

## Italian conventions in Gomes' orchestral writing: A transnational possibility



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### ABSTRACT

The mastery of Carlos Gomes over the Italian musical tradition can be elucidated by the success of his opera *Salvator Rosa* (1874), which, according to the author, was crafted in accordance with Italian taste. The Brazilian composer's journey in the realm of opera, marked by both triumphs and setbacks, is extensively documented in his biographies, yet remains relatively unexplored in investigations

focusing on his music within a transnational context. This study seeks to present some procedures employed in Gomes's orchestral writing through the teachings of three widely accepted treatises in the teaching of musical composition in Italy, more specifically in Milan. They are: *Il Maestro di composizione* by Bonifazio Asioli, *Corso di composizione musicale* by Anton Reicha (translated by L. Rossi), and *Grande trattato di strumentazione ed orchestrazione moderne* by Hector Berlioz (translated by A. Mazzucato).

**Keywords:** Opera, Antonio Carlos Gomes, Orchestration, Transnacionality.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The trajectory of Antônio Carlos Gomes, from his early studies in Brazil to his success on the stage of *La Scala*, reveals not only his technical mastery but also an ability to assimilate and reinterpret transatlantic musical traditions, specifically the Italian tradition. In the early 19th century, Italian teachings on orchestral composition—encompassing orchestration, instrumentation, and guidelines for the use of harmony and counterpoint in the distribution of instrumental parts—were distilled in translations of esteemed treatises from the classical period or publications of modern Italian treatises with essentially classical content. An analysis of these treatises reveals an orchestral organism primarily tasked with emphasizing the melody of the vocal line through well-known duplications [raddoppiamenti] – a topic we will explore further.

These treatises prioritize balance among orchestral groups without stifling the melody, demanding composers to maintain this tradition even as doors opened to transalpine innovations, and orchestras underwent transformations in their composition, with a consequent increase in instrumentalists and sonic mass influenced by the spectacle of French grand opéra. However, the preservation of melody—a key aspect of the Italian tradition—is present in the orchestral writing of the Brazilian orchestrator through abundant duplications.



Alberto Mazzucato<sup>1</sup>, a music critic, aesthetics, and orchestration professor at the Milan Conservatory, and a significant figure in Gomes's education, advised that Italy's openness to French and German innovations should not lose sight of the sense of Italian melody but should unite with the evolved technique of transalpine composition. Analyzing this tradition means gaining a better understanding of the context and writing of a composer who absorbs this environment and secures his place in Italy during those times.

In 1870, Carlos Gomes conquered Italian stages with his opera *Il Guarany*, and in 1873, he ventured with *Fosca*—writing with greater elaboration and notable evolution for his style. The critical acclaim did not correspond to the acceptance of the Italian audience, which considered *Fosca* a disaster. Shortly thereafter, Gomes presented *Salvator Rosa* on stage, an opera written in Italian conventions that reconquered the audience, rescuing his image and yielding dividends unlike any other opera in his productions. In truth, *Salvator Rosa* was composed in a rapid attempt to restore the composer's name on stage and reclaim his image as a popular and celebrated artist in Italy.

His return to these Italian conventions may easily suggest a reaction to the complex composition of *Fosca*—difficult for Italians to understand—and a return to a more accessible writing, as in *Il Guarany*. Marcos Virmond's statement about *Salvator Rosa* is illuminating:

It is a resumption of the *grand opéra* model similar to *Il Guarany* (1870), but revitalized, unprecedented, and with an enviable formal balance. This opera reveals Gomes as a composer who masters the techniques of Italian melodrama like few others but manages to give it a distinctive and personal touch (VIRMOND, 2007:18).

Already in *Salvator Rosa*'s orchestral makeup, we anticipate Gomes's intentions to undertake a writing closer to that Italian tradition. The composer opts for four horns in the same pitch, a set of trumpets without cornets, two timpani with changes in pitch by shorter and sufficiently spaced measures [accordatura] - a common procedure in classicism. Even *Il Guarany*, written three years earlier, hinted at a greater evolution in its orchestral makeup, employing cornets and paired trumpets in the brass section.

## 1.1 REPRESENTATIVE TREATISES: ASIOLI, REICHA, AND BERLIOZ

The initial years of Gomes in Milan are characterized by the coexistence of the appreciation of instrumental music—gradually gaining prominence with the establishment of instrumental music societies and adjustments in the orchestral ensembles of major Italian orchestras, particularly the increased number of string members in response to the arrival and affirmation of brass sections in the

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1 Alberto Mazzucato (1813-1877) was a significant figure in Italian musical culture. In addition to being a music critic, composer, editor of the *Gazzetta Musicale di Milano*, and a respected pedagogue, he served as the maestro direttore and concertatore for the orchestra at La Scala di Milano, leading from 1859 to 1868. Special attention should be given to him, considering that he was also an influential figure in the education of the young Carlos Gomes in Italy, immediately following the completion of the Brazilian's private studies with Lauro Rossi.



orchestra<sup>2</sup>—and, on the other hand, the cultivation of the bel canto tradition, where the orchestra assumes greater importance as an accompaniment group to singing, enhancing and interacting with the melody in the voices of virtuoso singers—a tradition still cherished by a large portion of the theater audience and reflected in Gomes's writing. In the realm of orchestration, while treatises that emphasized maintaining the melody through an orchestra subservient to singers were still being published and used in the Milanese teaching system, another part celebrated the arrival of Berlioz's teachings in Italy.

