed. by Giovanni L. Fontana/Gérard Gayot, Padova 2004, pp. 687–746. Significantly, both Mulhouse and Schio acquired the epithet of being the ‘Manchester’ of their own nation.

¹⁷ Michel Lallement, *Le travail de l’utopie. Godin et le Familistère de Guise*, Paris 2009.

¹⁸ Lorna Davidson, A Quest for Harmony. The Role of Music in Robert Owen’s New Lanark Community, in *Utopian Studies* 21/2, 2010, pp. 232–251; Melanie Zeck, *Well-Regulated Amusements and the Longitudinal Viability of Robert Owen’s ‘Plan for the Amelioration of the Condition of Mankind’*. New Harmony, Indiana, 1825–1874, PhD thesis, Chicago 2019.

¹⁹ Davidson, A Quest for Harmony, pp. 236–238.

²⁰ Katharine Ellis, The Structures of Musical Life, in *The Cambridge History of Nineteenth-Century Music*, ed. by Jim Sampson, Cambridge 2001, pp. 343–370, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CHOL9780521590174.014>, pp. 365f.

²¹ Lallement, *Le travail de l’utopie*, pp. 148f.; Joseph J. Ermenc, Avant-garde Capitalism in France, in *The French Review* 31/2, December 1957, pp. 129–135, here p. 131.

²² Ciuffetti, *Casa e lavoro*, p. 50.

pursuing an anticlerical political agenda.²³ Within the extensive urban replanning they undertook from 1890 until the 1920s, among typical worker amenities were a *sala di spettacoli* and a plan for a theatre (never realised). Again within the textile industry, the Ceresa-Antonini partnership opened the *canapificio veneto*, producing rope and twine, at Crocetta del Montello by the Piave river. Its particular distinction in the context of this chapter was the refusal of the owners to create any philanthropic institutions for their workers.²⁴ By the final decades of the nineteenth century, northern and central Italy were dotted with similar industrial sites including Crespi d'Adda near Bergamo, the Villaggio Leumann outside Turin and the boric acid plant at Larderello in Tuscany.²⁵

Parallel to this history of industrial paternalism were a range of charitable, philanthropic initiatives more often operating in urban settings but with similar class-based, political and religious motivation, often clustered within similar industries, for example confectionary as well as cloth-making. One case study is the Drapers' Company of the City of London, which constructed the People's Palace in the East End in 1883; this became one of the main educative and cultural spaces in which working people, of both sexes, were introduced to and participated in theatre, music and opera.²⁶ Both these manifestations of nineteenth-century paternalism are rich seams of evidence for how the labouring classes were able to engage in artistic pursuits including opera, music and theatre, outside the commercial theatres, to which they had limited access. They also allow us to interrogate how these activities functioned as signifiers of instruction, control, recreation, elevation and progress within bourgeois programmes of cultural philanthropy and to what extent working people had agency over the activities in which they were involved. Beyond the scope of this chapter, we should also consider the response of socialist and trade-union organisations that often issued trenchant critiques of paternalist initiatives.²⁷

²³ Carlo Fumian, *La città del lavoro. Un'utopia agroindustriale nel Veneto contemporaneo*, Venezia 1990, pp. 80–90.

²⁴ Ciuffetti, *Casa e lavoro*, pp. 49–53. Ironically, Pacifico Ceresa, one of the directors of the company, was a very prominent boxholder at the Teatro La Fenice in Venice, see Holden, *Opera avanti a Dio! Religion and opera in Liberal Italy*, PhD thesis, Oxford Brookes University 2019, pp. 261–263.

²⁵ Guiotto, *La fabbrica totale*, pp. 83–89.

²⁶ Andrew Holden, A Slice of Operatic Life in the East End of London, in *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 26/1 (*Italian Musical Migration to London*), 2021, pp. 70–87.

²⁷ See for example the work of Gianni Isola, La ribalta socialista in Italia tra Otto e Novecento, in *Ventesimo secolo* 2/3, 1991 (*Il popolo a teatro. Esperienze europee (1870–1939)*), ed. by Isola/Gianfranco Pedullà, pp. 387–411; Isola, Utopia sociale e società del futuro nel teatro socialista delle origini, in *Movimento operaio e socialista* 11/3, 1988 (*Il mondo nuovo. L'utopia sociale nel teatro europeo (1870–1939)*), ed. by Isola/Gianfranco Pedullà, pp. 469–480.

