

Building Musical Identities: the absorption of Italian musical styles in Portugal in the 18th century

Construindo identidades: a absorção dos estilos musicais italianizantes em Portugal no século XVIII

ABSTRACT

The Portuguese composers born around 1755 represent the generation responsible for the third moment of the absorption of the influences of the intense process of the Italianization of the arts, started with the reign of D. João V, and characterized by the local adaptation of the influences coming from Italy. António Leal Moreira, who never left Portugal and only received these indirect influences, had a musical production sometimes peculiar, that can be especially observed in the ten court *serenatas* composed for the ephemeris of the Portuguese Royal Family from 1782 to 1788.

RESUMO

Os compositores portugueses nascidos por volta de 1755 representam o terceiro momento do processo de italianização das artes, iniciado em Portugal com o reinado de D. João V, caracterizada pela adaptação local das influências vindas de Itália. António Leal Moreira, que nunca deixou Portugal, tendo somente recebido estas influências indirectamente, teve uma produção musical por vezes peculiar, com características especialmente observáveis nas dez serenatas da corte compostas para as efemérides da Família Real Portuguesa entre 1782 e 1788.

* Faculdade de Ciências
Sociais e Humanas,
Universidade Nova de
Lisboa, Centro de Estudos
de Sociologia e Estética
Musical – CESEM

BUILDING MUSICAL IDENTITIES

To understand the generation of composers in which Leal Moreira is included, it is crucial to realize that the 1780s were also a time when a considerable trust was placed in younger composers, especially those who had studied at the *Seminário da Patriarcal* in the previous decade, with David Perez and Sousa Carvalho as the main teachers. These musicians who graduated in the late 1770s demonstrated through their works the result of their own reading of the Italianised practice, after having studied with Italian masters established in Portugal, as well as with Portuguese teachers who had been sent to Italy in their youth to be trained and absorb styles, practices, and techniques. The Portuguese court was proud of its composers, considering them in no way inferior to any Italian masters. Having national composers who could write with true art in the internationalised style that conquered all Europe was a way of demonstrating the cultural and artistic development of the Portuguese through an image of highly cultured monarchs.

But it can be said that Portuguese composers coming to the forefront, no longer concentrating almost exclusively on the creation of sacred music, was also a consequence of the new political and financial adjustments that took place during the time of D. Maria I from 1778. A few Portuguese composers in partnership with the court poet Gaetano Martinelli (fl 1764–95) were called upon to develop a considerable number of reduced versions of the traditional three-act *opera seria*: the one-act *drammi per musica* that this research sees as being developed for the Portuguese court at this time. These works can be seen as an adapted sub-genre of the *opera seria* tradition that developed in a particular way in Portugal, initially generated principally by the financial reasons cited above, and which eventually became a standard. These works followed the model of what the poet Pietro Metastasio (1698–1782) called *azioni, feste* or *componimenti drammatici*, while in Portugal these short works with serious plots were generally called *serenata*. These works were not any kind of autochthonous genre or sub-genre (as might be observed in the sub-genres of the Portuguese *entremez*), but rather a local adaptation or practice that created something identifiable as unique in its recurrence and consistency, rather than making any claims for originality. These short works could also be seen as an effective reshaping of the long three-act *opera seria* paradigm into something more dynamic since there is no loss of musical and theatrical quality: rather the opposite, since the works are very assertive and dramatically fluid.

Brito tried to explain the discrepancy in terminology by the fact that these *serenatas* were non-staged works (or semi-staged) like the Italian model, but were called *dramma per musica* for reasons of status, length of the works and for the non-allegorical traits that could relate them to the Metastasian dramas rather than to the Italianate allegorical *serenata*.¹ All three royal theatres that were

1. Brito, *Opera in Portugal*, 58.

functioning during Leal Moreira's time were the main venues for the performances of the *serenatas*, which have plenty of staging indications in the libretti, revealing the possibilities for the performances of the *drammi per musica* or *serenatas* with costumes, scenery and machinery in keeping with the spectacle of Baroque tradition. Whether these works were fully or semi-staged may remain under discussion, but the most important issue is that they were chosen to be the replacement for the previous luxurious three-act operatic productions. Though apparently more economical because the likely reduced number of rehearsals, the whole spectacle was musically and theatrically highly demanding, intended to be performed by the best available singers hired for the court with an orchestra unrivaled by all but a few others in Europe.²

