

ITALIAN GRAND OPERA AT THE CAPE OF GOOD HOPE: THE 1875 AND 1876 CAGLI SEASONS

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Italiaanse “Grand Opera” aan die Kaap die Goeie Hoop: Die 1875 en 1876 Cagli Seisoene

Die geskiedenis van die Italiaanse “Grand opera” (*opera seria*) is steeds ’n besonder onontginde onderwerp in die kulturele historiografie van Suid-Afrika. Die artikel is geskryf met die doel om een van etlike leemtes te vul, naamlik ’n kritiese terugkyk na die eerste twee jaar van ’n ambisieuse onderneming deur ’n Italiaanse *impresario* en entrepreneur van Kaapstad, byname Augusto Cagli. Sy doelwit was om ’n “Grand opera”-seisoen in die Moederstad te reël. Die studie het uitgewys dat aanvanklike vertonings, geskoei op die werke van Verdi, Donizetti, Rossini en ander bekende komponiste, groot gehore getrek het en entoesiastiese resensies tot gevolg gehad het. Voor die afloop van die eerste seisoen het bywoning begin afgeneem. Die gebrek aan konsekwente openbare steun is ook gedurende die 1876-seisoen waargeneem. Die byvoeging van ballet as deel van die vertonings het slegs as ’n tydelike trekpleister gedien. Dit blyk dat Kaapstad in die jare onder bespreking ’n gebrek gehad het aan teatergangers met voldoende musikale gesofistikeerdheid. Die besonder lang tye van ernstige opera was dus moeilik om suksesvol te onderhou. Hierdie insigte is ook in harmonie met die eertydse joernalistieke kommentaar.

Slutelwoorde: Augusto Cagli, Italiaanse opera, Kaapstad, Royal Theatre

The history of Italian grand opera (*opera seria*) remains a woefully underexplored topic in the cultural historiography of South Africa. The present article is intended to fill one of the many gaps by exploring the first two years of an ambitious undertaking by an Italian *impresario* and entrepreneur in Cape Town, Augusto Cagli, to arrange operatic seasons in the Mother City. It is demonstrated that initially the performances of works by Verdi, Donizetti, Rossini, and other renowned composers drew large audiences and received enthusiastic reviews from local critics. Before the end of the first season, however, attendance dwindled, and this lack of consistent public support continued in 1876. Adding ballet to the performances proved to be only a temporary nostrum. It is suggested, in accordance with contemporary journalistic commentary, that Cape Town at that time lacked a sufficiently large base of potential theatre-goers with sufficient musical sophistication and specific interest to sustain lengthy seasons of serious opera.

Key words: Augusto Cagli, Cape Town, Italian opera, Royal Theatre

Introduction

The importance of numerous genres of music in the cultural history of South Africa has long been recognised. Dozens of theses have been written about the role of hymnody, folk music, concert halls, popular music, and related topics in various cities. Periodicals such as the *South African Journal of Cultural History* have, albeit infrequently, carried articles about these and other themes. In recent years, moreover, the *Journal of the Musical Arts in Africa* has served as a useful tool for the extension of the scholarly frontier. Less well explored in terms of scholarly investigation, however, has been the development of grand opera in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.¹ When one turns to Jacques P. Malan's *Suid-Afrikaanse Musiek Ensiklopedie*, which, despite its unreliability, has proven useful since its completion in 1986, one finds numerous articles about such relevant matters as performances by touring operatic companies. Their superficiality, however, underscores the need for intensive and detailed research.

The present article sheds light on an important early milestone on the road to the development of grand opera in South Africa by examining important aspects of what contemporary observers regarded as the first two seasons of Italian opera in the region, namely those arranged in Cape Town by the *impresario* Augusto Cagli in 1875 and 1876. The questions to be explored are how did these initial efforts to establish fairly lengthy opera seasons in Cape Town begin in an already rather crowded entertainment market, what kinds of difficulties did they confront in their early phase, what size audiences did they attract, and how did commentators view their degree of artistic and commercial success? At the time, they were perceived locally as generally successful and certainly as seminal events in the cultural history of the Cape Colony, although the second of the two seasons was noted to be fraught with difficulties. By contrast, a season launched in early 1877 proved to be nearly *un fiasco totale*, and for complex reasons whose explanation lies outside the scope of the present article it brought the seemingly auspicious beginnings of Italian opera in the Cape Colony to a screeching halt for approximately a decade. That broad subject will be considered in a separate study. The present article explores how two fairly long opera seasons could attract large audiences comprising both Europeans and Malay-descended people to some of its performances (while others played to nearly empty houses) in a city previously graced only by short visits by touring companies. Also analysed are factors which, at least in the eyes of local

¹ Among recently published investigations are Frederick Hale, "The Quinlan Opera Company in Cape Town, 1912-3", *Quarterly Bulletin of the National Library of South Africa*, LXVI, no. 2 (April to June 2013), pp. 73-83; Frederick Hale, "The First Scholarly South African Interpretation of Wagner? Ramsden Balmforth's Fabian Analysis of the *Ring* and *Parsifal*", *Journal of the Musical Arts in Africa*, X, no. 1 (2013), pp. 53-69; and Frederick Hale, "Ascending to New Operatic Heights in South Africa: The Royal Italian Opera Company in Cape Town, 1895", *Quarterly Bulletin of the National Library of South Africa*, LXVIII, no. 1 (June 2014), pp. 69-81.

observers, limited the attendance during the same company's second tour. Particular emphasis in the present article is placed on how critics who reviewed the performances in the local press defined them and the public reception thereof as indicators that the Colony of the Cape of Good Hope was reaching a commendable degree of cultural maturity hitherto found only in Europe and the United States of America.