Schio's nuovo quartiere operaio

In Schio perhaps the most significant cultural innovation was in neither of the theatres already mentioned but in another space built by Alessandro Rossi in 1869 as part of the original plan for his model village, or *nuovo quartiere operaio*. The *nuovo quartiere*, which would eventually house up to 1,500 residents in over 200 houses, was laid out from 1872 in the area west of the centre of Schio and south of the Fabbrica Alta, the imposing new factory that Rossi had built in 1862. Houses were designed with modern facilities, including bathrooms as well as gardens and allotments, and were divided into four grades, the higher two for managers and technicians (including foreigners) and the lower two for workers' families.²⁸ Additionally, they built social amenities ranging from schools, churches and hospitals to public baths, a laundry and an icehouse. Rossi's own political philosophy was grounded in his observant but liberal Catholicism and moderate conservative outlook, which motivated his response to the social threat that industrialists feared in the first years after unification as worker organisation increased and radicalised.²⁹ In his writings, while condemning the rapacity and callousness of English industrialists, he specifically railed against socialist ideas of equality, insisting that social inequality was part of the natural order.³⁰ While Rossi's schemes and those of other industrial paternalists were motivated by a genuine distaste for the social condition of the contemporary factory worker and her or his family, benevolence was severely tempered by the primary goal of controlling the workforce, including outside working hours. Rossi himself was known to tour local taverns to recover recalcitrant workers.³¹

Furthermore we should not forget – as it is significant for our consideration of the cultural activities of the workers – that despite Rossi's paternalistic vision, working conditions in his mills continued to be harsh, often punitive, and exploitative of women and children (as elsewhere). In the 1860s and 1870s, the number of working days throughout the year was 295. In winter working hours were 07.00 until 19.00 with an hour's break. In summer, work started at 05.30 and finished at 19.30 with two ninety-minute breaks. Daily rates rose gradually through the 1860s, by the end of which decade men were paid 1.50 to 4 lire a day and women (who made up 30% to 40% of the workforce) only 0.65 to 1.25L. According to Rossi himself, the average worker would spend almost 70% of their pay just to

²⁸ The designs are preserved in the Archivio Storico Lanerossi (ASLR), available at the Biblioteca Bortoli, Archivio di Comune di Schio. The presence of highly educated foreign technicians reinforces the sense, discussed earlier, of Schio as a transnational network of innovation and production, and the potential inclusion of foreign workers in the recreative and musical activities of the factory is a further point of reference for this.

²⁹ Alice A. Kelikian, *The Church and Catholicism*, in *Liberal and Fascist Italy*, ed. by Adrian Lyttleton, Oxford 2002, pp. 44–61, here p. 49.

³⁰ Alessandro Rossi, *Socialismo e fraternalismo*, Firenze 1888, p. 6.

³¹ Guido Piovene, *Lanerossi da ieri*, Milano 1967, p. 108.

feed himself and his family.³² Children were paid from 0.40 to 1.20L.³³ These officially declared rates would often be eroded by punitive fines, as reported in the local socialist press. Regarding the exploitation of women and girls, factory directors specifically claimed to save money by employing adolescent girls rather than boys.³⁴ Managers were allegedly abusive. Unmarried women and girls were accommodated in a separate boarding house and their dress and conduct regulated even on Sundays, which featured compulsory prayer. Excursions outside had to be authorised.³⁵ From the late 1860s, Rossi's paternalistic vision did begin to mitigate some of the symptoms of the distress of working life through sickness insurance, the new housing scheme, nurseries and health care. Yet despite Rossi's focus on the condition of his workforce, industrial relations at Lanerossi did not always meet the harmonious vision of its founder, with strikes over pay and mechanisation in March 1872 and in January 1890, during which striking workers were sacked.³⁶

However, even before the first housing was constructed, Rossi was deeply concerned with other schemes to raise the moral and intellectual condition of his workers. Rossi's network of literary and political friends included the historian Cesare Cantù and poet Jacopo Cabianca. Together they believed that the novels and periodicals written by and for their circle were, according to Cantù, "as likely to bore as corrupt" the workers; moreover, they noticed that, despite the effort put into educating working families, illiteracy was still widespread. Thus, they planned to focus on a theatrical enterprise at Schio, seeing the theatre and music, for their immediate emotional impact, as more fertile media for their ideas.³⁷ They were also conscious of arguments that mechanised industry risked replicating mediaeval feudalism in the factory system by sweeping away artisanal independence and self-worth, symbolised by the monolithic Fabbrica Alta that Rossi constructed in 1862. Rossi's circle sought to combine morally instructive art with genuine entertainment in recompense for the sacrifices made by the workers through long hours.³⁸

³² Fontana, *L'industria laniera scledense*, pp. 229f.

³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 223f. In fact it is misleading to speak of average 'salaries' for workers as only a small percentage (mainly managers and specialists) were paid a fixed salary with the majority of weavers still paid by piecework (*cottimo*), as Rossi himself reported, see *ibid.*, p. 225.

³⁴ Franca Bertamini, La "città del capitale" e il controllo sulle donne. Considerazioni sulla classe operaia femminile a Schio 1873–1915, in *Schio e Alessandro Rossi*, Vol. 10, pp. 447–459, here p. 450. Bertamini's research draws on reportage from the Vicentine socialist newspaper *El Visentin*.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 451.

