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MEDEA IN ITALIAN CULTURE: MUSIC, ICONOGRAPHY, AND CINEMA*

In his paper Claudio Moreschini tried to show how widespread a fortune the myth of Medea and the Argonauts had in Italian literature from the earliest testimonies to the sixteenth century. Following the same lines, in turn, I will discuss other examples of such a fortune in Italian music (namely, opera) and art, which sometimes are in close connection to literary models. For the sake of brevity, I will take into account only Italian works and therefore I will not discuss other important testimonies from European art and music.¹

It is perhaps obvious saying that Greek myths were particularly suit for the stage and for theatrical purposes, even though, in European culture at the beginning of the modern era, these purposes were radically different and diverging from the ones that originated the tragic performances in the fifth-century Greece, or the so-called 'rhetorical' tragedy in Rome. More specifically, musical opera since its beginnings in the sixteenth century was attracted by intrigues, complex plots, exaggerate passions, and extreme emotions – a

* It was for me a pleasure and an honour to take part in this conference together with scholars from all over the world. My topic is an attempt at divulging some aspects of Italian culture; though, to a greater extent, investigating the offspring of an ancient myth is a confirmation of a well known statement by the late Platonist Secundus Salustius, mentor of the Emperor Julian, according to whom myths are "events that never happened but are forever".

¹ A brief but rich and interesting survey is offered by G. Tedeschi, *Medea e gli Argonauti nei poeti greci*, in *Scrivere, leggere, interpretare. Studi di antichità in onore di S. Daris*, ed. by F. Crevatin, G. Tedeschi, Trieste 2005 (available online at <http://www.sslmit.univ.trieste.it/crevatin/Documenti/daris/Tedeschi.pdf>), with further bibliographic references, among which it is worth quoting E. Hall, F. Macintosh, O. Taplin (eds.), *Medea in Performance 1500-2000*, Oxford 2000; B. Gentili, F. Perusino (eds.), *Medea nella letteratura e nell'arte*, Venezia 2000. See also J. J. Clauss, S. I. Johnston, *Medea: Essays on Medea in Myth, Literature, Philosophy, and Art*, Princeton 1996.

mixture of ingredients, which could easily find fertile soil in classical mythology and in its vicissitudes. This was also a useful way to divulge or trivialize classical antiquity. On the contrary, I agree only partially with the Italian scholar Dario del Corno, when he states that tales and heroes (or heroines) from a remote past were favoured, because they could offer a sort of evasion or refuge in a mythical time.²

As expected, the saga of Medea and the Argonauts did not escape the notice of librettists and composers. As to my knowledge, there are almost twenty Italian operas and a few cantatas inspired by this story. This is a significant number, albeit this subject, however, seems less fashionable in comparison with other mythical tales or stories (Dido and Aeneas, for example).

I will take into account only the four major ones, limiting myself to a brief mention of the others: as it usually happens for many operas of the eighteenth century, in some cases, their music is now lost, or still unpublished, and we can only record the date of their performance. Such is the case of the various *Medea* composed by Giovanni Francesco Brusa (Venice 1726), Davide Perez (Palermo 1744), Gaetano Martinelli (*La vendetta di Medea*, Venice 1792), Gaetano Andreozzi (*Giasone e Medea*, Naples 1793), Francesco Piticchio (*La vendetta di Medea*, Naples 1798), and Antonio Sacchini (composed between 1784 and 1786, but unperformed). In addition, there are some vocal chamber works, which drew inspiration from the same legend: I will mention *Gli Argonauti in viaggio*, by Antonio Draghi (1682), *Peleo, Giasone, Pallade*, a cantata by Pasquale Cafaro (1766), and the more significant serenade *Giasone*, written by the famous Neapolitan composer Niccolò Porpora (1742). The related story of Jason and Hypsipyle, the young princess whom Jason meets during his voyage to Colchis, seduces and abandons, inspired many composers as well, who availed themselves of a libretto by the celebrated and prolific Caesarian poet in Vienna, Pietro Metastasio (1732). It is worth recording Johann Adolph Hasse, Niccolò Porpora, Pasquale Galuppi, Giuseppe Scarlatti, Johann Christian Bach, Giuseppe Sarti, Pasquale Anfossi and the famous Christoph Willibald Gluck.³

But let's turn now to some major works. The first example of an opera inspired by the Argonauts is *Giasone*, composed by the Venetian Francesco Cavalli and first performed in 1649. Together with *Egisto* and *Didone* it con-

² D. Del Corno, *Medea in musica: una figura nel mondo classico nel melodramma*, in *Atti delle giornate di studio su Medea, Torino 23-24 ottobre 1995*, ed. by R. Uglione, Torino 1997, 107-115.