Following the rise of Queen Maria I to the throne, an unwritten rule prohibited the appearance of female singers on stage, whether in private or public theatres. In the *serenatas*, the *primo uomo* and *prima donna* were male sopranos, while usually, the other three characters were: another soprano *castrato*, an alto *castrato* and a tenor. Following the *opera seria* tradition bass voices were not used, since those were associated with *buffo* (comic) roles. The composers, by working with a fixed and highly professional set of singers, were able to write with the singers' abilities in mind. This made possible a deeper knowledge of the singer's technical and expressive specialties, and allowed composers to explore the maximum possibilities of vocal virtuosity in their writing, with the confidence that the result would be successful.

Gaetano Martinelli (fl 1764–95) was the court poet responsible for providing most of the texts for the serenatas and he arrived in Lisbon on May 20th, 1769 to help the setting of Niccòllo Jommelli's operas at the Portuguese court. Jommelli was also invited to work in Portugal, but declined the King's offer, deciding to continue working for the Duke of Württemberg, however offering to send to Portugal copies of his operas as well as composing new operatic works and sacred music specifically for Lisbon. Jommelli arranged to work for the Portuguese court theatre in absentia, sending Martinelli as his representative to help with adapting his operas for the Portuguese court, in collaboration with the Portuguese composer João Cordeiro da Silva (fl 1756–1808).³

The majority of Martinelli's works in Portugal were written during the reign of D. Maria I (1777–1792). Curiously these works were in *opera seria* style, a genre in which he had no previous experience as a librettist. It is possible to say that Martinelli took advantage of his inexperience, which might initially have been seen as a deficiency, but left him with greater flexibility in creating successful smaller-scale *opera seria*-like libretti rooted in Metastasian models that pleased the Portuguese court, becoming their mainstream for operatic works related to royal celebrations. To understand the singularities of the Portuguese *serenatas* as organized

2. Brito, *Opera in Portugal*, 59. "for *serenatas* and *oratorios* there were only two rehearsals. The orders issued to the singers and players show that the orchestra for these performances comprised between twenty-three and thirty-two players, with an average number of twenty-eight. At Queluz there was sometimes a display of fireworks in the garden after the performance."

3. Marita P. McClymonds. «Martinelli, Gaetano.» In *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera*, edited by Stanley Sadie. Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online, (accessed July 9, 2011).

BUILDING MUSICAL IDENTITIES

by Martinelli it is important to remember a definition of the standard Italian *serenata* genre as defined by Michael Talbot, who attests that the main dramaturgical characteristics of these works were determined by allegorical characters personifying such concepts as duty and honor, rather than real ones. The texts of such works usually have a strong moralizing strain and are often divided into two approximately equal parts. Although these works sometimes include choruses, movements described as ‘coro’ are often ensembles for the full cast of principals. The characters, when not allegorical figures, can be deities, semi-deities or denizens of Arcadia; only rarely do historical figures appear, as in Metastasio’s *Il sogno di Scipione* of 1743.⁴ Interestingly, the Portuguese works were based on the exception to the rule, similar to this Metastasio’s *Il sogno di Scipione*, rather than following the Italian *serenata* definition as outlined by Talbot. Portuguese *serenatas* generally feature four to five characters representing historical royal figures from ancient Rome or Greece struggling with issues of love and royal virtues, as in the *opere serie*, instead of divinities or allegorical virtues such as Glory, Love or Envy as also described by Talbot. All *serenatas* by Martinelli consist of one act divided in two parts, with continuity of scene numbering and duration of approximately half an hour each part. The structure of these compact *drammi per musica* did not differ substantially from the mainstream opera seria. Since the Portuguese *serenatas* could be seen as shortened versions of *opera seria* – one act divided into two parts – some characteristics are present that are parallel to the full-scale *opera seria* model. The *primo uomo* and *prima donna* each have two contrasting arias, a maximum of three in some cases (with at least one or two for each character with accompanied recitative), they participate in the ensemble that normally takes place in some initial scene of the second part, they sometimes have a duet, and always participate in the final chorus (Coro as designated in the score) sung by the ensemble of soloists. The secondary roles usually have a single aria, a maximum of two (with or without accompanied recitative), participate in the ensembles (that are rarely more than a trio) and always engage in the closing all-characters chorus as well. Like Metastasio’s librettos, the ones by Martinelli were also highly customisable, enduring the usual cuts in recitatives and arias, the substitution of new texts, the condensing of act endings into ensembles and the omission of actual choruses. Not all the *serenatas* employ the same structure or number of scenes, and the use of duets and ensembles varies greatly among the works. Adjectives such as ‘conservative’ or ‘progressive’ for the structure of the librettos, if we can consider the strict Metastasian models more ‘conservative’, could not be applied based on the chronology of the works. To give an example using Leal Moreira’s works, an early *serenata* such as *Siface e Sofonisba* from 1783 has a more complex and ‘modern’ dramatic structure than *Ester* from 1786 or *Gli eroi spartani* of 1788.