³⁶ Roberto Canaglia, Salario e salute pubblica nella Schio di A. Rossi. Considerazioni sul costo sociale della prima industrializzazione, in *Schio e Alessandro Rossi*, Vol. 10, pp. 405–435.

³⁷ "I libri, e massime, i romanzi che si scrivono da noi, per verità sono più atti ad annoiare che a corrompere". Ferruccia Cappi Bentivegna, *Alessandro Rossi e i suoi tempi*, Firenze 1955, p. 163. All translations by the author if not otherwise stated.

³⁸ Alessandro Rossi, *Questione operaia e questione sociale*, Torino 1879, pp. 9f.

A new 'workers' theatre'

The new theatre was to be situated behind the Fabbrica Alta on the site of an old warehouse, flanking a garden laid out in the English style favoured in Italy in the late nineteenth century, leading up to an elegant conservatory and a series of fantastical grottoes, one even festooned with a stone crocodile. Designed by Antonio Caregaro Negrin, who would also design the workers' housing on the other side of the factory, the theatre building presents a neoclassical facade that echoes buildings in Schio of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century (Fig. 1).³⁹ The elevation of the theatre building onto the garden is embellished with medallions of significant political, scientific and artistic figures of the area and the wool industry, including Nicolò Tron.⁴⁰ From the glasshouse at the top of the gardens, the Fabbrica Alta looms ahead, dominating the setting of the gardens. The gardens and theatre were named after Joseph-Marie Jacquard, a mythical figure who can be seen to have had an almost god-like hand in the evolution of the lives of generations of weavers. His eponymous loom, patented in 1804, revolutionised the weaving of intricate designs in fabrics through a system of automated punched cards, presaging developments in computing. This juxtaposition between neoclassicism, a fantastical Arcadian garden and the rationalist edifice of the factory could hardly be a clearer metaphor for Rossi's philosophy and the concerns of his and his circle that industrial modernisation contained an inherent risk of dehumanisation.

The theatre building itself is divided into two floors. The ground floor was used as a library and meeting space while the theatre ran the length of the second floor. It is rectangular in design with bench seating for 600.⁴¹

What can we learn about the artistic activity in which Rossi's workers were involved, either as participants or spectators? The Teatro Sociale, of which Rossi was incidentally the president, continued to offer a serious, if less than progressive, operatic programme. Meanwhile its prose productions, including Carlo Goldoni, George Sand and Victorien Sardou, would suggest perhaps a richer satirical and melodramatic tone than Rossi thought fitting for a new workers' theatre.⁴² At the

³⁹ Negrin also designed the Teatro Sociale in Riva del Garda, inaugurated in 1865. See Federica Fanizza, *Teatro Sociale di Riva del Garda in Trentino (1862–1910). Un palcoscenico per la passione musicale tra pratica dilettante e spettacolo lirico*, in *Feltre's Teatro Sociale and the Role of Provincial Theatres in Italy and the Habsburg Empire during the Nineteenth Century*, ed. by Giulia Brunello/Raphaël Bortolotti/Annette Kappeler, Baden-Baden 2023, pp. 149–167.

⁴⁰ Enrico Castelnovo, *Lo stabilimento Rossi a Schio*, Venezia 1865, pp. 18f.; Bernardetta Ricatti Tavone, Antonio Caregaro Negrin. Architetto-Urbanista di A Rossi, in *Schio e Alessandro Rossi*, Vol. 1, pp. 687–730.

⁴¹ Some descriptions of the theatre, including on the panel outside the entrance to the gardens, erroneously describe the space as a horseshoe (*ferro di cavallo*), which may have been a putative part of the design plan which was never realised. See e.g. Ricatti Tavone, Antonio Caregaro Negrin, p. 694. My gratitude goes to Stefania Torresan at the Comune di Schio for allowing me access to view the theatre and gardens outside the appointed times for guided tours and providing me with additional information about the workers of the town.

⁴² Mancini/Muraro/Povoledo, *I teatri del Veneto*, Vol. 2, pp. 329–333; Paola Giandomenici, *Il Teatro Jacquard di Schio*, PhD thesis, Padova 1969, pp. 20f.



Fig. 1. ASLR, Il Teatro Jacquard interior, Biblioteca Bertoli, Comune di Schio. All images from the Lanerossi archive are reproduced by kind permission of the Biblioteca Bertoli, Comune di Schio.

Jacquard, a range of musical and theatrical groups were created in which workers participated, from a prose theatre company (*compagnia filodrammatica*) to a choir and instrumental bands, with professional troupes imported to perform alongside them. Rossi recorded that there were 60 choral and 24 orchestral students.⁴³ Photographic evidence within the Lanerossi archives suggests that opportunities for women were highly limited, perhaps only within the *compagnia filodrammatica operaia* (Fig. 2).

