FROM A COMEDY OF ERRORS TO TRAGEDY: THE CESSATION OF ITALIAN OPERA IN CAPE TOWN IN 1877

Frederick Hale
Extraordinary associate North-West University, Potchefstroom Campus
Cambridge University
fh243@cam.ac.uk

Van 'n komedie van flaters tot tragedie: Die beëindiging van die Italiaanse Opera in Kaapstad in 1877

Die geskiedenis van ernstige Italiaanse opera (*opera seria*) in Suid-Afrika is nog grootliks nie beskryf nie. Wat betref die periode voor Unie-wording, het enkele akademiese ondersoeke daaroor slegs uitgewys dat Europese opera-geselskappe enkele kort besoeke aan Kaapstad, Johannesburg, Durban, Port Elizabeth en enkele ander stede gebring het. Waarskynlik as gevolg van beperkte belangstelling was die kommersie"le resultate egter taamlik beperk. In die tweede helfte van die 1870's het die Italiaanse impresario Augusto Cagli ernstige opera vir drie opeenvolgende jare vanaf 1875-1877 aangebied, maar met al hoe minder sukses. Hierdie artikel bied getuienis en inligting waarom groter sukses daarmee ontwyk is, ten spyte van redelike belangstelling in hierdie kunsvorm. Dit word beredeneer dat 'n kombinasie van faktore soos bevolkingsgetalle, natuurlike oorsake soos die weer en vuur, asook wanbestuur deur 'n oorwerkte Cagli hierdie onderneming gekniehalter het.

Sleutelwoorde: Augusto Cagli, Italiaanse opera, Kaapstad, Royal Theatre, South African International Exhibition, Searelle Opera Company

The history of grand Italian opera (*opera seria*) in South Africa remains largely unwritten. With regard to the pre-Union period, the few scholarly investigations into this topic have revealed that European touring companies held brief seasons in Cape Town, Johannesburg, Durban, Port Elizabeth, and other cities. Probably owing to the lack of an adequate clientele, however, the commercial results were generally quite limited. In the latter half of the1870s the Italian *impresario* Augusto Cagli presented grand opera for three consecutive years with diminishing success from 1875 to 1877. This article presents evidence to show why success was elusive, despite considerable public interest in this art form. It is argued that a combination of factors, such as the size of the population, natural causes, and mismanagement on the part of the overstretched Cagli doomed his enterprise.

Key words: Augusto Cagli, Italian opera, Cape Town, Royal Theatre, South African International Exhibition, Searelle Opera Company

Introduction

European and particularly Italian grand opera had a chequered and sporadic history in the Colony of the Cape of Good Hope during the nineteenth century, despite its considerable extra-continental popularity in other parts of the world, such as many North American, Argentinian, and Australian cities. As other commentators have pointed out, occasionally touring companies called at Cape Town, Port Elizabeth, Kimberley, and elsewhere, sometimes conducting brief tours while *en route* to Australia or on their return voyages to the Northern Hemisphere. Furthermore, as the present writer has shown in the prequel to the present article, in 1875 and, to a lesser degree, the following year the Italian *impresario* Augusto Cagli brought companies from Italy to the Cape and enjoyed considerable success in attracting audiences, especially to the performances of such well-known operas as *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* and *Don Giovanni*. The addition of ballet numbers to the programme also increased the sale of tickets, as did the interest of Malay citizens of the Mother City. To some journalists, these performances suggested that culturally Cape Town, despite being approximately three weeks by steamship from Europe, was no longer a cultural backwater but beginning to come of age. However, at the end of the 1876 season sceptical local observers expressed pessimism about the future of grand opera in Cape Town.[1]

Certainly on the surface Cagli seemed to be a nearly ideal man to transplant Italian *opera seria* to the Cape of Good Hope. This native son of Italy had already gained an international reputation as an *impresario* beyond the borders of his homeland, which by the 1870s had a surplus of musical talent willing to further their careers by performing abroad. Various corners of the British Empire thus awaited their cultural conquest. In the 1860s and the first half of the 1870s Cagli had arranged successful opera seasons in Calcutta, and together with his compatriot Giovanni Pompei and later with W.S. Lyster he had done likewise in New Zealand and Australia. Cape Town could hardly have been more ideally situated for European touring companies that had to traverse the Indian Ocean.[2]