³ I derive these references (and the following ones about visual art) from J. Davidson Reid, *The Oxford Guide to Classical Mythology in the Arts, 1300-1990*, New York 1993, s.v. *Medea; Jason and the Argonauts*.

stitutes a sort of ‘mythological’ trilogy. It is counted among the masterpieces of its author, despite the inconsistencies and the faults of the libretto, written by Giacinto Andrea Cicognini. The major reproach, as we said, is the grotesque libretto, which appears somewhat farfetched in its mixing of farcical and serious elements – but it must be noticed that this was a common praxis of the period (just to remember a famous case, in *The Tempest* by Shakespeare the two buffoons insert their sketches between the main, solemn, plot). As usual in the operatic praxis, the composer, however, seems unaffected by the inconsistencies of the poor libretto, and, for example, gratifies with a fine aria the ugly and stammering servant Demos as well. Notwithstanding the plot, often absurd and farfetched, the libretto shows many elements of originality and novelty: for example, the scene is staged in Colchos and in the Iberian countryside, whereas the more usual place is Corinth according to the ancient models by Euripides or Seneca. There is no chronological consistency, for the scene displays simultaneously characters such as Hypsipyle, Medea, Jason, Heracles, and also Aegeus. The backbone of the myth is only a pretext to display a complex intrigue: Jason and Medea are planning their marriage, after the slaying of the bulls and the conquest of the Golden Fleece; but the sudden coming of Hypsipyle and her pretensions to marry the reluctant Jason provoke Medea’s suspicions and jealousy. She plans to let her rival be killed during the night, but falls a victim to her own intrigue: the servant entrusted to kill Hypsipyle mistakes a woman for the other and drowns Medea into the sea.

However, the most significant feature of this work consists in its astonishing happy end, which is a deliberate subversion of the classical model, in accordance with the joyful atmosphere we already underlined. Indeed, after a long series of misunderstandings, Jason marries Hypsipyle, whereas Medea eventually escapes to death, thanks to her old lover Aegeus, king of Athens, and marries him. In a broader perspective, this final section pays its homage to the unwritten rules of certain melodrama, which, to some extents, tended to avoid tragic endings. But, much more, in some respects all this is very fit to Cavalli’s temperament and musical style, which, according to all modern interpreters, is characterized by a cheerful attitude and fondness for joy, therefore being the actual representative of a Venetian musical fashion – it is perhaps worth remembering that his *Didone* displays a happy final as well. This opera, therefore, contains some ironical or auto-ironical patterns and can be regarded as a fresco of human feebleness. Music is also pervaded, so to say, by sensuality: it emerges particularly in love duets (and in this respect, it can be considered very close to Monteverdi’s *Incoronazione di Poppea*). At the same time, the composer emphasizes, as to be expected, the ‘dark side’ of

Medea, namely her sorcery and her close links to chthonian deities: this is well expressed in the famous aria and chorus from act I, *Le mura si squarcino* ("Let it be a rift in the walls"), where she performs an evocation of infernal gods. This passage offers a good example of Cavalli's colourful and lively instrumentation.⁴

Cavalli, therefore, represents an exception among the composers inspired by Medea and Jason: it was the tragic epilogue, according to the unanimous classical tradition, that most attracted composers and artists. The most important opera about Medea, and indeed one of the masterpieces of lyric music, "the highest peak of dramatic music" in Brahms' words, is undoubtedly the "tragédie lyrique" *Médée* composed by the Florentine Luigi Cherubini and first performed in Paris in 1797. The libretto was written by François Hoffmann and, as usual, omits the antecedents of the story that is the part placed in Colchis; conversely, it develops the events which took place afterwards, in Corinth. This opera was immediately considered if not the actual masterpiece, one of Cherubini's most important works; it was largely admired in France and, most of all, in Germany. In Italy it enjoyed a revival during the fifties of the last century, thanks to the powerful and spectacular interpretation of the Greek legendary soprano Maria Callas in the main role.⁵

