

1-1-1985

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### Recommended Citation

Harwood, Gregory W. (1985) "An Essay-Review of 'Orchestre in Emilia-Romagna nell'Ottocento e Novecento'," *Verdi Forum*: No. 13, Article 4.

Available at: <http://scholarship.richmond.edu/vf/vol1/iss13/4>

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# An Essay-Review of 'Orchestre in Emilia-Romagna nell'Ottocento e Novecento'

**Keywords**

Orchestras, Marcello Conati, Marcello Pavarani, performance practice

# An Essay-Review of *Orchestra in Emilia-Romagna nell'Ottocento e Novecento*

by Greg Harwood, Brigham Young University

ORCHESTRE IN EMILIA-ROMAGNA NELL' OTTOCENTO E NOVECENTO. Edited by Marcello Conati and Marcello Pavarani. Parma: Orchestra Sinfonica dell'Emilia-Romagna "Arturo Toscanini," 1982. xi + 525 pp.

Studies dealing with performance practice in the nineteenth century have appeared with greater frequency in recent years, but important areas remain unexplored. One is the orchestra, its changing organization and structure. For the Italian repertory, the predominance of opera over symphonic music has no doubt contributed to this neglect. Yet the orchestra is a vital component of opera, and the importance of its role is attested, for example, by numerous letters of Verdi that show his insistence on precise orchestral sonorities and clean playing.<sup>1</sup>

One of the greatest hurdles a researcher faces is the difficulty in obtaining data. Relatively few source materials, including the correspondence and contracts of theater managers, impresarios, conductors, musicians, composers, and music publishers, have found their way into print. The most valuable published sources typically deal with a particular theater,

school of music, or other institution that sponsored an orchestra. Of the chronicles that have appeared, several reproduce valuable primary material about the nineteenth century orchestra.<sup>2</sup> However, the orchestra is not the primary focus of these studies, and documents, if present, are usually scattered through the volume and easily overlooked. Furthermore, many of these books are difficult to find in this country, particularly the older theater chronicles.

*Orchestra in Emilia-Romagna nell'Ottocento e Novecento*, originating in the celebrations commemorating the bicentennial

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<sup>2</sup>Two particularly fine chronicles with information about the orchestra are: Ino Allodi, ed., *I teatri di Parma "dal Farnese al Regio,"* (Milan, 1969), and the first two volumes of *La storia del Teatro Regio di Torino*, Vol. 1, *Il teatro di corte*, by Marie-Thérèse Bouquet (Turin, 1967) and Vol. 2, *Il teatro della città*, by Alberto Basso (Turin, 1976). Sergio Martinotti's *Ottocento strumentale italiano* (Bologna, 1972) examines several Italian orchestras in a general context but supplies few details. Daniel J. Koury's recent dissertation, "The Orchestra in the Nineteenth Century: Physical Aspects of its Performance Practice" (Boston University, 1981) presents a valuable collection of data from previously published sources, but discusses only the largest Italian theaters.

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<sup>1</sup>A number of such letters appear in Martin Chusid, "Verdi's Own Words: His thoughts on Performance," in *The Verdi Companion*, ed. William Weaver and Martin Chusid (New York, 1979).

of Paganini's birth, can be considered the first major study solely devoted to the development of the orchestra in nineteenth century Italy. It considers the orchestras of an entire geopolitical region, covering ensembles not only in large cultural centers but also in small outlying towns. The volume is published under the auspices of the "Orchestra Sinfonica dell'Emilia-Romagna 'Arturo Toscanini,'" a regional orchestra officially constituted in 1975, which has established an archive at its seat in Parma containing photocopies of documents concerning orchestras in the region during the past two centuries.

Written by a group of Italian scholars, the book consists of a series of essays, each dealing with the orchestra in a particular city or sponsored by a particular institution. They are arranged first by province, starting with Piacenza in the northwest and ending with Rimini in the southeast. The volume covers a large portion of the cities and towns that had regular opera seasons or active orchestral organizations.<sup>3</sup> Most of the information concerns the early and middle nineteenth century, when orchestral activity in the area was at a peak. Marcello Conati, who proposed the study, writes an excellent introduction

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<sup>3</sup>In his introduction, "Il progetto di Paganini di riforma dell'Orchestra Ducale Parmense e una ricerca sulle orchestre in Emilia-Romagna," Conati explains that some towns with a regular opera season or an active philharmonic society were excluded from the study either for the lack or unavailability of documents or for the want of someone to do the research. See pp. 11-12.

which ties together trends noted in the individual chapters and discusses Paganini's role as an orchestral reformer.