Given the general dearth of pertinent archivalia, research on nineteenth-century opera in the Cape has of necessity long relied to a great extent on journalistic sources. The Cagli tours are no exception, but that is not a cause for despair. By the fourth quarter of the century the English-medium newspapers in Cape Town had become a rich trove; they offered quite extensive and, at times, moderately sophisticated coverage of local musical events. This segment of the local press gave the Cagli tours extensive, relatively sophisticated, and generally sympathetic coverage. One can glean much about the Cagli performances from, for example, *The Standard and Mail*, *The Cape Argus*, *The Cape Times and Daily Advertiser*, and *The Capetown Daily News and General Advertiser*. On the other hand, to search the Dutch-medium press of the city is to fish in a dry lake. Otherwise, contemporary documentation is virtually nil. Accordingly, research on the present topic is necessarily based largely on journalistic sources which, to be sure, are rich and provide a wealth of insights into aspects of the matter.

In the existing historiography one finds very little of merit about the Cagli seasons in South Africa. No scholarly study of this topic is known to have appeared. The little that has been published is riddled with errors. P.W. Laidler attempted to describe them briefly in his sketchy *The Annals of the Cape Stage*, but nearly everything he wrote about Cagli (whom he called "Signor Carli"), his troupe, the dates of the seasons, and the composers whose works were performed is mistaken. Because of a lack of annotation, Laidler left few clues about his sources, although he vaguely cited the *Cape Times* in his bibliography.² A quarter-century later, the erstwhile drama critic of that newspaper, Olga Racster (who had used the pseudonym "Treble Violl"), completed her popular history, *Curtain Up! The Story of Cape Theatre*, in which she irresponsibly relied heavily on Laidler for both facts and phraseology without acknowledging her indebtedness to him. Racster naïvely reproduced his mistakes *verbatim*, even referring to "Carli".³ Jacques P. Malan included Cagli's troupe in his article "Touring Theatre Companies and Concert Artists" in his *South African Music Encyclopedia*. However, his comment about Cape Town in this regard is limited to a sentence in which he declares that "Calli" arranged a season there in 1876. Malan

² P.W. Laidler, *The Annals of the Cape Stage* (Edinburgh: William Bryce, 1926), p. 89.

³ Olga Racster, *Curtain Up! The Story of Cape Theatre* (Cape Town and Johannesburg: Juta and Co., Limited, 1951), p. 68.

evinced no awareness that there were also seasons in 1875 and 1877, and he provided no further information about Cagli's involvement in the Mother City.⁴

The Advent of a Globetrotting *Impresario*

Cagli had accrued fairly extensive intercontinental experience as an impresario before attempting to transplant Italian opera to the Cape of Good Hope. The surplus of talent in his native land rendered it relatively easy to find gifted performers eager either to launch or continue careers by acquiring experience abroad. The British Empire offered several venues for his indefatigable ambitions to profit from cultural transmission. During the latter half of the 1860s and the early 1870s he arranged opera seasons in Calcutta, and in tandem first with Giovanni Pompei and subsequently with W.S. Lyster Cagli expanded his horizon still further to the east and south, namely the colonies of Australia and New Zealand. These ventures in the Southern Hemisphere almost immediately preceded his initial undertaking in Cape Town.⁵

A word about the size of his prospective audiences is in order. According to the census of the Colony of the Cape of Good Hope 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 To be sure, 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.

It was, however, nearly satiated with possibilities for entertainment, at least when one considers the number of people in and near Cape Town. Appealing to the 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 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 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

⁴ Jacques P. Malan, "Touring Theatre Companies and Concert Artists", in Jacques P. Malan (ed.), *South African Music Encyclopedia*, volume 4 (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 359.

⁵ Tom Kaufman, "Cagli, Augusto", in Stanley Sadie (ed.), *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera*, volume 1 (London: Macmillan Press Limited, 1992), p. 678.

⁶ *Results of a Census of the Colony of the Cape of Good Hope, Taken on the Night of Sunday, the 7th March, 1875* (Cape Town: Saul Solomon and Co., Printers, 1877),

⁷ The Man about Town, "Table Mountain Echoes", *The Standard and Mail*, 10 February 1877, p. 3.