At that time, as a student of Lauro Rossi and Alberto Mazzucato, Carlos Gomes encountered both sides of this experience, but it was the melodrama tradition that Gomes clung to when he sought to regain his popularity after the rejection of *Fosca*. Among the main orchestration treatises published and adopted in Milan by Gomes's professors, the most representative ones were *Il Maestro di composizione* by Bonifazio Asioli, *Corso di composizione musicale* by Anton Reicha (translated by L. Rossi), and *Grande trattato di strumentazione ed orchestrazione moderne* by Hector Berlioz (translated by A. Mazzucato). The first two reflect the orchestral tradition of their time, and the latter marks the beginning of the changes that would reach Gomes through Mazzucato. Although not all the mentioned documents were conceived in Italian soil, they were the models adopted and absorbed for the orchestral tradition in the investigated period, serving as an important record of the standard sought and taught before Gomes's arrival and during his stay in Italy.

*Il Maestro di composizione*—published in Milan around 1836—is among the main documents available for researching Italian orchestral music in the first half of the 19th century. It was conceived with the primary justification of providing the conservatory with Italian documents. We refer to the Conservatorio Regio di Milano, whose first director would be the treatise's author, contributing to the institution with several treatises on singing, harmony, solfeggio, counterpoint, and composition.

Well-illustrated with examples from orchestral literature, mostly from the classical period, the author's main concern lies in balancing the parts to highlight the melody. There are various guidelines for reinforcing the melody in strings or winds, with particularities for high, intermediate, or low tessituras in the orchestra.

The melody of the vocal line, reinforced by wind instruments with upper octaves (and the same would happen if they were lower), gains the necessary strength to stand out above the deep, swift, and marked sounds of the quartet [strings], expressing the realistic situation of the actor<sup>3</sup> (ASIOLI, ca 1836: 54).

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2 To the trumpet section, which in the classical period was limited to two members, now two cornets were added, following a trend in French orchestral music explained by Berlioz's treatise and, more significantly, by the staging of French operas on Italian stages. Additionally, a horn quartet and a trombone section were formed (with the addition of a cimbasso: an ophicleide, bombardone, or tuba), a section that in the classical period was essentially composed of only two members.

3 In the original: “La melodia del Canto rinforzata dagl' istromenti da fiato com ottave superiori, (e lo stesso succederebbe se fossero inferiori) acquista quella forza che basta per campeggiare sopra i suoni gravi, veloci e marcati del quartetto, il quale esprime la cruda situazione dell' Attore”.



And a little further: "[...] The melodic part of the bass, not very distinct due to the weight overlaid on the harmony, is reinforced by the composer with various upper octaves, where, due to this, it captures the listener's attention"<sup>4</sup> (Ibid.: 72).

Regarding *Corso di Composizione musicale* by Reicha, the document was initially published in 1817 and translated from French to Italian by Luigi Felice Rossi in approximately 1839<sup>5</sup>. In the treatise, the orchestra is also recognized as highly effective in creating effects, and the timbre of the instruments used is analogized strongly to the human voice. Even the term melody in the orchestra is replaced by the term canto—although the orchestral ensemble is not accompanying singers—demonstrating a continuous concern for this melodrama technique. Like Asioli, Reicha also emphasizes careful balance of the parts with the main purpose of not suffocating the melody—providing guidelines for doubling [raddoppiare] the melody line with other instruments. These are procedures widely distributed in Gomes's writing, as when he states and exemplifies: "Here, the singing part is performed by half the mass, with the aim of making it more apparent"<sup>6</sup> (REICHA, ca. 1839: 240).

These explanations of treatment to the melody by the orchestra gain space in other contexts, for example, when presenting the maintenance of the melody in its various meanings, sometimes needing brightness emphasis or relief of low parts (when the melody is in the bass) or color changes (timbres), demanding different attitudes for each desired result. According to the author:

When the singing passage is in the bass, as in the following example, it is almost always avoided to duplicate with the upper part; however, if you want to make it shine more, you will almost always reinforce it by doubling it with the intermediate voices<sup>7</sup> (Ibid.: 241).