The promise remained only weakly fulfilled, however, and the fears expressed in 1876 proved to be well-founded. As a commercial venture, Cagli's 1877 season did

[1] Cagli's relatively successful seasons in Cape Town in 1875 and 1876 are analysed in Frederick Hale, Italian Grand Opera at the Cape of Good Hope: The 1875 and 1876 Cagli Seasons, *South African Journal of Cultural History* 29 (1), June 2015, pp. 58-73.

[2] T. Kaufman, Cagli, Augusto, *in* S. Sadie (ed.), *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera 1* (London, 1992), p. 678.

not meet his expectations or those of opera enthusiasts, and several years passed before further attempts were made to arrange a full season of this art form in the colony. In the present expository and analytical article I shall describe salient features of this undertaking, concentrating on certain innovations which yielded mixed results, and explain the main causes for the overall failure of the season. The overall lack of success in the Cagli seasons will then be contrasted with the unprecedented attainment which the Searelle Opera Company enjoyed when it emphasised comic opera a decade later. This juxtaposition goes far towards illuminating what appealed to the public during those times and what failed to attract audiences.

Internationally, the historiography of musical performance has long relied to a great extent on such contemporary sources as critical reviews in the press. That is certainly the case when one attempts to reconstruct operatic seasons in South Africa, especially in the decades before the constitution of the Union in 1910. Given the nature of the extant sources, research on opera in Cape Town during the nineteenth century necessarily rests heavily on contemporary journalistic accounts. Pertinent archival material is meagre in the extreme, and apart from the Anglophone daily press, very little about opera then appeared in print. However intensely historians might long for additional significant sources, in many cases they do not appear to exist. The city's Dutch-language newspapers tended to neglect musical culture in the Cape during the nineteenth century. On the other hand, the English-medium newspapers of Cape Town yield a rich trove of relevant material (much of it refracted, to be sure, through the prisms of a small number of local music critics), and its content unambiguously reveals several of the factors which doomed Cagli's 1877 season. Moreover, a close reading of detailed reviews in the press reveals that their authors had an appreciable degree of musical sophistication.

Very little of scholarly merit has been published about Cagli's initially successful seasons in Cape Town, and no attempt has yet been made to diagnose why grand opera failed to take root there at that time. When one turns to Jacques P. Malan's broadly defined but often unreliable *South African Music Encyclopedia*, one finds no attempt to tackle this question. The shallowness of his research is suggested by the fact that he did not even reproduce Cagli's surname correctly; it became "Calli" under Malan's pen, a modification which fairly closely echoes the Italian pronunciation of that name.[3] P.W. Laidler shed no light on the subject in his very sketchy *The Annals of the Cape*

[3] J.P. Malan, Touring Theatre Companies and Concert Artists, *in* J.P. Malan (ed.), *South African Music Encyclopedia IV* (Cape Town, 1986), p. 359.

Stage, where he touched on the initial efforts by Cagli (whom he called "Carli") but did not even succeed in correctly stating when the seasons were or the names of the principal singers.[4] A quarter-century later, Olga Racster relied heavily on Laidler's brief account (and, in doing so, naïvely reproduced several of his mistakes) in her *Curtain Up! The Story of Cape Theatre*.[5] The lack of reliable literature is further proof that the failure of serious grand opera to take root in nineteenth-century Cape Town is a story remaining to be told. The present article is part of a broader project intended to fill much of that *lacuna*.

A Satiated Entertainment Market

One of the difficulties lay in the fact that too many forms of entertainment were competing for the attention of the local citizenry. According to the census of the Colony of the Cape of Good Hope enumerated in March 1875, Cape Town had a population of 33,239, while its suburbs added 12,001 souls for a total local population of 45,240.[6] Thousands of other potential theatre-goers resided further from the centre of the city but could reach it by train. Nevertheless, from a strictly demographic perspective the market was by no means large.