The milestone initial season was conceived as a by-product of Cagli's endeavours in Australia. On a return voyage to Europe, the steamer on which he was sailing, the *St. Osyth*, called briefly at Cape Town near the end of February 1875. As reported in the press, the ambitious *impresario* "was so much struck with the inducements offered to an improvisator to bring Italian Opera before the public of South Africa, that we are informed he contemplates introducing an Italian Opera Company here at an early date". To attain that goal, Cagli engaged a recent immigrant, A.B. Lyster, to handle arrangements in his absence.⁸

Apparently planning proceeded smoothly. At the end of October 1875, without having conclusively arranged a venue for his undertaking, Cagli disembarked from the *European* with a company of musicians from his native land. It was hardly an expansive troupe; instead of an orchestra, he had hired a talented pianist named E. Maggi to accompany the vocalists on the piano and serve as the general musical director. Nevertheless, Cagli immediately signed a contract with the directors of the still uncompleted Royal Theatre, where he would launch the season in mid-November. Publicity for the endeavour was immediately forthcoming. A journalist at *The Cape Argus* writing on 2 November flattered readers by suggesting that "Cape Town is certainly to be congratulated on the arrival of so distinguished a troupe, who have come at a very opportune time, seeing that Parliament is on the eve of assembling." He added, presumably tongue in cheek, that the performances could serve a second purpose: "no doubt the charms of music will find a gentle response in bosoms agitated by party excitement."⁹

Pre-season Publicity and Concerts

Apparently owing to the incomplete state of the Royal Theatre, Cagli publicised his troupe before its Cape Town season began by arranging two vocal concerts at which his operatic principals would sing selections from operas but not act. These were held in the city's Mutual Hall on 3 and 10 November. The program included works by three Italian composers, namely Donizetti, Rossini, and Verdi, and one Frenchman, Gounod. Journalists in the city co-operated in publicising these events. Writing in *The Standard and Mail* the day before the first, for example, one recalled Cagli's promise to "give the inhabitants of Cape Town an opportunity of witnessing performances of a character far in advance of anything which had yet been seen here". The visiting *impresario*, it was further emphasised, had insisted that the galleries and boxes in the new theatre be supported by pillars. Moreover, this compliant spokesman expressed

⁸ "Occasional Notes", *The Cape Argus*, 2 March 1875, p. 2.

⁹ "Opera Company", *The Cape Argus*, 2 November 1875, p. 3.

confidence that “Signor Cagli has invested too much in his venture not to have taken every precaution to secure its success.” He concluded with the hope that the Italian’s visit would be “the means of causing others to imitate Signor’s Cagli’s example”.¹⁰ Looking slightly ahead, two days before the first opera the same newspaper carried a translated excerpt (possibly supplied by Cagli) from the Italian periodical *Universo Musicale*, which was described as “the highest authority on matters musical in Italy”, informing readers in that country that having arranged opera seasons in Bombay and Calcutta, as well as “another English Colony [*i.e.* Australia] and met with very great success”, he will also visit the Cape of Good Hope to immortalise his name”.¹¹

The scant extant evidence, all of it in the local press, indicates that these performances favourably impressed but hardly overwhelmed the audiences. The day after the first, a journalist at *The Cape Argus* allowed that even when the singers were most appropriately judged by lofty European rather than modest local standards, they “take no mean rank”. He cautioned, however, that readers who contemplated attending the second concert would do well to remember that the Mutual Hall was much too small to serve as a fully appropriate venue. “They are essentially opera singers,” he also noted, “and to sing without acting places them under a restraint that, to some extent, marks their efforts.” Nevertheless, he continued the standard rhetorical thrust by assuring that “when heard in opera in the new theatre, such a treat will be given as was never heard at the Cape before.”¹²

Before the second concert, Cagli used the local press to announce the price of tickets and inform the public regarding what the repertoire would encompass. Both serious and comical music would be offered. The performances, he assured, “will equal if not surpass any Troupe out of Europe and the United States”. Season tickets for reserved seats in the stalls and dress circle at 24 performances would cost £5 5s., while a similar number of performances unreserved seats in the stalls would cost £4 4s. Single tickets in the dress circle or stalls could be purchased for five shillings, while those in the pit could be had for two and a half shillings.¹³ By the standards of the time, these were by no means cheap. One can safely assume that the majority of the Europeans and non-Europeans alike in Cape Town could not have afforded to purchase season tickets easily, and they simply would have been beyond the means of many Capetonians.

What economic impact the initial Italian opera season had on Cape Town is impossible to gauge. At any rate, at least one local merchant sought to capitalise on it in a most direct way. Beginning in early November, L. Alexander & Company, a retailer

¹⁰ “Our Portfolio”, *The Standard and Mail*, 2 November 1875, p. 3.

¹¹ “Our Portfolio”, *The Standard and Mail*, 13 November 1875, p. 2.

¹² “Occasional Notes”, *The Cape Argus*, 4 November 1875, p. 3.