Meanwhile Rossi was searching for repertoire that better suited his didactic ideals, and the theatre opened in October 1869 with two *opere semiserie*, which offered tangential frames of reference for their participants and audience (Fig. 3).⁴⁴ *Pipelè or Il portinaio di Parigi* by Serafino De Ferrari was based on the melodramatic series *Les mystères de Paris* by Eugène Sue, whose sympathetic portrayal of the lower classes of Paris had become phenomenally popular across and beyond France. *Tutti in maschera* was composed by the Veronese Carlo Pedrotti, also a conductor, who enjoyed success for several of his operas and as an administrator, having recently been appointed the head of the Teatro Regio in Turin. While no

⁴³ Alessandro Rossi, *Risposte alle domande dell'inchiesta industriale delle ditte Francesco Rossi ed Alessandro Rossi e C. di Schio*, Firenze 1872, p. 21.

⁴⁴ ASLR, Locandina. See Figure 3.



Fig. 2. ASLR, La Compagnia Filodrammatica operaia, Biblioteca Bertoli, Comune di Schio

more didactic than *Pipèle*, *Tutti in maschera* did offer a meta-framework for introducing workers to the world of theatre with a plot concerned with a cast of singers and dancers overcoming the disappointments of a theatrical failure and ending with a masked ball at the Teatro La Fenice in Venice.

Rossi's next project for the Jacquard in 1869 was far more progressive in the context of an exploration of social and economic conditions in the new Italian state. He commissioned teachers from his school in Schio to make a local-dialect translation for the *compagnia filodrammatica* of the recent national success *Le miserie di Monssù Travet* (1863) by the Torinese author and journalist Vittorio Bersezio.⁴⁵ Originally written in Piedmontese, Bersezio's play spread rapidly across Italy, including in Milan to the approbation of Alessandro Manzoni, and the author himself made an Italian translation.⁴⁶ Paradoxically, dialect literature and theatre experienced a new flourishing during the period of the Risorgimento as regional identities were celebrated in the absence of a clear, new national identity and also as part of the turn towards naturalism and realism that explored the

⁴⁵ Cappi Bentivegna, *Alessandro Rossi e i suoi tempi*, p. 165.

⁴⁶ Vittorio Bersezio, *Le miserie di Monssù Travet. Comedia in 5 atti. Versione italiana dal dialetto col testo piemontese unito e presentazione di Renzo Laguzzi*, Torino 1945. A film version was also made in 1945 under the title *Le miserie di Signor Travetti*. A dialect television production of the play from the 1980s is available to view on YouTube at <https://youtu.be/hKCPHzMW2N4> (all weblinks in this contribution last accessed 8 August 2025).