4. Michael Talbot. “Serenata.” In *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online*, (accessed July 7, 2011).

Fig. 1 – Excerpt from the aria "Agitato oh Dio" from the serenata *Ascanio in Alba* (1785) with music by Leal Moreira. Example of orchestral writing that emphasises the freedom of the voice line.

The image shows a musical score for the aria "Agitato oh Dio" from the serenata *Ascanio in Alba* (1785) by Leal Moreira. The score is in G major and 3/4 time. It features a vocal line for Ascanio and a piano accompaniment for strings. The lyrics are: "A - gi - ta - to oh Di - o! Con - fu - so oh Di - o de - - gli af - fin - ni io so - - no in bra - cio... oh Di - o a - gi - ta - to oh Di - o con - fu - so de - - gli af - fin - ni io so - - no in bra - cio..."

Approximately forty-seven of these short *drammi per musica* or *serenatas* were written by two generations of Portuguese composers, most of them based on texts by Gaetano Martinelli. The music that the Portuguese composers set to Martinelli's texts is highly effective and representative of Portuguese musical development in the last quarter of the eighteenth century. It is possible to consider two generations of composers from the list above, with David Perez, Luciano Xavier dos Santos, João de Sousa Carvalho, João Cordeiro da Silva, and the brothers Jerónimo and Braz de Lima being a first group of composers who had already begun their professional musical career during the time of José I; and then António da Silva Gomes e Oliveira and António Leal Moreira as younger composers who wrote their first professional works at the beginning of Maria I's reign.

Leal Moreira, like all the most significant Portuguese composers in the eighteenth century, kept up to date with the most important musical centers influenced by the Italian styles. The tendency towards the last decades of the 1700s was to give more freedom to the vocal lines and provide a "simplification" of the orchestral writing. Hence, the voice tends to dialogue with an orchestra that provides a larger richness of timbre. The *serenatas* from the mid-1780s tend to present a more transparent orchestral texture that is comparable to the style of Paisiello and Cimarosa. This kind of writing can be seen in the late scores of Leal Moreira and even Sousa Carvalho (who had his musical training in Naples with Niccolò Piccinni as his teacher and Giovanni Paisiello as his colleague). This "simplification" was part of a tendency in the 1780s of mixing elements of opera buffa into the opera seria structure. According to McClymonds and Hertz, "Paisiello appears to have