¹³ “Italian Opera” (advertisement), *The Cape Argus*, 6 November 1875, p. 4.

in Longmarket Street, repeatedly placed large advertisements on the front page of *The Standard and Mail* announcing in bold letters the arrival of Cagli's troupe and stating that the shop sells "superior opera glasses", including "French makes".¹⁴ The newspaper that benefitted from this advertising revenue did its part to co-operate. Corroborating the language which the shopkeeper had chosen, the editor of *The Standard and Mail* assured readers in his column on 10 November that the opera glasses offered by L. Alexander & Co. included some which were "perfect gems" and "they are the most perfect works of art of their kind ever introduced into South Africa."¹⁵

The Generally Successful 1875 Season

As the press had promised, the Royal Theatre was completed in time to serve as the venue of the 1875 season, which began on 15 November with a performance of Verdi's *Il Trovatore*. Among the other works in the repertoire, which included both serious and comic operas, were Donizetti's *Don Pasquale* and *Lucia di Lammermore*, Rossini's *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*, and Verdi's *Un Ballo in Maschera*.

Critical reception of the first few performances was generally favourable. Frustrating the historian's task, reviews were published anonymously in the Cape Town English-language newspapers. Nevertheless, critics' comments shed useful if necessarily representative light on how audiences received the operas in the Royal Theatre. After the first staging of *Il Trovatore*, one critic wrote in *The Cape Argus* that the building, "really a handsome and commodious structure", was "filled with quite a brilliant assemblage". Continuing a theme which would become a *Leitmotiv* in press coverage of the season, he added that "the operatic performances of the company were such as are seldom to be enjoyed anywhere out of Europe or America."¹⁶ The same reviewer thought that the company continued to fly at an artistically high altitude when it staged the challenging *Don Pasquale* and *Lucia di Lammermore* the first week. Its members had "passed the ordeal successfully", he judged. The *Argus*'s critic allowed that it would be "absurd" to assert that either their singing or acting attained perfection. Nevertheless, he insisted, "without fear of contradiction", in a curiously phrased argument that "the Cape may congratulate itself that Signor Cagli had the energy and spirit to bring them to this country." Without identifying any individuals by name, he recalled, "Of late the Cape has been made familiar with some good actors on the dramatic stage," but none of them had been the match of Signor Ferario in *Don Pasquale*. This performer's combination of singing and acting was "one of the best things seen at the Cape".¹⁷

¹⁴ "Advertisement by 'L. Alexander & Comp.'", *The Standard and Mail*, 6 November 1875, p. 1.

¹⁵ "Our Portfolio", *The Standard and Mail*, 10 November 1875, p. 3.

¹⁶ "Occasional Notes", *The Cape Argus*, 16 1875, p. 2.

¹⁷ "The Opera", *The Cape Argus*, 18 November 1875, p. 2.

Slightly less restrained were the comments by a critic from *The Standard and Mail* who surveyed the first three nights of the season. Like his counterpart at *The Cape Argus*, he began by lauding the newly inaugurated theatre, declaring with some exaggeration that “Cape Town can now boast of an Opera House and an opera troupe.” He crowed that “the gallery has *not* come down on the heads of the croakers who predicted its fall,” thought the stage to be “in excellent taste”, acknowledged that “the lighting and ventilation are good,” and professed that “the accommodation for the public is infinitely superior to any to be had at any other place of entertainment in this city.” This local enthusiast believed that “it is no slight thing to inaugurate the opera at this distance from Europe,” particularly when the challenges which Cagli had overcome “were such as could hardly be credited”. In his comments on the second performance of *Il Trovatore*, this contributor to *The Standard and Mail* offered “great praise” for the work of the company’s scene painter: “No scenery like it has yet been seen in this city.” On the other hand, he found it unfortunate that one of the principals, Signor Greco, had suffered from “a violent cold” on the opening day, and that his omission of “a great deal of his part” as the Count had disappointed the audience, whose small size (in contrast to that which saw the lead-off performance) was “regrettable”. Moreover, the critic apparently would have appreciated genuine orchestration. He included in his review a suggestion to Cagli that Maggi’s piano be supplemented with a harmonium, for the latter instrument’s “vibrating tones” could assist the company’s singers “in keeping the voices up to pitch”.¹⁸

Critical praise of the production of *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* flew at an even loftier altitude. Despite its disastrous premiere in 1816, this *opera buffa* had soon become a persistent crowd-pleaser, and by the time it was staged in Cape Town the work had earned its place as one of the most frequently performed of all operas. The response to it there mirrored its beloved international status. The anonymous reviewer in *The Cape Argus* did not veil his total elation. Writing the morning after the first performance on 19 November, he generalised categorically that it was “according to the opinion of all present, the most brilliant success hitherto achieved by this talented company; and without exaggeration can maintain that it was the best musical performance ever heard in Cape Town.” Indeed, this critic ventured to say that Signora Neri’s mastery of the role of Rosina was better than he had ever heard it sung “anywhere”. It was especially gratifying that the audience had responded to her with “thunderous applause and *encores*”. Furthermore Ferario as the Barber had “repeatedly brought down the house” with his “naturally comic” acting, while Signor Setragini as the Count had been “simply perfect”. The critic also lauded the accompanying Maggi as “a first-class pianist” who “left nothing to be desired”. He only lamented that members of

¹⁸ “The Opera”, *The Standard and Mail*, 20 November 1875, p. 3.