Appealing to this population, the front pages of the newspapers constantly announced a wealth of musical, dramatic, and circus performances at the Royal Theatre, the Mutual Hall, and other venues. This was long before a major tourist industry developed in Cape Town to attract visitors from afar, and although the extension of the local railway network made it relatively easy for people in communities nearby to travel into the city, the number of potential customers was hardly sufficient to support what in 1877 seemed to some observers to be a virtual cornucopia of amusements. A columnist who used the pseudonym "The Man about Town" described the predicament graphically in February of that year as "a case of 'dog eat dog' with the managers, none of whom can make out how the deuce the other ones can manage to make a living."[7]

Having learned the previous year that performances of Italian *opera seria* by themselves could not be counted upon to attract large audiences indefinitely, Cagli adopted a limited strategy of diversification. Near the end of January, he announced

4 P.W. Laidler, *The Annals of the Cape Stage* (Edinburgh, 1926), p. 89.
5 O. Racster, *Curtain Up! The Story of Cape Theatre* (Cape Town, 1951), p. 68.
6 *Results of a Census of the Colony of the Cape of Good Hope I, Taken on the Night of Sunday, the 7th March, 1875* (Cape Town, 1877), p. 9.
7 The Man about Town, Table Mountain Echoes, *The Standard and Mail*, 1877-02-10, p. 3.

in the press that when his operatic season resumed the following evening with *Norma*, those in attendance would also hear "Old Pete", who was billed as "The Eccentric Nigger Solo Banjoist, from Louisiana" and a man who would delight them with humorous "character representations".[8] This gimmick failed to impress local critics. It must have seemed utterly incongruous to insert that comedy routine into the context of Bellini's well-known *bel canto* tragedy about infanticide. The reviewer in *The Cape Argus* noted the next day that "Old Pete" had met with "a very cordial reception" but thought it regrettable that the African-American musician had performed an *entr'acte* rather than entertaining the audience after the curtain had fallen on *Norma*.[9] His counterpart at *The Standard and Mail* was less merciful. He acknowledged that "Old Pete" was a gifted musician but judged the placement of that banjo strummer on the programme as "an innovation scarcely to be tolerated" and "injudicious on the part of the management".[10]

A vastly more impressive form of diversity was a concert of sacred music which members of the troupe performed on the last Friday evening in March in the Good Hope Gardens. This, one reviewer believed, was "in every respect a great success" and had drawn an audience of nearly a thousand. He especially lauded Ester Neri's rendition of "Ave Maria" and Signor Greco's "noble voice" in doing "Stabat Mater". His critical verdict was that "altogether this was one of the best concerts of sacred music ever given at Cape Town."[11]

Cagli's Distracting Simultaneous Exhibition

It is also arguable that Cagli himself was spreading his efforts too thinly in Cape Town. In the wake of the enormously successful 1851 Great Exhibition with its magnificent Crystal Palace in Hyde Park, London, similar phenomena, some of them decidedly international in scope, proliferated in Europe and North America during the next two decades. In May 1876 the Cape Town press announced that Cagli had just proposed to erect a "crystal palace" in the city, more specifically in the gardens of the Good Hope Masonic Lodge in the centre of the city. It would feature "produce and goods from all parts of the world". But the veteran *impresario* was not abandoning his musical enterprises; readers were informed that the popular Italian would hold "concerts and other entertainments" in the building in the evenings. Cagli would return to Europe

8 Advertisement, Grand Opening Night of The Opera in the Gardens, Goede Hoop Lodge, *The Cape Argus*, 1877-01-30, p. 1.
9 The Opera, *The Cape Argus*, 1877-02-01, p. 2.
10 Italian Opera, *The Standard and Mail*, 1877-02-03, p. 2.
11 Our Portfolio, *The Standard and Mail*, 1877-04-03, p. 3.

in June, immediately after the close of his second season in Cape Town, to make arrangements for his "international exhibition" and to recruit a new opera company to perform in the Mother City.[12] As will be seen shortly, the exhibition was fraught with problems and, at least for Cagli, proved to be a financial disaster. It is impossible to ignore the possibility that preoccupation with this matter contributed indirectly to the eventual failure of the 1877 opera season.