BUILDING MUSICAL IDENTITIES

5. Marita P. McClymonds and Daniel Hertz. "Opera seria." In Grove Music Online.

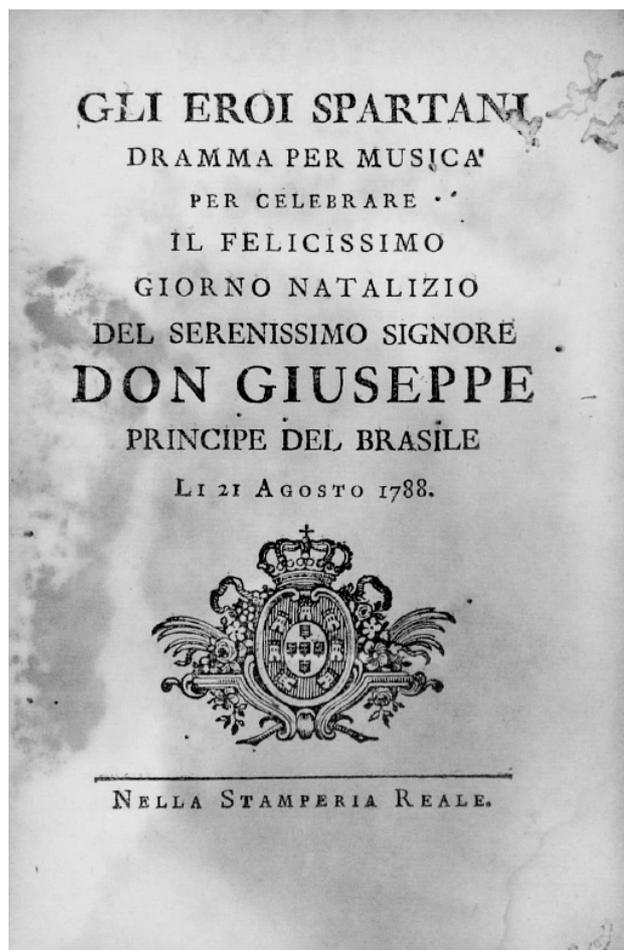
been a leading figure in the establishment of the new style. His broad, simple melodic lines and longer periods took center stage, while accompaniment styles carried over entire sections with little change and seldom stepped out of the role of beat keeping repeated notes or arpeggiation except to insert brief obbligato motif 'comments' during vocal caesuras."⁵ A transitional style between an earlier textural treatment that shows traits of late Jommelli's and early Sousa Carvalho's writing and Paisiello's approach to the relationship between voice and orchestra can be observed in Leal Moreira's works through the decade of 1780. The Portuguese composer found his own solutions by mixing these traditions, especially given his experience directing the newly arrived works by Paisiello and Cimarosa for Rua dos Condes.

Leal Moreira applied an updated transitional style that renewed and "simplified" the musical discourse on a slower harmonic pace, letting the melodic fluidity of the voice replace what had been the complexity and prolixity of the earlier orchestral writing. Among the characteristics of the orchestral writing of the last quarter of the eighteenth century, also evident in Portuguese works of that time, one of the most important is the increased size of the orchestra, which made more contrast between segments for full orchestra possible, and the thin string accompaniments, alongside the possibility of greater crescendo effects. The separation of the orchestral treatment in blocks of instruments, such as woodwinds working separately from the strings, sometimes with concertato features, was also fundamental to a new and different sonority.

Certain types of motivic/rhythmic ostinati in the orchestra were also brought from the opera buffa to the serious style. On the example below, an aria from *Ascanio in Alba* (1785), Leal Moreira tends to present a non melodic agitated figuration on the strings (not doubling the voice) that provides the necessary tension and breathless sensation to describe the character's internal agitation and anxiety. The subtlety difference of textural treatment, in this case, can be observed in the fact that in *Ascanio* all the strings, except for the basses, have the 'off-beat' figuration with particular attention to the movement of the first violins. The melodic shape, even more notable in the 1780s, became broader, with more simple melodic lines and longer musical phrases. Accompaniment for solo voices became less intrusive and more simple, letting the voice shine, without being doubled by the orchestra.

Portuguese composers also tended to increase the number of recitatives with the orchestra to enhance dramatic value, creating several scenes without musical interruption by simple recitatives. Leal Moreira's accompanied recitatives are very long and dramatic, following the tradition of Jommelli and Sousa Carvalho. Some of these scenes are especially noteworthy because they introduce musical material that is developed during the recitative and reaches its final version in the arias. Since the recitatives are through-

Fig. 2 - Front-page of the serenata *Gli eroi spartani* (1788) with music by Leal Moreira and libretto by Gaetano Martinelli.



composed and are ruled by the text rather than following pre-determined forms as in the case of the arias, true modulatory development of the musical motives takes place during those long scenes. The same melodic motive, whether in its entirety or in fragments, is presented in different keys, alternating between major and minor mode. Some recitatives and the arias that follow require one or more obbligato instruments, which brings even more timbral variety and dramatic possibilities to the motivic developments as described above.