Parliament had been attending to legislative business on the evening of performance; had that not been the case, the house would have been sold out. The *Argus* critic hoped that should Rossini's masterpiece be repeated the legislators would avail themselves of that opportunity to "forget their political animosity in listening to the performance of one of the most delightful operas ever composed".¹⁹

His counterpart *The Standard and Mail* also pulled out all the stops in praising the company's *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*. On Saturday evening, 20 November, he stated without reserve, it had been "produced in a way which we have not seen excelled in London". The overall quality of the performance had not been significantly reduced by the fact that Signor Setrangi was suffering from "a severe cold brought on by the prevalent South Easter" and was thus "rather hard put" during the first two scenes, after which his singing had improved markedly. Like the *Argus* reviewer, this one lauded Ferario in the title role. "Having seen the performances of all the Italian star buffo artistes in this part for the last ten years," he declared, "this writer has no hesitation in saying that he has never seen a better rendering of the character than was that of Signor Ferario on Saturday night." That alone was "worth ten times the price of admission".²⁰

As effusive as the local newspapers' critics were in lauding the immensely popular Rossini piece, they outdid themselves in praising the performance of Verdi's *Un Ballo in Maschera*. The reviewer for *The Standard and Mail* asserted that it was the company's "greatest success yet achieved". He cited the "excellent" scenery, the unsurpassed "dressing of the piece", and the generally "fine singing and fine acting" of the entire troupe. The performance on 10 December was said to be the first time that work had been done in Cape Town, and the manner in which it had been staged had done the company "infinite credit".²¹ In *The Cape Argus*, the reviewer was slightly more restrained in declaring that in their execution of *Un Ballo in Maschera* Cagli's musicians had demonstrated their ability to "do justice to the most difficult works of composers who used their genius for the purpose of trying to the utmost the capabilities of the human voice". What particularly impressed him was the ability of the principals to sing consistently on key and indeed brilliantly when they were accompanied only by Maggi at the keyboard. "With a piano accompaniment every sound from a singer is distinctly heard, and such support as a voice might have in sustained notes or brilliant passages from a flute, or other similar instrument, is wanting." Consequently, in Cape Town the opera singers were "subjected to a strain severer than if they were performing with the accessories of an opera house in London or Paris."²²

¹⁹ "The Opera", *The Cape Argus*, 20 November 1875, p. 3.

²⁰ "The Concerts", *The Standard and Mail*, 23 November 1875, p. 2.

²¹ "The Opera", *The Standard and Mail*, 11 December 1875, p. 2.

²² "The Opera", *The Cape Argus*, 14 December 1875, p. 3.

To be sure, the local critics were not consistently effusive in their comments about the 1875 season. One noted acerbically after the second performance of *Il Campanello* in late November that it had been “entirely spoilt” because the prompter “could be heard in every part of the house”.²³ At *The Standard and Mail*, a critic panned that same performance as having been, for some unknown reason, “entirely below the average”. Ferario had handled his role quite adequately, but “none of the others were up to their parts.” No less bluntly, he judged the first act of *Il Trovatore*, which alone was paired with the complete *Il Campanello* on the evening’s programme, “fell flat on a miserably poor house”. Especially disappointingly, the “Miserere” was “out of tune”.²⁴ However, it should be emphasised that such negative comments were only sporadic wrinkles in a fabric of praise.

Statistics about the number of tickets sold during the 1875 season do not appear to be extant. To the extent that one can rely on journalistic comments, in general audiences seem to have been fairly good, and at times the theatre was full, especially when *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* was performed. On the other hand, on some evenings Cagli must have wrung his hands. On 25 November, for example, *Don Pasquale* failed to attract many spectators. As a critic noted in *The Cape Argus*, that evening the theatre had “a lamentable appearance” and “really looked dismal”, as it was “full of emptiness”. He had counted approximately seventy people in the audience. Those who had stayed away, this reviewer opined, had missed the treat of experiencing a performance “not to be excelled out of the capitals of Europe”.²⁵ Two days later, attendance at *Il Campanello* was reported to be “very thin”.²⁶ At any rate, the season was apparently sufficiently successful to induce Cagli to promise to return early in 1876.

The Troubled 1876 Season

Cagli’s second season in Cape Town extended the frontier of operatic performance in that city but in certain respects was less successful than his initial one. As promised, he returned early in 1876 with a troupe comprising both familiar and new voices. Moreover, opera-lovers who made their way to the theatre in Burg Street were served a repertoire of works many may have heard the previous year, such as *Un Ballo in Maschera* and *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*, and some fresh ones, like von Flotow’s *Martha*, Donizetti’s *Poliuto*, and Mozart’s *Don Giovanni*. Observers might have reasonably

²³ “The Opera”, *The Cape Argus*, 30 November 1875, p. 2.

²⁴ “The Opera”, *The Standard and Mail*, 2 December 1875, p. 3; *The Cape Argus*, 27 November 1875, p. 2.