The essays generally do a fine job in linking source materials and providing continuity, although some of the collaborators were undoubtedly limited in their research by constraints of time. The study was assembled in a remarkably short time - from December 1981 to spring of 1982 - in order to appear during the Paganini bicentennial celebrations. In their chapter on the orchestras in Ferrara, for example, Natali and Stefanati report that time did not permit them to search for documents in private collections (p. 297). Bizzoccoli notes that many items belonging to the theatrical archive at Mirandola had been removed by collectors and therefore, were not available (p. 285). In his essay about orchestras in Piacenza, Rabitti only touches on musical activity in private salons and churches because of the difficulty of conducting research in their archives. Girardi notes that scholars are not permitted to sift through the vast, uncatalogued archival collection at the Accademia Filarmonica in Bologna (p. 368).

Despite these limitations, the volume contains much information from largely untapped sources. At the end of most chapters there is an appendix, some quite extensive, reproducing materials such as contracts, regulations, and letters, many published for the first time. Other documents are included in the texts. With the exception of letters, these are conveniently listed in a separate index at the end of the book. Unfortunately, the index makes no distinction between documents actually reproduced and those only cited.

The documents are one of the volume's greatest treasures. They are well chosen, although unevenly distributed. For example, the chapter on the Ducal Orchestra in Parma includes a 16 page appendix with five documents from the Archivio di Stato, while portions of other documents are quoted in the copious footnotes. On the other hand, no documents are reproduced in three of the chapters dealing with Modena, or in the chapter on Ravenna, even though these cities were also important cultural centers. Conspicuously absent is a reproduction of the 1821 *Piano organico delle orchestre nel Teatro Comunale di Bologna e negli altri stabilimenti dipendenti dalla magistratura comunitativa*. This document occupies a prominent place in the history of the major Bolognese musical institutions, since it affected not only the orchestras at the Teatro Comunale and the Basilica di San Petronio, but also played a significant role in transferring administrative control of the city's musical activity from the Accademia Filarmonica to the Liceo Musicale.<sup>4</sup> Although a summary of the document is contained in Mioli's essay on the Teatro Comunale (p. 321-33), it is of such importance that it would be better reproduced than paraphrased.

In addition to primary documents, the individual essays often include valuable references to secondary material. Finding relevant secondary literature about nineteenth century orchestras often presents problems because information appears in such a wide variety of sources: biographies, memoirs, and

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<sup>4</sup>See pp. 329-33, 346, 366, and 377-78.

travelogues, as well as books and articles primarily devoted to general history, theater, art, architecture, and ecclesiastical history. Information in nineteenth and early twentieth century journals and newspapers are easily overlooked because few articles are indexed and the periodicals themselves are often rare. Several chapters in the volume also include a helpful bibliography.

One significant area for scholars of performance practice is the size and balance of nineteenth century orchestras, and the large "data base" supplied by the new volume is one of its chief assets.<sup>5</sup> The introduction is followed by a large table, prepared by Girardi, which gives a sampling of the size and distribution of instruments at various times for many of the ensembles and provides a convenient reference point. The table, arranged alphabetically by city and chronologically within each city, includes useful information about the documents from which the statistics were drawn. For several larger cities, some confusion might arise because the table gives data for more than one ensemble in the same chronological list. In Bologna, for example, data for the orchestra at the Teatro

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<sup>5</sup>The data in the volume seem to be carefully assembled. One error (presumably typographical), however, ought to be noted. The transcription of Article I from the "Decreto sovrano riguardante alla Ducale Orchestra [di Parma]" of July 1822 (p. 130) mistakenly omits the 2 clarinets. See the transcription of this decree by Marchesi and Pavarani, p. 99, and a facsimile on pp. 112-12 of a list entitled "Stato generale dei Sig.ri Professori. . ."