Cherubini is in many respects a proto-romantic composer, his operas being a sort of transition between classicism and romanticism. His texture shows echoes from different composers, even though they are blended in an original ensemble. As far as *Médée* is concerned, this is particularly clear in the instrumental sections (the *ouverture* is a good example), whereas in the solo parts a sort of monumental pathos is continuously irradiated from the music. Despite the literary weakness and inconsistencies of the libretto, it is all the same possible to outline a spiritual evolution of Medea, who is a passionate woman in despair for having lost her lover. She seeks for revenge after having humiliated herself. Indeed, in Corinth she is an exile, and she is hated as a stranger and alien figure. Comprehensibly, she is the main character. In comparison with her, the other figures result more faded (even though King Creon has a sort of heroic greatness in resisting her menaces). Some critics have labelled *Médée* as a 'monodrama'. Cherubini obtains this contrast

⁴ F. Bussi, *L'opera veneziana dalla morte di Monteverdi alla fine del Seicento*, in *Storia dell'opera*, diretta da A. Basso, Torino 1977, vol. 1, 121-182 (in part. 131-142). This opera was recorded by Harmonia Mundi in 1989 (conductor R. Jacobs).

⁵ Her first interpretation of Medea during the season of the Maggio Musicale Fiorentino in 1953 (with Vittorio Gui as conductor) was particularly meaningful and decreed the international success of Callas as a star. Among her many recordings of this opera, we can mention the one conducted by Tullio Serafin (Emi Classics, 1998).

by employing two different kind of music, and therefore there is a sort of disproportion between the excited and colourful harmony characterizing Medea and the plain melodic line of the other figures. However, it is all the same worth mentioning the only coloratura aria sung by the Corinthian rival of Medea, Glauce, and the melodic, more intimate, aria sung by Medea's servant, Neris.⁶

After Cherubini, two minor composers in the first half of the nineteenth century were attracted by the story; I mean Giovanni Simone Mayr and Giovanni Pacini. The first one performed in 1813 an extremely classicizing *Medea in Corinto*, which is his acknowledged masterpiece. Though born in Germany, Mayr lived for a long time in Italy and tried to blend the two styles together, adding sometimes a touch of French vague. Mayr, who had been completely forgotten till recent times, was, however, one of the most successful and acclaimed composers of his times: the well known rivalry against Rossini testifies his importance. *Medea*, first performed in Naples with the famous Isabella Colbran and Manuel Garcia in the main roles, was a triumph. Part of the merits should be credited to the librettist, the famous Felice Romani (who, incidentally, some decades later wrote for Vincenzo Bellini a pendant of *Medea's* story, namely *Norma*, deriving the partly similar plot from Chateaubriand's *Les Martyrs*)⁷. The libretto is powerful and concise, as, for example, the dialogues show. Medea is a tormented figure, both a sorceress and a barbarian princess, and the contrast between the two different civilizations and culture is exemplified in the other female figure, the mild-temperate Creusa, as well as in the male hero Jason, who feels himself entangled by Medea's dangerous charming. The Athenian king Aegeus represents an element of novelty in the otherwise standard plot, for he loves Creusa too and was formerly promised to her. Furthermore, he and Medea conjure together in order to prevent the marriage between Jason and Creusa. After murdering Creusa and the children, Medea flies away, together with Aegeus, whereas Jason attempts at committing suicide, his deed being prevented only by the Corinthians. Among the most interesting sections of the opera we can count

⁶ G. Confalonieri, *Cherubini*, Torino 1978, 295 ff.