²⁵ “The Opera”, *The Cape Argus*, 30 November 1875, p. 2.

²⁶ “The Opera”, *The Standard and Mail*, 8 February 1876, p. 3.

predicted that this amalgamation of the familiar and innovation would virtually assure financial and artistic success, especially against the background of the 1875 season and the Cagli's firmly established reputation for staging high-quality performances.

The second season, however, got off to an inauspicious start. To be sure, critical acclaim was immediately forthcoming when the season was launched with Gounod's *Faust* on 3 February. A reviewer in *The Standard and Mail* went so far as to call it "one of the best things we have seen in South Africa" and judged that "it would bear favourable comparison with any representation we have heard in Europe".²⁷ In *The Cape Argus*, one could read that "all the *artistes* were in excellent voice" with the exception of Signor Greco, who was "a trifle hoarse".²⁸ Similarly, *Martha* opened to enthusiastic reviews.²⁹

Pleasing the local critics was one thing; attracting the public was quite another. The day after a performance of *Poliuto*, it was reported that "Signor Cagli's Company sang to an almost empty house,"³⁰ and *Martha*, "one of the finest comedies of the operatic stage", drew a "poor" audience in early February.³¹ An anonymous writer at *The Standard and Mail* reviewed the first week of the season and thought it "more than a matter for regret" that the company's performances had not attracted considerably more people; to him it seemed "inexplicable". "We cannot help fearing that the management, however excellent it is in providing the bill of fare, is somewhat at fault in the outside work," he mused. "This is the only reason which can be given for the theatre not being crowded at each performance of this talented company."³²

When attendance did not improve in the second week, Cagli announced in mid-February that performances would be suspended until a ballet troupe he had hired would arrive from Italy.³³ *The Cape Argus* found this fully understandable. "Since his return to Cape Town, the support he has received has been very small," conceded an editor there, "and the average attendance would hardly pay for the gas required to light the new theatre." This observer suggested that the closing of the opera house might be interpreted as "a satire on the taste of Cape Town". In his view, "high art" was presented in the city at a distinct disadvantage because "the people best able to support it, for the most part, reside out of the city." He feared that if no reversal of the singers' fortune took place soon, "it will be some time before their like visits South Africa again." But hope springs eternal in the human breast, including Cagli's, this

²⁷ "The Opera", *The Cape Argus*, 5 February 1876, p. 3.

²⁸ "The Opera Company", *The Standard and Mail*, 10 February 1876, p. 3.

²⁹ "The Opera", *The Cape Argus*, 8 February 1876, p. 3.

³⁰ "The Opera", *The Cape Argus*, 10 February 1876, p. 3.

³¹ "The Opera Company, *The Standard and Mail*, 10 February 1876, p. 3.

³² "Amusements in Cape Town", *The Standard and Mail*, 12 February 1876, p. 2.

³³ Advertisement, *The Cape Argus*, 15 February 1876, p. 1.

journalist recalled, and he thought it conceivable that the arrival of the ballet troupe might rescue the season.³⁴

Indeed, there is evidence that the *impresario* had invested wisely. After the first two operatic performances at which Cagli's imported dancers added their numbers to the programme, critics agreed that they had made a noteworthy difference. "The ballet has come, and it draws," opined one. On 24 February there had been a "capital house", and the following evening, despite a "fierce south-easter", the audience has been "good". The dancers' costume were "scant" and their dancing was "excellent". This combination had prompted much enthusiasm and applause from the audience. "Cape Town appreciates art-in legs," concluded an editor at *The Cape Argus*. "Signor Cagli has hit the public taste."³⁵ Another reviewer reported that *Martha*, with ballerinas dancing after both the second and final acts, had now been performed to "an unusually crowded house". He sympathised with the singers "in their mortification which they must naturally feel, on finding how much greater enthusiasm and support is [*sic*] provoked from the Cape public by the certain evolution of pink stockings, than can be extracted from it by the sweetest music."³⁶

Precisely how decisive the addition of ballet to the operas was in salvaging the 1876 opera season is impossible to gauge. Not all performances which merged the two art forms attracted large audiences, and critics continued to comment on the enthusiastic receptions which some works, especially renowned crowd-pleasers like *Don Giovanni* and *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*, found in the city. Indeed, the second season ended on a high note with productions of these two. Rossini's ever-popular *opera buffa* was performed to a "crowded house" on 30 May, and the beloved leading lady Signora Neri was greeted with "a shower of bouquets".³⁷ After Mozart's work closed the season in early June, it was reported that "the large audience were as enthusiastic as ever, and the several performers received most hearty applause."³⁸

On other evenings, attendance remained disappointing; at other times it was middling. *La Favorita*, for example, was given in March to what was described as a "pretty fair" audience, and the following evening attendance at a repeat performance of Donizetti's *The Daughter of the Regiment* attracted only a "thin" crowd because of "a heavy south-easter".³⁹

Cagli sought to boost attendance by presenting opera to a much younger generation of Capetonians. On the first Saturday in April members of the company put

³⁴ "Occasional Notes", *The Cape Argus*, 15 February 1876, p. 2.