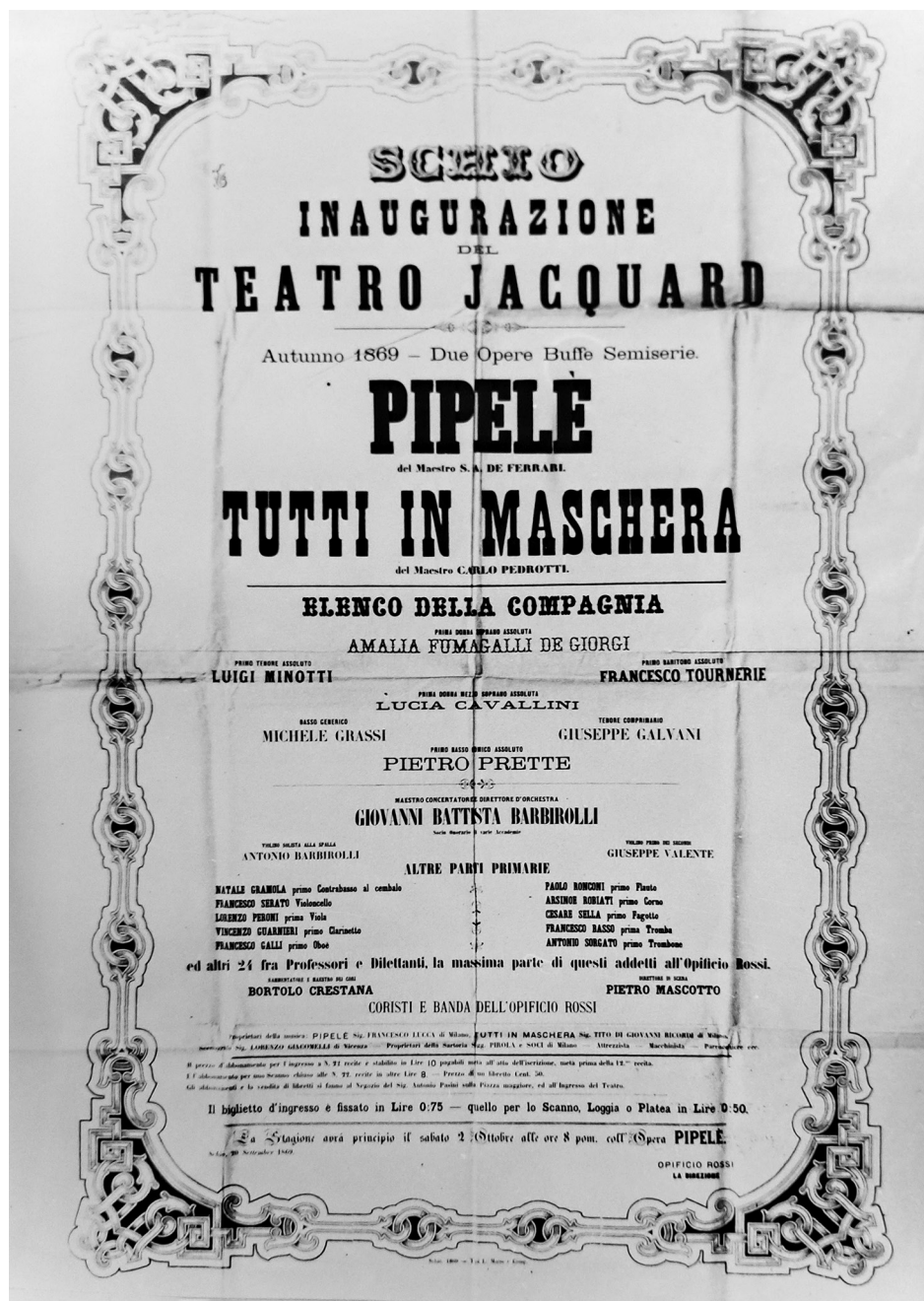


Fig. 3. ASLR, Locandina, inauguration of the Teatro Jacquard, Biblioteca Bertoli, Comune di Schio

lives of the working classes.⁴⁷ Antonio Gramsci, writing in 1916 after the death of Ferruccio Benini, the celebrated dialect actor from Conegliano near Treviso, stated that “dialect theatre has been a great tutor of sincerity in Italy.”⁴⁸

In *Le Miserie di Monssù Travet* Ignazio Travet is an honest but lowly functionary (*impiegato regio*) of the royal bureaucracy at a time when Turin is still the capital of Italy, a status it had lost only in 1864. Repeatedly passed over for promotion, he is mocked by a pair of younger, more cynical colleagues (Moton and Rusca) who are constantly scheming against him. However, he has a young second wife who is beautiful, socially ambitious and admired by the Commendatore, who is Travet’s new divisional head (*cap division*). The Commendatore is also an old friend of Madama Travet’s family, remembers her fondly as a child and has recently moved into the same apartment block where the Travets live. Travet hopes he will receive better treatment from him. The Commendatore invites the Travets to use his family box at the Teatro Regio, and Madama Travet, desperate for entertainment and possibly the flattery, accepts, despite the couple having no suitable dress for the opera. She coerces her husband into giving up his prized pocket watch (inherited from his father, also an *impiegato regio*), the symbol of his desk-bound status, so she can visit the Monte de Pietà, the Italian pawnbroker, to cash it in and finance the purchase of attire worthy of a box at Turin’s premier theatre. The Commendatore, perhaps unwisely, praises Travet to his wife and suggests his overdue promotion may soon be possible.

Travet’s immediate superior, the *Cap Session*, is a vainglorious pedant, recently awarded the rank of cavaliere. He despises Travet, not recognising his honesty and hard work. Meanwhile Moton and Rusca open an office subscription to present the *Cap Session* with a cross to mark his enhanced status and give him a celebratory lunch. Travet has no money to contribute and also fails to acknowledge the *Cap Session*’s new designation of ‘cavaliere’ when addressing him, further aggravating the former’s animus against him. Moton and Rusca get wind from a blabbermouth neighbour of Travet (Barbarot) of the association of the Commendatore with the Travets and the trip to the theatre. They exaggerate this gossip to the *Cap Session*, implying an unseemly relationship between the Commendatore and Madama Travet, who in turn reports this directly to the Minister’s Secretary General. As punishment Travet is to be exiled from his beloved Turin (which he has never left) to a post in Sicily, without promotion. Realising he has been traduced and standing accused of selling his honour to gain promotion, Travet angrily confronts the *Cap Session*, who immediately fires him.

⁴⁷ Hermann W. Haller, *The Other Italy. The Literary Canon in Dialect*, Toronto 1999, pp. 3–7, 136. See also the introduction by Renzo Laguzzi in Bersezio, *Le miserie*, pp. 5–23, particularly for the play’s enthusiastic reception in the Veneto, p. 17.