⁷ C. Questa, *I Romani sulla scena operistica*, in *L'aquila a due teste. Immagini di Roma e dei Romani*, Urbino 1988; L. Belloni, *Reminiscenze da 'Medea' nel libretto di 'Norma': sulla memoria euripidea di Felice Romani*, in *Memoria di testi teatrali antichi*, ed. by O. Vox, Lecce 2006, 33-65.

the arias sung by Medea – they, once again, are meant to emphasize the obscure power of the woman.⁸

Giovanni Pacini was, likewise, a prolific composer. Among his titles, we can remember other two plots inspired by classical subjects, *L'ultimo giorno di Pompei* (1825), and *Saffo* (1840), both counted among his masterpieces. Pacini's *Medea*, was first performed in Palermo in 1843, and after ten years, in a revised form, in Naples. This opera is rather interesting, for, according to the fullest Romantic atmosphere of the forties, it displays a sensitive use of instrumentation and orchestra. Of course the dark and ominous side of the events is emphasized as well. This is particularly clear in sections like the ill-fated weddings between Jason and Creusa (who does not appear on stage), or the rites performed by Greek priests to avert Medea's magic arts and incantations. But the main element of novelty is the sympathetic attitude towards her disgraces – a result which Pacini achieves by accentuating her solitude and her despair. His heroine is a deceived woman, exile in a stranger land, threatened by losing both her children and her lover. The music is, in certain respects, inconsistent, for Medea alternates passionate moods and outbursts of wrath and calm and peaceful, somewhat, melancholic melodies. However, the main elements of the story are slightly changed in order to create a coherent framework: for example, Medea disguises herself as a servant to persuade Creon to have mercy of her and her children, and at the same time advising him of how terrible can be Medea's demonic fury. The tragic final demonstrates this twofold and unresolved nature, since, after killing her children, Medea commits suicide. Unlike from Cherubini, however, her suicide does not prelude to revenge against Jason in the otherworld, but is a vain acknowledgement of despair and febleness.⁹

To conclude the section about music, it can be worth recording here also Prospero Selli's and Salvatore Cammarano's *Medea* (1839 and 1851 respectively), whose libretto was readapted from Romani's text; and two modern operas, both entitled *Medea*, written by the Roman composer Vincenzo Tommasini (performed in Trieste in 1906), and by the polyvalent artist Pietro Canonica (Roma 1953), who himself wrote the libretto, and cared for the per-

⁸ For further details see J. Commons, *Medea in Corinto* (foreword to the discographic edition, Opera Rara, 1994); P. Russo, "*Medea in Corinto*" di Felice Romani. *Storia, fonti e tradizioni*, Firenze 2004.

⁹ A. Weatherson, *Il Maestro delle Cabalette* (foreword to the discographic version by Agorà Musica, 1998). For other bibliographic references, see the webpages dedicated to Pacini's life and works: <http://www.italianopera.org/pacini/pacini.html>; <http://www.geocities.com/Vien-na/8917/Pacini.html>

formance details (scenes, costumes) as well¹⁰. These compositions would be worth of a rediscovery like the one that favoured Mayr and Pacini in recent times.

As far as iconography is concerned, there are not many Italian artists inspired by Medea or the Argonauts. This seems a more fashionable subject in other European countries and regions (for example, in France). Some paintings, however, are worth mentioning. For the sake of brevity, I will offer here just some hints. Medea performing her magical arts to rejuvenate the Athenian king Aeson inspired two Tuscan artists between sixteenth and seventeenth century – namely Girolamo Macchietti (whose painting is now in the *Studiolo* of Francesco I in Florence) and the baroque artist Anton Maria Vassallo (whose canvas, painted about 1637-48, is now in the Uffizi Museum). In the Mannerist age, it is worth mentioning also a drawing of the Venetian painter Andrea Schiavone (1563), now in Princeton, representing Medea flying on her chariot. Strangely enough, as to my knowledge, there are no iconographic representations in Italian art of Medea slaying her children.