³⁵ "The Opera", *The Cape Argus*, 26 February 1876, p. 2.

³⁶ "The Opera", *The Standard and Mail*, 26 February 1876, p. 3.

³⁷ "The Opera", *The Cape Argus*, 1 June 1876, p. 2.

³⁸ "Occasional Notes", *The Cape Argus*, 3 June 1876, p. 2.

³⁹ "The Opera", *The Cape Argus*, 25 March 1876, p. 2. Whether it was sung in the original French or in Italian is not known.

on a programme which included a scene from *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* and two ballet numbers. An anonymous writer in *The Cape Times and Daily Advertiser* wrote that he had “seldom witnessed a prettier scene” and that “the house was thronged with children, whose enjoyment of the performance gave rise to the hope that the next generation of Cape Town will have better taste than the fogies of the passing age.” According to his testimony, the youthful audience “screamed with delight at Ferario’s splendid comedy”. On the other hand, one boy had confided to him that he “would have liked it better if the young ladies [in the ballet] had worn longer skirts”. The amused journalist quipped: “Thus does taste vary from age to age.”⁴⁰

It is impossible to ascertain how many of the Capetonians who purchased tickets were not of European descent. However, anecdotal evidence suggests that at times a considerable number did so. An editor of *The Capetown Daily News and General Advertiser* wrote with no mean condescension in mid-April that it was “gratifying to perceive a gradual elevation of taste for public amusement amongst the Malay community” and cited their attendance at recent operas to substantiate the point. He opined that attending such performances was morally superior to “getting ‘elevated’ with beer at the canteens”. Cagli therefore deserved credit for “working this reform amongst a segment of the population who were formerly devoted to street disturbances”. This observer assumed that “not many Mohamedans” could be assumed to have previous exposure to fine Italian music, but despite this gap in their cultural upbringing “the gallery of the theatre presents attractions to many Malays of both sexes whose attention seems to be rivitted [*sic*] towards the stage during the performance.” Such orderliness which they evinced, he admitted, did not always characterise the behaviour of visitors “who do not believe in the Prophet”. In a feeble attempt at humour resting on a strained pun, he declared that “the Signor himself . . . places his faith in a different kind of *profits*, that of drawing good houses and ensuring a balance in his treasury.”⁴¹

In June a counterpart at *The Cape Argus* corroborated some of these observations in a marginally less condescending tone. He remarked that human nature was such that if people did not have access to “rational and wholesome amusement” they would inevitably “be led to the pursuit of vicious and undesirable pursuits”. Consequently, it was “most gratifying and encouraging” that “Malays and coloured people” were attending the opera and other theatrical performances. He reserved judgment on “whether the greater appeal to them was “the gay dresses or the beautiful music”, but at any rate the operas which Cagli was staging “appeared to afford them unbounded delight”.⁴²

⁴⁰ Untitled article, *The Cape Times and Daily Advertiser*, 3 April 1876, p. 2.

⁴¹ “Local Intelligence”, *The Capetown Daily News and General Advertiser*, 15 April 1876, p. 3.

⁴² Untitled editorial, *The Cape Argus*, 6 June 1876, p. 2.

From time to time health problems among the personnel caused headaches and disappointment. Reviews of the performances occasionally mentioned that one or another singer either had to cancel his or her role or that respiratory problems inhibited voices. These incidents especially irked the critic at *The Cape Argus*, who believed that local audiences were actually too forgiving of the “confusion” which arose. Managers should do more to ensure that what was billed was actually performed, he groused.⁴³ On a more constructive note, the same writer suggested that rather than taxing some of the vocalists’ voices by having them sing on consecutive evenings, “lessees could provide dramatic entertainments in English on alternate nights with the operas.” It seemed to him that such an arrangement would also have the advantage of catering to all public tastes, and thereby the theatre would be put to optimal use. He urged Cagli to consider this.⁴⁴

Near the end of April, *i.e.* a few weeks before the conclusion of the season, an editor at *The Cape Times and Daily Advertiser* offered a sober assessment of the future of opera in the city. The “singers of rare merit” had “failed so signally to attract audiences at the commencement of the present season,” he recalled. Adding ballet between the acts of the operas had made a “marked impression” on attendance, and “occasionally” the theatre was “fairly filled”, but rarely did the size of the audiences suggest “pecuniary success”. This did not surprise him, given the demographic reality of Cape Town and the surrounding area. “The fact is that the popular taste cannot be satisfied with the Opera alone, nor even with Opera and ballet,” he reasoned. 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.”⁴⁵

At any rate, the 1876 season ended on a high note. At the end of May and in very early June opera-goers had their final opportunities to hear *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* and *Don Giovanni*, and they thronged the Royal Theatre, perhaps uncertain when they would have another chance. The former work played to a “crowded house and with splendid effect”, while Mozart’s most famous opera drew a “brilliant and overflowing house”.⁴⁶ On the final night of the season, *Don Giovanni* was presented again, and “the large audience were as enthusiastic as ever, and the several performers received most hearty applause.” This prompted a writer in *The Cape Argus* to hope that the

⁴³ “Occasional Notes”, *The Cape Argus*, 22 April 1876, p. 2.