At any rate, Cagli returned soon to Cape Town and began to construct his exhibition building at his chosen site. Although his initial vision was to open it at the beginning of January 1877, this proved impractical. It was announced in the first week of that month that the structure was "rapidly rising" and that Cagli and "the few men whom he has interested in the plan" had elected to postpone the launch of the exhibition until mid-March.[13] Even that prognostication proved overly optimistic. Despite the delays, the public met this major project with both enthusiasm and derision. The editor of *The Standard and Mail* supported it, even though he admitted that "it was not exactly flattering for our pride that a foreign *impressario* [*sic*] had hit upon, and actually carried out, a plan in favour of the Colony which the Cape people would hardly have thought of when left to themselves, and which having once thought of, they would have discussed for ages before putting their shoulders to the wheel."[14]

The exhibition suffered setbacks even before it began. On Sunday morning, 4 February, foolhardy vandals loosened the supports that temporarily held the iron columns of the unfinished building in place. Had a strong wind been blowing, speculated one journalist, it was probable that the structure would have collapsed with loss of life to pedestrians.[15] When a second attempt was made between 2 and 3 a.m. the following night, the agitated Cagli immediately offered in the press a reward of £100 for information leading to the arrest and conviction of the offenders.[16]

A Series of Setbacks

The harried *impresario* pressed ahead with the opening of the opera season while devoting much of his attention to preparations for what was billed as the "South African International Exhibition". However, instead of using the Royal Theatre, of which he was the lessee, Cagli elected to stage operas *al fresco* in the garden where his exhibition hall was being erected. The season thus began with Verdi's *Il Trovatore*,

12 Occasional Notes, *The Cape Argus*, 1876-05-23, p. 2.
13 The Exhibition, *The Standard and Mail*, 1877-01-06, p. 2.
14 The Exhibition, *The Standard and Mail*, 1877-02-01, p. 2.
15 Occasional Notes, *The Cape Argus*, 1877-02-06, p. 2.
16 Advertisement, *The Cape Argus*, 1877-02-06, p. 1.

followed by Bellini's *La Sonnambula* on an enlarged stage with new scenery painted exclusively for these works. Tickets for the outdoor seating cost three shillings.[17] These performances were well received, as was a repeat of *La Sonnambula* the following week. The latter reportedly attracted a large and enthusiastic audience. Adding variety but also musical incongruity to the evening, the renowned brass band of the 24th Regiment performed between acts of *La Sonnambula*.[18] Continuing his efforts to include a broader pallette of entertainment to the *al fresco* evenings, Cagli arranged a "grand concert" on 18 January, at which Maggi's wife sang in English.[19]

Cagli's innovative scheme, however, soon fell on hard times, defeated by meteorological conditions which proved incompatible with his art form of choice. The performance of Donizetti's *Lucrezia Borgia* on 15 January was especially problematical. As reported in *The Standard and Mail*, a large audience was present, but so was "a strong south-easter". Under very trying circumstances, *prima donna* Signora Gamboa Zenoni, who had been battling a cold, struggled to sing her role properly. One critic generously allowed that when she had fully recovered and could be heard in a "suitable building" she could have "unprecedented success". However, all the other singers' "best efforts were continually rendered non-effective by the boisterous prior claims of Æolus." The same writer was even more critical of the staging: "The less we say about the scenery and accessories the better."[20]

Therefore, it may not have surprised many readers that on 18 January Cagli announced that he had suspended the *al fresco* performances in the Good Hope Gardens for fifteen days. In the interim, an enclosure would be built to protect both the performers and the public from the elements. The unpredictable south-easters, he complained, interrupted the entertainment and had proven disadvantageous for all concerned.[21] Cagli inflated the description of his plan in a large, front-page advertisement. Before the end of the month, he promised on 18 January, the Good Hope Gardens would have an "Opera House". Reminding readers that he was investing a considerable sum of money in that project, he stated that he was offering blocs of eighty tickets for £10.[22]

Yet another disaster struck in late April. Early in the morning of 25 April a fire broke out in Cagli's impromptu theatre in the gardens. Buckets of water and a "small engine" proved no match for the flames, which soon consumed the combustible materials that had been used in the construction of the building. Cagli's covered