The legend of the Argonauts, in turn, inspired various painters. I will mention here a famous picture by the famous Ferrarese artist Lorenzo Costa (1464-1535, now in Padua); a pictorial cycle by Ercole Grandi da Ferrara (also a mannerist);¹¹ a relief by Francesco Primaticcio in Fontainebleau Castle (1541-45); a fresco by Giuseppe Passeri (1678) in Palazzo Barberini (Rome); a quite interesting fresco by Baldassarre Peruzzi (1510) in Villa Farnesina (Rome), which represents Argo as a star (the so-called *catasterismos*); a bas-relief by Filarete (1433-45) on the bronze portal in St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, in which the tale of Jason and Medea has an allegorical meaning together with the other relieves inspired by Ovid. At the end of the nineteenth century the Argonauts were painted by the Istrian artist Cesare Felice Giorgio dell'Acqua on a fresco in Miramare Castle in Trieste (1868).¹² Finally, also the very last period of contemporary art records an aluminium sculpture by Anglo-Italian sculptor and painter Eduardo Paolozzi (1924-2005).

In my opinion, however, the most important painting inspired by the Argonauts is Giorgio de Chirico's *La partenza degli Argonauti* (*Departure of the Argonauts*), which is not, however, the only painting De Chirico produced on the subject. The most famous paintings on this subject were painted by De Chirico in 1909 and 1920 respectively. It is significant that the first one, more

¹⁰ Cfr. http://www.museocanonica.it/museo/figura_di_pietro_canonica/canonica_musicista

¹¹ Cf. R. Longhi, *Officina ferrarese*, Roma 1934.

¹² These paintings can be viewed at <http://www.castello-miramare.it/cesaredellacqua/home.htm>

academic, represents just the harbour of Volos (that is the ancient Iolchos, Jason's homeland), where De Chirico himself was born in 1888. The second one is more meaningful and original. De Chirico painted it just after the years he spent in Paris, becoming acquainted with the Surrealist movement. It is already possible noticing in that canvas the distinctive features of his 'meta-physical' style, which gave him universal renown. The subject is particularly important because De Chirico was fascinated by the theme of the voyage and dealt with it at great length. Classical myths exerted on him a particular attraction because he spent part of his youth in Greece (where his father worked as a train engineer in Thessaly). De Chirico resumed this topic in a sort of autobiographic writing (*Hebdomeros*, published in French in 1929) too.¹³ It is perhaps worth remembering that his younger brother, the composer, writer and painter Alberto Savinio (a pseudonym) is the author of a brief piece about the Argonauts, dedicated to another Italian writer, namely Giovanni Papini.¹⁴ Savinio, though labelled as "the most important writer between world war I and II" (by Leonardo Sciascia), is still a less known author and his works has not received until recent times the attention it deserves. Perhaps this is due to the difficulty and peculiarity of his style, sometimes ironic, sometimes mannerist, often grotesque, extravagant and eccentric. Savinio's literary production, like his brother's pictorial one, is deeply influenced by classical antiquity and displays a sort of nostalgic feelings for ancient Greece and its literature, which is filtered through the lens of a modern sensibility. In particular, this work narrates an autobiographical journey through Italy.¹⁵

Before concluding, I would like to hint at the cinematographic fortune of Medea's story. I will not take into account the famous masterpiece by Pier Paolo Pasolini with Maria Callas in the main role (also because specific communications are going to deal with it),¹⁶ but minor works only. Besides

¹³ *Hebdomeros. Le peintre et son génie chez l'écrivain*, Paris 1929. This work has been considered as De Chirico's masterpiece, as a writer. He published also an Italian version of it in 1942 and 1971 (see the modern reprints Milan, 1999 and 2003). For further information about De Chirico, his life and works see the website managed by the Fondazione Giorgio and Isa de Chirico, <http://www.fondazionedechirico.it>.

¹⁴ *La partenza dell'Argonauta in Hermaphrodito* (A. Savinio, *Hermaphrodito e altri romanzi*, a cura di A. Tinterri, Milano 1995, 107 ff.).

¹⁵ See S. Zampieri, *Il punto su Savinio*, in *Bollettino '900*. Electronic Newsletter of '900 Italian Literature, 1-2 (2002) (available at <http://www3.unibo.it/boll900/numeri/2002-i/Zampieri1.html>).