⁴⁸ “Il teatro dialettale è stato in Italia un gran maestro di sincerità.” Antonio Gramsci, Ridicolo e comico [5 March 1916], in Gramsci, *Sotto la Mole. 1916–1920*, Torino 1960 (Opere di Antonio Gramsci, Vol. 10), pp. 63f., here p. 63.

Meanwhile Travet's daughter Marianin is in love with Paolin, the rich but dopey young associate of Giachëtta, a childhood friend of Travet who pursued a career in trade rather than the bureaucracy, managing a bakery and making his fortune, which he will pass on to Paolin. Madama Travet resists the match as unworthy of an *impiegato regio*, but the Commendatore advises Travet to overrule his wife. The denouement sees Giachëtta offering Travet a post as bookkeeper in the bakery with a pay rise, only for the Commendatore to arrive to reinstate Travet with his overdue promotion, having uncovered the calumny against himself and resolved the scandal (with the *Cap Session* the one to be posted outside the city). Travet politely declines in favour of joining the bakery as Giachëtta restores Travet's pawned watch to him as a token of the young lovers' engagement.

Without any direct evidence of the play's reception in the Teatro Jacquard, we can only speculate about the motives for choosing this work for the new workers' theatre or what the audience might have read in its celebration of petty bourgeois virtues. The success of *Travet* was so widespread and long-lasting that a *travet* became synonymous with the idea of pen-pushing in Italian. The play critiques the phenomenon of *impiegomania* in the new State that drove the lower middle classes to seek the security of permanent employment in the rapidly expanding state bureaucracy, and which became a tool to co-opt the elites of the former Italian states, but also made the political class anxious about the dominance of the state within the economy of Italy.⁴⁹ Rossi and his circle had supported the Risorgimento, but, as more recent scholarship by David Laven and others has shown, Austrian rule was in many respects no more oppressive than the sovereign Italian states or the new Kingdom.⁵⁰ Satire of the new bureaucracy in the play might therefore have been keenly observed, particularly in an area of Italy with such recent memories of Imperial rule, while the depiction of lowly officials as mere cogs in a bureaucratic machine would have elicited some sympathy.⁵¹ However, the life of the *impiegato regio*, while dull and relentless, was far removed from the grinding hours of a worker in the deafening and dangerous atmosphere of the mill factory. Alternatively, the play can be read as the redemption of the virtuous little man in the face of hierarchy and authority as well as artisanal freedom privileged over institutional drudgery.

⁴⁹ Maria Sophia Quine, *Italy's Social Revolution*, London 2002, p. 40; Guido Melis, The Irresistible Rise of Monssù Travet. The Bureaucrat in Italian Literature from the 19th to the 20th Century, in *Bilder der Verwaltung. Memoiren, Karikaturen, Romane, Architektur/Images de l'administration. Mémoires, caricatures, romans, architecture*, ed. by Erk Volkmar Heyen, Baden-Baden 1994 (Jahrbuch für Europäische Verwaltungsgeschichte, Vol. 6), pp. 99–120, see especially pp. 99–104.

⁵⁰ For example, David Laven/Elsa Damien, *Empire, City, Nation. Venice's Imperial Past and the "Making of Italians" from Unification to Fascism*, in *Nationalizing Empires*, ed. by Stefan Berger/Alexei Miller, Budapest 2015, pp. 511–544, here pp. 514–516.

⁵¹ Laven points out that Cesare Cantù, who, as we have seen, was a member of Rossi's circle, was even-handed about the Austrian domination in his *Cronistoria*. He also cites Brigitte Mazohl-Wallnig's more benign assessment of the role of lowly officials in the Austrian administrative machine (see David Laven, *Venice and Venetia under the Habsburgs 1815–1835*, Oxford 2002, pp. 3, 10).

In terms of a socio-political reading of the play, we might also consider how theatre and opera function within the narrative. Seen as an aspirational luxury for the Travets, the Teatro Regio is a parallel, hierarchical world. We even learn from the exchange between the Commendatore and the Travets that his (mother's) box, the key to which he hands to Madama Travet, is in the third tier of five.⁵² The Travets have only occasionally been to the Gerbino and Rossini (minor theatres presenting less-elevated fare than opera and ballet, including French plays and illusionists), where they sit in the gallery for just sixteen soldi.⁵³ Pawning the pocket-watch ends up embarrassing them before the Commendatore and their friends, suggesting living beyond their means and that aspiring to visit the Teatro Regio was immoderate or pretentious. Travet's cynical colleagues, Moton and Rusca, are far more familiar than Travet with the world of the Teatro Regio. They read the press reviews, agreeing wearily with negative criticism of the current production. Rusca, meanwhile, actually has an *abbonamento* but attends not for the productions but to 'protect' a young ballerina whom he showers with applause and a few packets of sweets, gifts that elicit only silence from the unimpressed dancer. They cut short this conversation for mock fear of scandalising Travet.⁵⁴