17 Advertisement, *The Standard and Mail*, 1877-01-01, p. 1.
18 Our Portfolio, *The Standard and Mail*, 1877-01-09, p. 3.
19 Advertisement, *The Standard and Mail*, 1877-01-16, p. 1.
20 Italian Opera, *The Standard and Mail*, 1877-01-18, p. 2.
21 Occasional Notes, *The Cape Argus*, 1877-01-18, p. 2.
22 Advertisement, The Opera in the Gardens, *The Cape Argus*, 1877-01-18, p. 1.

auditorium was thus reduced to "a heap of charred cinders", and its stage, along with the company's scenery and accessories, were also lost. Setrangi's collection of wardrobes for the company, for which he had reportedly paid over £300, was similarly destroyed. Several of the singers also lost jewellery, collars, belts, and other belongings.[23]

The Briefly Abiding Remnant of the Troupe

Some members of the troupe remained in Cape Town after the disappointing season had fizzled out, although it is not known precisely how many did or how long they stayed. Enrico Mazzi, for example, elected to put his talent to use locally. On 7 June 1877 Cagli's pianist and music director placed an advertisement in *The Standard and Mail* announcing his availability for "a few hours to devote Finishing Lessons on the Pianoforte and to instruction in Singing" at 35 Burg Street.[24] Cesar Nulli, who had advertised his availability to give lessons in singing, piano, and harmony at 34 Strand Street as early as November 1876,[25] became the director of the local Choral Society, and in April 1877, as the final season approached its close, he advertised from 49 Plein Street that he was "prepared to give lessons at "moderate" rates and could arrange to visit students either in Cape Town or its environs.[26] The immensely popular Ester Neri also spent time in the city after the season coaching emerging vocalists. She enjoyed some measure of success in this undertaking. When some of her disciples gave a concert at the Mutual Hall in mid-1877, a critic at *The Cape Times* observed that there was "not a seat unoccupied" and that "the Signora knew very well she was going to astonish the public with the talent which Cape Town possesses." Neri's students, he thought, should "congratulate her on the excellent music they can introduce into our drawing-rooms".[27] These two erstwhile members of Cagli's troupe sometimes co-ordinated their efforts and those of their charges. In August, for example, they drew a large audience to the Mutual Hall despite "most unfavourable" weather. The performances on that evening prompted one critic to insist, "We consider Signora Neri and Signor Nulli's educational work as of more value than even Mr. John Paterson's," a reference to the endeavours of a Scottish immigrant politician and teacher in the Cape.[28]

23 Fire at the Gardens, *The Cape Argus*, 1877-04-26, p. 2.
24 Advertisement, Signor Enrico Mazzi, *The Standard and Mail*, 1877-06-07, p. 1.
25 Advertisement, *The Cape Argus*, 1876-11-18, p. 1.
26 Music advertisement, *The Cape Times*, 1877-04-18, p. 1.
27 Local and General, *The Cape Times*, 1877-06-08, p. 3.
28 Local and General, *The Cape Times*, 1877-08-10, p. 3.

On the other hand, some members of Cagli's troupe returned to Europe. On 3 July 1877, for instance, the editor of *The Standard and Mail* noted with regret that Signora Gamboa Zenoni, and Signor Greco were about to sail away on the *Edinburgh Castle*. He especially lamented the departure of Greco, who, he recalled, had been in Cape Town since originally appearing with Cagli's entourage in 1875 and thus become well known to music lovers in the city. The editor believed the departure of these highly talented vocalists did not bode well for the future of Italian opera in the colony. People never appreciate anything as much as when they are on the verge of losing it, he generalised, and the departure of these two was a painful reminder that support for their particular art form was insufficient in Cape Town to induce them to stay. Consequently, "we look forward somewhat ruefully to the future prospects of Italian Opera in this part of the world, albeit Signor Setragni promises to bring out a new company shortly." Regardless whether that commitment was fulfilled, he feared that "we are not likely for a long time to welcome to these shores two more accomplished vocalists than Greco and Zenoni."[29] But it failed to materialise in the short term. Readers of the local press learned in mid-December that whatever commitment Setragni had made (or seemed to have made) for 1878, it would not be fulfilled. *The Cape Argus* brought the bad tidings in a single blunt sentence: "We have heard that it is not Signor Setragni's intention to return to Cape Town with an opera troupe, as originally intended."[30] Whether he had misgivings about the commercial viability of a fourth season or other difficulties impeded him is unknown. At any rate, Italian opera became a *rara avis* in the flock of the city's entertainment for nearly two decades.