Comunale are interspersed with data for the orchestra at San Petronio. In some cases, the distinction between instrumental groups in the same city is difficult to define. The "orchestra comunale" listed in Piacenza for 1839 and 1850 is the same ensemble that played in the theater for those years.<sup>6</sup> The situation is more complex in Parma, where the court orchestra was used for theatrical performances, often with additional players paid by the impresario.<sup>7</sup>

In addition to the general table, other data are scattered throughout the book. The chapter on Imola, for example, has a table listing orchestral distribution for 25 seasons between the years 1837-51. These and other archival materials show that orchestral size and balance in theaters during the nineteenth century differ significantly from that of the modern orchestra. For one thing, orchestras were considerably smaller. Although wind and brass sections tended to fluctuate, they followed a trend toward the minimum complement required by most scores of the day (pairs of woodwinds, horns, and trumpets, three trombones, and a low brass instrument), and most theater orchestras in Emilia-Romagna, even the smaller ones, boasted a full wind and brass complement by the middle of the century. String sections, however, were less standardized and subject to variation from such factors as local tradition, economic conditions, and availability of players.

The ratio of winds to strings, especially in smaller theaters, was generally much greater than now. For example,

Carpi in 1828 had 14 strings and 15 winds, Cortemaggiore in 1835 had 12 strings and 12 winds, and during the same year, Ferrara had 12 strings and 13 winds. The table mentioned above shows that the balance within the string section itself also differed from that of the modern orchestra. By modern standards, almost all theatrical orchestras had few violas and cellos, and the double-basses outnumbered cellos in virtually all ensembles. The use of large double-bass sections during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was a particularly Italian practice,<sup>8</sup> and Verdi

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<sup>8</sup>G. Scaramelli, who directed the orchestra at the theater in Trieste, writes in his treatise, *Saggio sopra i doveri di un Primo Violino Direttore d'Orchestra* (Trieste, 1811), 10-12, that there should be 1 double-bass for every 4 violins in the orchestra, but that the number of cellos should remain constant at two except in very large ensembles. This kind of string balance is not found, to my knowledge, in French or German orchestras of the period. A number of 19th century seating plans for German theatrical orchestras are printed by Gassner, *Dirigent und Ripienist für angehende Musikdirigenten, Musiker, und Musikfreunden* (Karlsruhe, 1844). These consistently show the number of cellos equal to or greater than the number of double-basses. For example, at the Munich Hoftheater there were 20 violins, 8 violas, 6 cellos, and 6 double-basses (see also Hans-Joachim Nösselt, *Ein ältest Orchester 1530-1980: 450 Jahre Bayerisches Hof- und Staatsorchester* [Munich, 1980], p. 150), at the Vienna Hofopertheater, 14 violins, 4 violas, 4 cellos, and 4 double-basses, and

<sup>6</sup>Rabitti, pp. 44, 57.

<sup>7</sup>Minardi, pp. 85, 88, 91.

himself suggested some possible reasons:

Here [in Genoa] in the orchestra they have placed all the double basses in one mass, like sheep; and the result is deplorable beyond belief. I will put it this way, when the double basses encircle the entire orchestra, with their dark sound they cover, or at least smother in part, the piercing sonority of the brass and the bad intonation of the woodwinds. And the sonority of the loud [passages] comes out full and imposing. . . .<sup>9</sup>

The second half of the nineteenth century was one of transition for theater orchestras in Italy. Political unification had resulted in serious problems for the country's musical institutions and many fell into decline. Lack of financial support from the new central government was a major reason, as well as the emigration of players to foreign houses.<sup>10</sup> Budgetary restraints caused by these unfavorable

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at the Berlin Opernhaus, 16 violins, 6 violas, 8 cellos, and 4 double-basses (increased to 10 cellos and 5 double-basses "bei grossen Opern"). The balance at the Paris Opéra in 1855 is listed as 22 violins, 8 violas, 10 cellos, and 8 double-basses by Castil-Blaze in *L'Académie Impériale de musique*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1855), 2:466. See also E. M. E. Deldevez, *L'Art du chef d'orchestre* (Paris, 1878), pp. 106-9.