⁴⁴ “Occasional Notes”, *The Cape Argus*, 29 April 1876, p. 2.

⁴⁵ Untitled editorial, *The Cape Times and Daily Advertiser*, 29 April 1876, p. 2.

⁴⁶ “The Opera”, *The Cape Argus*, 1 June 1876, p. 2.

troupe, which was about to depart for Europe, “may be induced to return and renew an acquaintance which has proved so eminently satisfactory and agreeable”.⁴⁷

However, the inconsistency in public interest continued during the off-season, *i.e.* after much of the troupe had sailed away but before Cagli launched a new venture in January 1877, namely a short-lived season of opera *al fresco* in Cape Town. A writer in *The Capetown Daily News and General Advertiser* lamented in November 1876 that the audiences on two recent evenings of joint opera and ballet performances had been “beggarly”. On the first, there was “but the mere sprinkling of an audience”, while on the latter the theatre, which could comfortably seat 400 people, had contained only about fifty in addition to approximately a dozen in the gallery. He wondered whether a scarcity of cash in individuals’ pockets underlay the poor attendance, “or are the people of Cape Town growing weary of musical entertainments?” He gave no answer.⁴⁸ Writing only two days later in *The Standard and Mail*, however, a columnist who used the pseudonym “The Man about Town” declared that a recent performance merging the same two art forms had been “very fully attended”, even though as entertainment he regarded the evening as “a failure”.⁴⁹

Conclusion

Despite critical acclaim, the mixed public reception that Italian opera, sometimes in tandem with ballet, had in Cape Town in 1876 anticipated difficulties which re-emerged after Signor Cagli returned to the southern tip of Africa to launch yet another season. At that time he divided his attention between his work as an *impresario* and purveyor of musical culture and a grand scheme of arranging an international exhibition to promote trade between the Cape Colony and Europe. The latter venture lies outside the scope of the present study and deserves scholarly examination as a discrete topic in South African economic history. Neither this undertaking nor his 1877 season proved to be particularly successful for him, and accordingly the ambitious Italian’s involvement in this part of the world did not continue thereafter.

The limits on the success which the Cagli troupe had in Cape Town in the mid-1870s stand out in bold relief when contrasted with the remarkable growth of serious opera in Australia during that decade. With considerable justification Harold Love could identify the years 1861-1880 as “the golden age of Australian opera”.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ “Occasional Notes”, *The Cape Argus*, 3 June 1876, p. 2.

⁴⁸ “Local”, *The Capetown Daily News and General Advertiser*, 9 November 1876, p. 3.

⁴⁹ The Man about Town, “Table Mountain Echoes”, *The Standard and Mail*, 11 November 1876, p. 3.

⁵⁰ Harold Love, *The Golden Age of Australian Opera: W. S. Lyster and his Companies 1861-1880* (Sydney: Currency Press Pty Ltd, 1981).

In this regard, the potentially far greater clientele in both Sydney and Melbourne, which in 1881 boasted populations of ca. 225,000 and 283,000, respectively, was undoubtedly a key factor.⁵¹ Demographically, Cape Town could hardly compete. Placed into the historical context of musical performances in that city, moreover, Cagli's moderate successes of 1875 and 1876 contrast remarkably with the fulsomely rewarding season of the Searelle Opera Company, which in 1887 drew full or nearly sold out houses several evenings a week for approximately six months. Luscombe Searelle, an Englishman by birth who had spent part of his younger years in both New Zealand and Australia but frequently travelled back to his native land and was in close touch with the musical scene in London, gauged public taste accurately and offered Capetonians chiefly comic opera, not least works by Offenbach and Gilbert and Sullivan, which since the 1870s had proven immensely popular in London and many other cities around much of the globe.⁵² While the massive and ever-growing population of the British metropolis could easily support a great deal of both serious and comic opera at venues like the Royal Opera House at Covent Garden and the Savoy Theatre, respectively, that of Cape Town could not.

With the benefit of historiographical hindsight, much in the story of the 1875 and 1876 tours suggests that despite the linkage of its British and other European immigrant citizens and their descendants to the broader context of Western culture, opera had great difficulty taking root in Cape Town. Notwithstanding repeated assertions that the existence of Italian opera showed that the colony was rapidly coming of age, critical observers who opined that the degree of interest and curiosity was simply not enough to sustain long-term opera in an environment when other forms of entertainment competed to draw audiences were almost certainly correct at that time. Their observations, however, did not deter hope from springing eternally – or at any rate for another year – in Cagli's breast. The history of his final season in Cape Town awaits scholarly attention.

⁵¹ Graeme Aplin, *et al.* (eds.), *Australians: a Historical Library* (Broadway, New South Wales: Fairfax, Syme & Weldon Associates, 1987), p. 97.

⁵² Frederick Hale will soon publish an article about the success of the Searelle Opera Company in popularising especially British and French comic opera in Cape Town.