Debating Cagli's Legacy at the Cape

How significant in the musical history of South Africa were the tours which this peripatetic impresario arranged in Cape Town during the latter half of the 1870s? One could quibble endlessly about the criteria by which their importance should be judged. At any rate, as Cagli was completing his chequered involvement in artistic and other public life of the Cape, defenders and detractors debated his place in its cultural life. In itself, the short-lived war of words did not shed a great deal of light on regional cultural history, but the acerbic exchange nevertheless merits brief consideration for what it reveals about the mentality of certain individuals' response to this importation of Italian art.

[29] Our Portfolio, *The Standard and Mail*, 1877-07-03, p. 3.
[30] Local and District News, *The Cape Argus*, 1877-12-15, p. 4.

In November 1877 an editor of *The Cape Argus* acknowledged that Cagli's behavior had prevented him from attracting enough of the public to sustain an enduring operatic tradition in Cape Town. Nevertheless, he asserted that "even his bitterest opponents" had to concede that Cagli had "raised the standard of musical taste in Cape Town, and we may say in the colony". How this broad generalisation could be empirically demonstrated remains a mystery, and the editor in question did not seek to do so. Rather, he commented on what were spin-offs from Cagli's troupe, namely the presence of Neri, Maggi, and Nulli as resident music teachers who were "giving their numerous pupils in and about Cape Town the benefit of the best Italian art in music". He cited a recent concert given by the city's Choral Society at which Nulli had conducted as evidence that "many performers" were active locally and thought that "each of them will carry into his or her own circle the lessons learnt from a competent master."[31]

Measured though it may seem in retrospect, the acknowledgment published in the *Argus* elicited a critical response from at least one disgruntled reader who, oddly enough, sent his complaint to the rival *Standard and Mail*. This anonymous dissenter, who used the pseudonym "Eusebius", launched his protest by declaring, "Praising people for what they never intended doing is one of the most amiable characteristics of the Cape Press." Misquoting the encomium in the *Argus*, Eusebius did not disagree that Cagli had "raised the standard of musical taste in the colony". What disgusted him was the implication that nineteenth-century opera represented "the best Italian art in music". No, Eusebius insisted, the summit in Italy's music "(as well as in poetry, sculpture, and painting)" had been attained earlier (presumably referring to the Renaissance and Baroque eras, though he did not explicitly mention either of them), and since "about A.D. 1750" Italian culture had been waning, long "outshone by French and German art". The *Argus* editor's praise, he thought, revealed a failure to grasp this ostensible decline. Eusebius concluded his dissent by quoting Thomas Gray's 1742 "Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College": "Where ignorance is bliss, it's folly to be wise."[32]

Writing less than three days later, an irritated defender of recent Italian opera vented his objections. Calling himself "A Christy Minstrel", this apparent devotee of the nineteenth-century musical theatre declared that "Eusebius" himself was the ignorant one. Marshalling an argument no more logical than that of his opponent, he did not wonder whether Eusebius had ever heard of such acclaimed opera composers as Gaetano Donizetti, Vincenzo Bellini, Luigi Cherubini, Niccolò

[31] Occasional Notes", *The Cape Argus*, 1877-11-17, p. 2.

[32] Eusebius (unspecified provenance) to the Editor, *The Standard and Mail*, 1877-11-19, in *The Standard and Mail*, 1877-11-20, p. 4.