The play's gentle but essentially conservative commentary on class relations might also have appealed to Rossi. Travet, under the snobbish pressure of his wife, asks the Commendatore whether marrying the daughter of an *impiegato regio* to a baker risks him losing his dignity, to which the Commendatore expounds the following moral lesson:

Dignity one loses through dishonest actions, not for this sort of trifle. This is the shortcoming of the bourgeoisie, to have such senseless pride against the class of artisans and shopkeepers. There isn't an honest trade that is dirty or dishonourable, and when a person is educated, whatever honest activity he practices, is equal to every other person. We bourgeois complain about the nobility who behave with pride and strive to make us believe them superior to ourselves, but we behave in the same way with those who are or seem inferior to us. What nonsense! To be an *impiegato regio* is certainly an honest thing, but it doesn't give you the right to disparage people in other circumstances.⁵⁵

While distinct from any sense of political equality that Rossi would have opposed, this lesson of moral equality between classes would have suited his didactic vision.

⁵² Bersezio, *Le miserie*, I/viii, p. 35.

⁵³ On the operatic and theatrical life of Turin in the post-Risorgimento period see Holden, *Opera avanti a Dio!*, chapter 4, pp. 167–234; Luigi Tamburini, *I teatri di Torino. Storia e cronache*, Torino 1966.

⁵⁴ Bersezio, *Le miserie*, II/i, p. 47.

⁵⁵ "Il decoro si perde facendo delle cose disoneste e non per queste sciocchezze. È questo il difetto di gran parte della borghesia, di avere certe superbie senza ragione verso la classe degli artigiani e dei bottegai. Non vi è nessun mestiere onesto che sporchi e che disonori, e quando una persona è educata, qualunque attività onesta eserciti, è uguale a qualsiasi altra persona. Noi borghesi ci lamentiamo della nobiltà quando ci tratta con orgoglio e si sforza di farci comprendere di essere superiore a noi, ma poi ci comportiamo nello stesso modo con quelli che sono o che ci sembrano inferiori. Che diavolo! Essere un impiegato regio è certo una cosa onorevole, ma non dà diritto a disprezzare le altre condizioni." Ibid., IV/ii, p. 76.

Furthermore, the Commendatore also delivers a judgment on correct marital relations that Rossi might also have been keen to emphasise to his workers. Having realised that Madama Travet was meddling in her husband's affairs, he advises Travet that "a woman should have an influence and greater role within the family than in other situations. But if it's wrong that a wife is treated like a servant, it's also wrong that a man fails to command and – allow me the expression – is led by the nose."⁵⁶

Writing to his friend Domenico Berti, the former Minister of Education and now President of the National Association for the Education of the Population, Rossi outlined this moral vision for the theatre:

The stage, like the press, when we are moved by noble aims, can be a focused means, even efficient I would say, of education, to mould a healthy people, brave and hard-working. We fortunates who, coming from part of a great nation in the middle of a new era, know we will benefit, morally and economically prepared, from the wonderful future which is now beginning, avoiding the dangers and making us worthy of it.⁵⁷

The following year, 1870, the Teatro Jacquard produced *L'amore di un operaio* by Massimiliano di Valvasone, a Friulian writer and journalist. By 1871 they were performing existing Italian comic operas like *Il birraio di Preston* (*The Brewer of Preston*) by Luigi Ricci and *Crispino e la Comare* (*Crispino and the Fairy Godmother*) from 1850 by Ricci and his brother Federico.⁵⁸ This last work, one of the most popular *opere buffe* of the mid-nineteenth century, gently satirises avarice and the professional classes while valorising the homely virtues of the artisan with an impecunious cobbler as its hero.

Conclusion – the performance and iconography of Rossi's moral vision

It is clear that suitable repertoire for the Jacquard theatre had to be relevant both to the worker experience and the moral vision of their employer, although we might wonder whether the operatic tropes within Bizet's *Carmen* – which apparently the factory choir was involved in in 1889, as depicted in Figure 4 –, despite containing factory workers, were quite within this morally educative spectrum.

⁵⁶ "È certo che in una famiglia la donna deve avere un'influenza e una considerazione maggiore di quanto non ne abbia in tanti casi. Ma se in una casa è un male che la moglie sia trattata come una serva, è anche un male che l'uomo si lasci comandare e... mi permetta l'espressione... condurre per il naso." Ibid., IV/ii, p. 76.

⁵⁷ "[...] il dramma, come il giornale, quando siamo rivolti a nobile fine, riescano un mezzo concentrato, direi così efficace di educazione, per formare un popolo sano, gagliardo operoso. Noi fortunati se, fatti d'un tratto grande nazione nella pienezza dei tempi nuovi, sapremo approfittare, moralmente ed economicamente armati, dell'immenso avvenire che ci sta innanzi, evitandone i pericoli e rendendocene degni." ASLR, Alessandro Rossi to Domenico Berti, 25 June 1868.