This concern in managing the melody is a procedure widely used by Gomes in his orchestrator career, especially in the early works of his Italian phase, such as in *Il Guarany* or *Salvator Rosa*. Throughout all of Gomes's production, we will also notice his care for melody grounded for various reasons: at certain moments, to reinforce intensity, in others, to enhance brilliance, and in others still, for experimenting with new timbres as seen in the treatises. Among the various examples in Gomes's orchestral writing for *Salvator Rosa*, there is also the first solo of the cello section in Allegro giusto. The instrument with strong correspondences to the baritone voice [voce di petto] is highlighted by bassoons and violas and, later, with the solo duplicated by the orchestra. There is no duplication of the

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4 In the original: "[...] La parte melodica del basso non abbastanza distinta a cagione dell' ammasso sovrastante d' armonia, dall' Autore vien rinforzata con diverse ottave superiori onde richiamare su di questa l' attenzione dell' uditore".

5 In the document, there is no specific date provided.

6 In the original: "Qui la parte cantante viene eseguita dalla metà della massa, allo scopo di renderla più appariscente. In quest' ultimo esempio la parte grave, eseguita da un solo Fagotto, sarebbe troppo debole, e vorrebbe essere rinforzata o da un Contrabasso o da un Trombone".

7 In the original: "Quando il tratto di canto è nel Basso, come nell' esempio seguente, si evita quasi sempre il raddoppiarlo colla parte superiore; ma se si vuole farlo brillare maggiormente, lo si rinforzerà colle parti intermedie".



melody at this moment, however, it is visibly highlighted. Further on, we will have in *Condor* a probable intention of Gomes in uniting timbres. There is no need to ensure the intelligibility of the melody, as the strings are already in *pp* dynamics and in a stable fabric, without rhythmic or harmonic movement.

Regarding Berlioz's *Grande Traité*, the *Gazzetta Musicale di Milano* witnessed the arrival of the didactic work, announcing its content on April 5, 1846<sup>8</sup>, and providing some clarifications on the importance of the document for that phase of Italian orchestration—still based on duplications of melodies. Detailed comments on each chapter of the treatise were made by the musicologist Luigi Ferdinando Casamorata, who, in criticizing the duplication of the melody by orchestral parts, emphasizes its justification in a time when singing did not yet have a well-established school or a well-defined art. With rare exceptions, this doubling procedure [raddoppiamenti] should be used, but with great caution:

Before the melody took on distinct forms, when the singing part was essentially nothing more than an indifferent part of the real harmony, the instruments that often accompanied resorted to doubling this voice, either in unison or an octave [...], but when the melody began to acquire a decisive physiognomy, when the art of singing proper emerged, there was a need to free the singer from the constraint of instruments that kept him strongly chained<sup>9</sup> (GMM, 1846, V, No. 14).

## 2 CONCLUSIONS

In exploring the Italian orchestral tradition within the context of Carlos Gomes's work, particularly in his opera *Salvator Rosa*, a fascinating narrative of absorption, adaptation, and transnational resonance emerges. The Brazilian composer, immersed in the musical atmosphere of 19th-century Milan, unveils his ability to assimilate the principles of the Italian tradition, extending beyond purely Italian treatises and incorporating them into his own musical language.

The Italian tradition, characterized by the emphasis on melody and the subordination of the orchestra to the voice, finds resonance in Gomes's compositions. His *Salvator Rosa*, in particular, reflects not only technical mastery but also a profound understanding of the Italian aesthetics of the time. The emphasis on equalizing orchestral parts to enhance the melody, as highlighted in the treatises of Asioli, Reicha, and Berlioz, resonates vividly in Gomes's orchestration.

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8 The date of this publication was provided by Ricordi and is disclosed in its catalog. The treatise was divided into seven installments and was published in the following order: 1846 (publication of installments 1 and 2) and 1847 (publication of installments 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7). Catalog available at: <http://www.ricordicompany.com/it/catalog/detail/14035>

9 In the original: “Prima che la melodia assumesse forme distinte, quando la parte cantante non era in sostanza che una indifferentemente delle parti reali dell' armonia, li strumenti che accompagnavano solevano spesso raddoppiare questa parte o all' unisono o all' ottava [...] quando però la melodia cominciò a prendere fisionomia decisa ed a sè, quando surse l' arte del canto propriamente detto, si senti il bisogno di liberare il cantante dall' impaccio degli strumenti che lo tenevano troppo a catena”.



Antônio Carlos Gomes had a solid career as a composer in 19th-century Italy. His formative years were marked by study, albeit in private classes, under the faculty of the Conservatorio Regio di Milano, leading to his proficiency examination and the attainment of the coveted diploma. Mastery of the Italian tradition was a fundamental, if not vital, ingredient for survival in the land of melodrama. The focus on this tradition must primarily consider the treatment of melody – the most exalted subject in the art of orchestration contained in the treatises adopted by the Milanese educational system during Gomes's time and the starting point for everything built upon that tradition.

This work concentrated solely on the platform of orchestral writing, presenting elements of Carlos Gomes's writing strongly aligned with the teachings of treatises that reflected the aspirations of that era. Gomes's orchestral writing went beyond the exaltation of melody, but examining this tradition means delving a little deeper into the context of the Brazilian musician in his early years on the peninsula, understanding some of the marks that would never leave his oeuvre.



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