Antonio Zingarelli, Gioachino Rossini, and Giuseppe Verdi, all of whom came into international prominence after 1800. But he truncated his case by failing to weigh their artistic achievements against those of pre-1750 Italian artists. Moreover, A Christy Minstrel attempted to caricature his foe's argument by suggesting that the denizens of supposedly superior French and German art Eusebius had in mind were Jacques Offenbach, Johann Strauss, Joseph Gungl, Kéler Béla, "and others of the same school". Of course, this coterie of French, Austrian, Hungarian, and Slovak composers were not "of the same school", and to discerning readers A Christy Minstrel undermined his credibility by misspelling some of the names and giving incorrect biographical data for approximately half of the Italian opera composers whom he cited. His cornucopia of flaws notwithstanding, this ardent Capetonian defender of nineteenth-century Italian opera sought to counter Eusebius' quoting of Gray by misquoting Alexander Pope's 1709 "An Essay on Criticism": "A little knowledge [*sic*] is a dangerous thing."[33]

The exchange failed to rise to a higher altitude of either logic or civility when Eusebius submitted his rejoinder to *The Standard and Mail*. Resorting to unrelenting sarcasm, he began by asking, "how shall I express my contrition; how shall I hide my confusion, my shame?" Feigning remorse, Eusebius professed that if he had known that there was in Cape Town someone with "such astounding biographical knowledge, he "would never have penned a line" criticising the Italian cultural achievements of recent decades which resident erstwhile members of the Cagli company were imparting.[34]

Juxtaposed with Success: The 1887 Searelle Comic Opera Season

One can further illuminate the failure of Italian opera to take root at the Cape in the 1870s by juxtaposing Cagli's limited success with the fulsomely profitable season which the English-Australian *impresario* and composer William Luscombe Searelle arranged in Cape Town in 1887. On 9 June it was announced in the local press that "Searelle's English and Comic Opera Company" had just arrived from Australia and that its season would open at the Theatre Royal four days later, with William Vincent Wallace's *Maritana* to be presented on the first evening.[35] The "large and enthusiastic audience" who watched that Irishman's work that had enjoyed considerable popularity in the United Kingdom since its premiere in 1845 augured well for the season.[36]

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33 A Christy Minstrel (unspecified provenance) to the Editor, *The Standard and Mail*, undated, in *The Standard and Mail*, 1877-11-24, p. 4.

34 Eusebius (unspecified provenance) to the Editor, *The Standard and Mail*, 1877-11-26, in *The Standard and Mail*, 1877-11-29, p. 4.

35 Advertisement, Theatre Royal, *The Cape Argus*, 1887-06-09, p. 2.

36 Theatre Royal, *The Cape Argus*, 1887-06-14, p. 3.

When it finally concluded on 19 December 1887, there had been no fewer than 162 performances in a repertoire including *inter alia* Offenbach's *Grand Duchess* and *La Perichole*, Searelle's own *Isidora and Babodil*, Balfe's *Bohemian Girl*, Lecocq's *Giroflé Girofla* and *La Fille du Madame Angot*. As a more serious work of grand opera Searelle included *Il Trovatore*. The final evening was safely devoted to Gilbert and Sullivan in a double-header which included both *H.M.S. Pinafore* and *The Mikado*. With such popular fare on the menu, the theatre was reportedly "crammed to suffocation".[37]

The great appeal which Searelle's programme enjoyed harmonised well with trends in public taste elsewhere in the English-speaking world. The popularity of Gilbert and Sullivan's comic operas, many of them quintessentially British, generally soared after they resumed collaboration in 1875, and such works as *The Sorcerer* (1877), *H.M.S. Pinafore* (1878), *The Pirates of Penzance* (1879), *Patience* (1880), *Iolanthe* (1882), and, not least, *The Mikado* (1885) filled the Savoy Theatre under the leadership of Richard D'Oyly Carte during this period. Performances of their works also drew large audiences in the United States of America, Canada, Australia, and other countries. Searelle could not have been unaware of that. He prudently emulated Carte to a considerable degree but also included a small dose of grand operas, several French operettas, and other forms of music in his varied programmes. For a time, it was clearly a recipe for financial success.