⁵⁸ Baice, *Il Teatro Civico di Schio*, p. 6.



Fig. 4. ASLR, L'Unione corale Lanificio Rossi, 1869, Biblioteca Bertoli, Comune di Schio⁵⁹

While Rossi's vision for his workers' moral elevation and recreation through culture was certainly as much participative as passive instruction, we might question how much agency the workers had in this programme. There is certainly little suggestion that the workers were much consulted in the vision or repertoire for the theatre.⁶⁰ As we can see from the playbills and other material, there is evidently a quite dynamic mix of professional singers and players in these productions alongside amateurs from the musical groups established in Schio. Other archival evidence shows that the musical and theatrical performances toured to other villages like Bassano del Grappa.⁶¹ Indeed there was a lively exchange of visits and tours between factories, for example nearby Valdagno, the site of the Marzotto factory.⁶² Furthermore, we might reflect on the fact that the commitment involved in training and executing performances beyond the work and domestic commitments of the average worker was surely immense. Economically, the ticket prices for the Jacquard were pitched to accommodate the audience, 10 centesimi for female

⁵⁹ The image records that the chorus were performing in a production of Bizet's *Carmen*, corroborative evidence of which has yet to be identified, though again, as with *Mefistofele* at the Teatro Civico, the subject matter would hardly have chimed with the morally educative prescriptions of the Lanerossi corporation.

⁶⁰ Cappi Bentivegna, *Alessandro Rossi*, pp. 162–171.

⁶¹ ASLR, various *locandine*.

⁶² Lanerossi became part of the Marzotto group in 1987.



Fig. 5. “L’Omo” (L’Uomo) – Monumento al Tessitore, Schio (Photo: Elisa Rolle, CC BY-SA 3.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=28262141>)

workers and children, 20c for male workers, 40c for foremen (*agenti capi*) and their wives.⁶³ We can compare these prices to those at the Teatro Civico when it opened in 1909, where popular performances (*serate popolari*) with reduced prices allowed entrance to the *loggione* at 50c for *Mefistofele*.⁶⁴ Given the high proportion of wages that were spent on subsistence, we shouldn’t assume tickets were affordable for all, even if performances were rare. In the context of the disparity of pay between specialist and non-specialist workers as well as between men, women and children (as discussed above), the relative disposable income available across the workforce would suggest that audiences at the Jacquard were the preserve of the better-paid.

However, we should not forget that Rossi’s primary aims were the creation of a model workforce in the new Italian state, and we see this embodied in the memorial he erected to his workers (Fig. 5).

⁶³ Giandomenici, *Il Teatro Jacquard di Schio*, p. 63.

⁶⁴ ASLR, *Provincia di Venezia*, 23 September 1909, “Teatro civico, serata popolare”.

The statue is by Giulio Monteverde (1879). It depicts the idealised mill worker in a relaxed artisanal pose, shuttle in hand, looking almost like a painter at his easel (a stance mirrored in Rossi's own posthumous memorial in the Jacquard gardens). On the octagonal base of his pedestal (designed by Negrin) are engraved the following mottos, which tie the whole Rossi project back to identity formation in the new Italian state, including the final incorporation into the Italian kingdom – only recently achieved – of Rome as its capital.

Poised at the shuttle for the family, rifle in hand for Italy and the King.
Through the loom we save money, by saving we become owners.
The Capital was the work of yesterday, work will be our capital of tomorrow.
Work liberates and ennobles us.
He who conquers work conquers gold.
Through its renewal we reclaim the art of our fathers.
Equal before the loom as before God.
The future belongs to the working people.⁶⁵

⁶⁵ “Pronti alla navetta per la famiglia, alla carabina per l'Italia ed il Re / Dal telaio al risparmio, dal risparmio la proprietà / Capitale lavoro di ieri, lavoro capitale del domani / Il lavoro ci affranca ed eleva / Conquiste di lavoro conquiste d'oro / Rivendichiamo rinnovando l'arte dei padri / Eguali dinanzi al telaio come dinanzi a Dio / L'avvenire è dei popoli lavoratori”. The monument was originally erected between the Fabbrica Alta and the *nuovo quartiere*, further elaborating the visual and spatial narrative that Rossi and Negrin were creating for his workforce from the Jacquard gardens and theatre back through the factory site to the residential quarter. However, the monument was moved in 1945 to the piazza in front of the Duomo. The inscription can be read in any order round the octagonal base. For an alternative reading (which begins from the line “L'avvenire è dei popoli lavoratori”) and suggests an ‘escalation’ from the material to the metaphysical, see Franco Barbieri, *Dal primo al secondo progetto della ‘nuova Schio’ verso Crespi d’Adda*, in *Schio e Alessandro Rossi*, Vol. 1, pp. 731–744, here p. 737.