¹⁶ See, however, M. Fusillo, *La Grecia secondo Pasolini. Mito e cinema*, Roma 2007; B. Zimmermann, *Fremde Antike? P. P. Pasolinis Medea*, in *Bewegte Antike. Antike Themen im modernen Film*, ed. by U. Eigler, Stuttgart – Weimar 2002, 53-66; B. Hessen, *Pasolinis Medea – aus der Perspektive eines Klassischen Philologen*, in *Pontes II. Antike im Film*, ed. by M. Ko-

some 'peplum-movies' from the fifties and the sixties (a trivial genre, which now has been rediscovered after the success of the epic *Gladiator* – indeed, more distinguished),¹⁷ it is important mentioning two movies drawn from the *feuilleton* novel by Francesco Mastriani, *La Medea di Porta Medina* (published posthumously in 1915). This colourful and pathetically exaggerated novel is placed in a popular quarter of Naples at the end of the eighteenth century and actualizes the story of the betrayed woman who kills her baby because her lover is going to marry another woman. The plot is inspired in the title and in its main lines by the Greek myth and the main female character, Coletta, is daring and fierce like her classical antecedent. At the same time, there are some significant differences, introduced by the author in accordance with the different ambiance and a sort of fondness for folkloric details: the 'modern' Medea is not a princess, but an orphan who is raped and then married by an old man; after her divorce, she falls in love with a moneylender, Cipriano Barca. They have a baby, but Coletta is jealous of the love Cipriano has for the little girl, because she feels neglected. Furthermore, Cipriano meditates marrying another woman, submissive and, so to say, less dangerous. This provokes Coletta's outbreak: her wrath knows no limits; she catches the two in the church where they are just celebrating the wedding, strangles the baby and stabs the rival, who will die in sufferings. Coletta is finally sentenced to death. As we can see from this brief summary, the novel emphasized passion and intrigue, according to the literary genre of serial stories, of which Mastriani was acknowledged as the Italian master.¹⁸ Two films were drawn from it, one (silent) in 1919, by the Neapolitan director Elvira Notari, one of the first women engaged in cinematographic direction. The subject seems very fit to her professional activity, which was largely inspired by Neapolitan popular life and stories placed in the underworld, full of violence, passionate love, coups de theatre, hardships and privations of poverty, and so on. The other remake is more recent (1981): it was directed for television by Piero Schivazappa and was interpreted by a popular Neapolitan actress, Giuliana de Sio. Finally, it should be mentioned a documentary by P. Benvenuti,

renjak, K. Töchterle, Innsbruck, etc. 2002, 95-106; R. Linder, *Der Heros und die Zauberin. Gender in Verfilmungen griechischer Mythen*, *ibid.*, 44-57.

¹⁷ *I giganti della Tessaglia (Gli Argonauti)*, written and directed by Riccardo Freda (1961); the Argonauts appear also in the farfetched *Ercole e la regina di Lidia* (1959), directed by Pietro Francisci.

¹⁸ Among his works, in fact, we can mention novels like *La cieca di Sorrento*, or *I misteri di Napoli*: they follow the genre of the contemporary French *feuilleton* literature (e.g. Eugène Sue), and at the same time show some concerns towards the socialist movement. For his *Medea*, see P. Fornaro, *Medea italiana*, in *Atti delle giornate di studio su Medea, Torino 23-24 ottobre 1995*, ed. by R. Uglione, Torino 1997, 117-163. Mastriani's novel has been reprinted in 1988 (with a foreword by R. Reim, Rome).

Medea, un Maggio di Pietro Frediani, inspired by a popular opera written by the Pisan vernacular poet Pietro Frediani (1775-1852). This kind of representations, usually performed during the month of May ("maggio"), was meant both to educate and to entertain villains and humble people in the countryside with theatrical declamations and music. This tradition seems very close to the one of the *Commedia dell'Arte*. Frediani's *Medea* is inspired by the classical antecedents, though, in certain respects, simplified and modernized.¹⁹ His woman is a despaired figure, obsessed by jealousy, who in the end commits suicide.

¹⁹ The text was reprinted in *I Maggi*, with a foreword by E. Montale, Pisa 1954.



La spedizione degli Argonauti (L. Costa)



La partenza degli Argonauti (G. De Chirico)



La partenza degli Argonauti (G. De Chirico)