To be sure, Searelle enjoyed a noteworthy demographic advantage over Cagli. It is impossible to ascertain precisely what the population of Cape Town and its suburbs was in 1887. There were comprehensive censuses of the colony in 1875 and 1891, but none in the 1880s. At any rate, between the two years of enumeration the official population of Cape Town itself rose from 33,239 to 51,251, a striking increase of more than 54 per cent.[38] Its suburbs had also grown during the 1880s, although the magnitude of their expansion is not known. In any case, at least on the surface this is a significantly larger population which an *impresario* could attempt to attract to musical entertainment. However, it is proposed that the greater commercial success which the Searelle performances enjoyed had more to do with the *kind* of entertainment they provided. In late Victorian Britain, as in France and certain other continental European countries, comic opera had reached an unprecedented level of popularity. Outside Europe, the works of Offenbach, Gilbert and Sullivan, and other composers of light opera were enjoying great success in many cities of the United

[37] Searelle Opera Company, *The Cape Argus*, 1887-12-19, p. 2.

[38] *Results of a Census of the Colony of the Cape of Good Hope, as on the Night of Sunday, the 5th April, 1891* (Cape Town, 1892), p. 16.

States of America, Canada, Argentina, Australia, and other countries. By offering a heavy dose of it, chiefly in English, coupled with occasional grand opera and other forms of music, Searelle catered to a broader spectrum of popular taste than had Cagli with his emphasis on Italian *opera seria*.

Evaluated from a much later historical perspective, it seems virtually inevitable to conclude that the performances Cagli arranged between 1875 and 1877 did *not* make a particularly noteworthy, lasting impact on public music in the Cape. One can hardly say that his endeavours established a beachhead for grand opera at the southern tip of Africa. When the next highly publicised season of Italian operatic performances were staged in Cape Town–nearly two decades later–some critics recalled Cagli's efforts as a precedent, but otherwise no link between these chronologically distinct endeavours can be demonstrated. For that matter, no more than the operas produced by Cagli did the latter, arranged by the Italian immigrant Arturo Bonamici, launch a sustained tradition of *opera seria* in Cape Town. That development had to wait until well into the twentieth century.

Conclusion

Harking back to a pivotal issue formulated at the beginning of this article, why was the 1877 season *un fiasco totale* that failed to advance opera as a fixture in the cultural life of the city while other forms of entertainment thrived? The demographic and journalistic evidence adduced, though necessarily limited because of the paucity of reliable sources, suggests that two answers lie in the small size of the population and the wealth of popular entertainment to serve its perceived needs. By the 1870s theatres of various kinds were attracting sufficiently large audiences to their performances to sustain them. The implied dire prediction made by "The Man about Town" in February 1877 proved correct and, one must believe, because of the surplus to which he had called attention. *Opera seria* is not inherently an elitist art form; since the seventeenth century it had enjoyed wide appeal in the cities of Europe and other parts of the world, and in both Sydney and Melbourne long seasons of it, though in some cases mixed with lighter fare, had proven successful. However, among English-speaking people operetta was then in vogue, as the packed houses that saw the works of Gilbert and Sullivan's works were making clear, not only in London but in many other cities on intercontinental basis. Public taste is notoriously fickle and unstable in the world of music, and while proven crowd-pleasers like *The Marriage of Figaro* were perennially popular, many other works could not be counted on to fill theatres in a small market like Cape Town. That lesson should have been learnt in 1876, but apparently it was not. At that time an editor of *The Cape Times and Daily Advertiser* had offered his

trenchant analysis. "The fact is that the popular taste cannot be satisfied with the Opera alone, nor even with Opera and ballet," he reasoned during that year's only partly successful season. As a rule, people preferred to see dramas in their own language which appealed "directly to their own feelings". This sceptical observer conceded that "the exquisite pleasure experienced by educated persons in hearing good Opera music is not realized by everyone; indeed, in so mixed up a community as ours any genuine appreciation of such music must belong to a small minority."[39] The extent to which meteorological challenges and the shortcomings in Cagli's management contributed to the failure is very difficult to assess. It seems more plausible that in the still culturally immature environment of Cape Town, where the flourishing of formal musical education lay in the future, *opera seria* was not yet a form that could be sustained in lengthy seasons.

[39] Untitled editorial, *The Cape Times and Daily Advertiser*, 1876-04-29, p. 2.