Another main characteristic of these serenatas during the time of D. Maria I is the systematic presence of *Licenze* at the very end of each work, with the exception of the oratorios and a few other works. Musically, these *Licenze* are short final scenes, in the course of which, after the main plot is solved, the characters (even those who might have died in the action) turn to speak directly to the audience in recitatives with orchestra, comparing the virtues of the heroes or heroines depicted in the drama, and praising those of the royal person to whom homage was being paid. Even if this final section may seem dramatically detached from the main action, musically the *serenata* is not done without the *Licenza* that includes the final “chorus” with the full musical forces. Even though systematic and expected the final *Licenza*, conveyed in accompanied recitative, could have a considerable effect on the

Fig. 3A - List of characters and the singers from the Royal Chamber of of the serenata *Gli eroi spartani* (1788) with music by Leal Moreira and libretto by Gaetano Martinelli.

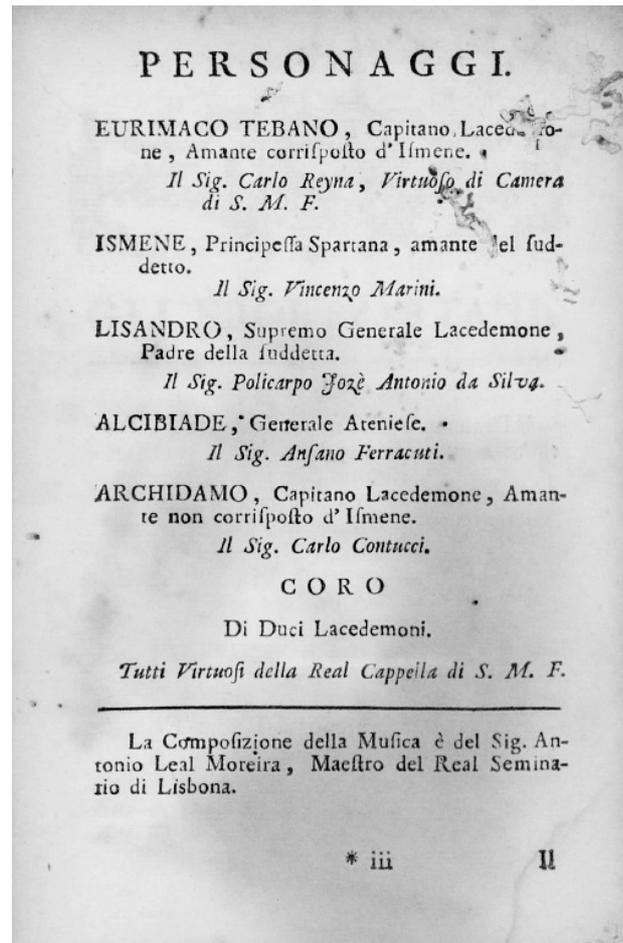
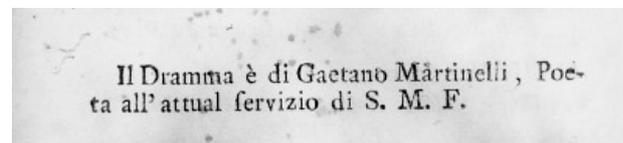


Fig. 3B - Mention to Gaetano Martinelli's authorship of the libretto of the serenata *Gli eroi spartani* (1788).



audience, since all were waiting for the solution of the plot and for this ceremonial moment of the work.

As we have seen, this was due to many financial, but also to some degree aesthetic, choices made during the rule of Queen Maria I (1777–1792). Solutions were found by the librettist Martinelli in partnership with the most representative composers active in Lisbon at the time. This became the principal dramatic means founded by a new generation of Portuguese composers to express their own reading of the established Italian genres and styles through the *drammi per musica* as established by Metastasio and adapted by the court poet Martinelli. Musically, these *serenatas* do not necessarily show any recognizable or musical feature that could be claimed as “original” or identifiable “Portuguese”. However, as we have suggested above, the local adaptation of the musical forms and structures undertaken by the local composers through their set of Martinelli librettos inherently display their uniqueness and strength. Leal Moreira was the young composer whose career was, perhaps, most directly related to the development and decline of this genre, since he dedicated himself exclusively to a significant

Fig. 4 - Leal Moreira's autograph of the recitative and aria "Per pietà non accrescete al mio cor pie tormento" from the serenata *Artemisia regina di caria* (1787) with music by Leal Moreira and libreto by Gaetano Martinelli



number of these compositions from his youth to his early maturity. His compositional activity related to the court began with the music for the Acclamation of Maria I and ended with the official regency of Prince João in 1799 when Leal Moreira left the direction of *Teatro São Carlos*.

There are no doubts that one-act court *serenatas* were the main operatic genre developed by Portuguese composers in the last quarter of the eighteenth century and, perhaps, one of the most noteworthy examples of the adaption of the Italian models to the Portuguese context as proposed in this book. The Portuguese court *serenata* as a genre saw its rise and fall in no more than twenty years. It went from a novel solution to maintain the operatic production at the court during a time of financial restrictions to an “outdated” spectacle in a short amount of time. This was mainly due to the fact that Queen Maria I’s reign was already a late holdover of the *ancien régime*. Her time as ruler is traditionally described as much more conservative in customs and civil and religious ideology compared to the previous reign. However, shorter laudatory allegorical works remain important in Portugal till at least the mid-1830s, and the period of Absolutist usurpation (1828 – 1833) marks a striking late flowering of the genre. *Serenatas* were the works that revealed Leal Moreira’s dramatic abilities and through which he established and cemented his predominance as court composer, preparing him for his time at *Rua dos Condes* and later at *São Carlos*.⁶ From the freshness of *Siface ed Sofonisba* of 1783 to the already antiquated, yet elegant, *Il natale augusto* of 1793 it is possible to trace the developments of this genre that saw no systematic continuation, and that had Leal Moreira as one of its most significant representatives.⁷ These works were important for the consolidation of Leal Moreira’s style. His use of comic opera elements in the late *serenatas* shows a composer able to circulate easily and wisely between the serious and comic genres, ready for his own mixing of Italian features in his two unique extant *entremezes*, the works “in the Portuguese manner” *A Saloia Namorada* and *A Vingança da Cigana*.

6. Sousa Carvalho and Cordeiro da Silva also wrote a large number of *serenatas* just as Leal Moreira, but they were already established and experienced composers, who had staged other different operatic genres, when the *serenata* became the mainstream of Queen Maria I’s reign.

7. A few occasional laudatory allegorical works were composed for the Portuguese court, both in Lisbon and Rio de Janeiro, as late as the first decades of the nineteenth century without, however, representing any significant expansion or renaissance of the genre.

BUILDING MUSICAL IDENTITIES

Bibliography

- ARSHAGOUNI, Michael Hrair. 1994. "Aria forms in opera seria of the classic period: Settings of Metastasio's "Artaserse" from 1760-1790." PhD. diss., University of California.
- BRITO, Manuel Carlos de. 1989. *Opera in Portugal in the eighteenth century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- KUHL, Paulo Mugayar. 1998. "Os Libretos de Gaetano Martinelli e a Ópera de Corte em Portugal (1769-1795)." PhD. diss., FFLCH - USP, Universidade de São Paulo.
- MCCLYMONDS, Marita P. 1980. "The Evolution of Jommelli's Operatic Style." *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 33, 2 (1980): 326-355.
- . 1981. *Niccolò Jommelli: the last years, 1769-1774*. Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press.
- MCCLYMONDS, Marita P. and HEARTZ, Daniel. 2011. "Opera seria." In *Grove Music Online*. *Oxford Music Online* (accessed August 8, 2011).
- ROBINSON, Michael F. 1972. *Naples and Neapolitan Opera*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- STROHM, Reinhard. 1997. *Dramma per musica : Italian opera seria of the eighteenth century*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- TALBOT, Michael. 2011 "Serenata." In *Grove Music Online*. *Oxford Music Online*, (accessed July 7, 2011).