<sup>9</sup>Chusid, p. 153.

<sup>10</sup>See Conati's Introduction, pp. 16-20.

conditions frequently counterbalanced a tendency toward larger ensembles and for many theaters the size of the orchestra was especially unstable. At the same time increasing familiarity with French and German repertory, changes in the instruments themselves (especially brass and woodwinds), and the gradual acceptance of a standard international pitch all contributed to a different way of thinking about orchestral balance and sonority.

In general, the data in the new volume do not adequately explain when and how theatrical orchestras of the region shifted toward modern proportions. In the chapter on Parma, for example, Minardi discusses the formation of a 120-piece symphony orchestra (which boasted a string section of 42 violins, 14 violas, 15 cellos, and 15 double-basses) by Cleofante Campanini for the *Esposizione generale italiana di Torino* in 1884 (pp. 104-5). He makes no mention, however, of the 80-piece theater orchestra that accompanied the Parma premiere of *Aida* in 1872. The strings (24 violins, 8 violas, 8 cellos, and 9 double-basses) were stipulated by the publisher Ricordi in the contract with the theater, undoubtedly under pressure from Verdi.<sup>11</sup> The

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<sup>11</sup>See Marchesi, *Giuseppe Verdi e il Conservatorio di Parma (1836-1901)* (Parma, 1976), pp. 57-61. Marchesi also lists an 83-piece orchestra directed by Franco Faccio for a performance of Verdi's Requiem at the Teatro Regio in 1876: 14 first violins, 13 seconds, 8 violas, 9 cellos, 10 double-basses, 3 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 4 bassoons, 4 horns, 8 trumpets, 3 trombones, 1 cimbasso, bass drum, and timpani

general table at the beginning of the book is heavily weighted toward the earlier part of the century and, in fact, gives no information for any of the orchestras in the region between 1869 and 1898. More data on orchestras during this period would be most helpful.

With respect to the influence of *musica ultramontana* on Italian orchestras during the last half of the ottocento, the Teatro Comunale in Bologna is of special interest. With Angelo Mariani conducting, several Meyerbeer operas were produced during the 1860s. The climax occurred in 1869, when *Il profeta*, *Gli ugonotti*, and *Roberto il diavolo* were mounted. Mariani also conducted the first Wagner performances in Italy at the Teatro Comunale: *Lohengrin* in 1871 and *Tannhäuser* the following year. In his essay on the orchestra at the Teatro Comunale, Mioli includes statistics on balance for the years 1821, 1835, and 1901. These, however, fail to show the way in which the orchestra changed during the Mariani years. According to Mioli, it numbered 64 in 1864 and reached 80 in 1869, the year of the Meyerbeer extravaganzas (p. 336). This is almost double the size of the orchestra in 1835. The playbills for 1871 and 1872 also advertised an 80-piece orchestra, and a 30-piece stage band.

In addition to larger and better balanced orchestras, the documents reveal an increasing concern for a higher standard of playing and orchestral discipline.<sup>12</sup> The many regulations

for orchestras detail the responsibilities of performers. These provided that musicians play the music without alterations, be in place properly dressed before performances or rehearsals, and not play "preludes" after the general tuning. Penalties for disciplinary problems were usually pecuniary, but might occasionally be more severe, particularly early in the century.

One document spells out auditioning requirements for the court orchestra at Parma (pp. 134-5). Upon passing preliminary examinations, players were admitted as *aspiranti*. In order to occupy a vacant post, however, an *aspirante* had to sightread an orchestral piece, then a trio or quartet, and accompany a vocal piece, transposing it upon request.

The establishment of conservatories also facilitated greater professionalism. Some orchestra contracts stipulated that the first chair players provide free instruction. At the Teatro Comunitativo in Piacenza, for example, players had to teach free of charge two students from poor families designated by the theater. In several instances, conservatories were founded to alleviate shortages in the local orchestra. The School of Music in Modena, for example, was organized primarily to train string players for the theater. A memorandum dated 8 December 1863 proposes an ideal string section of 10 first violins, 9 seconds, 4 violas, 4 cellos, and 6 double-basses. At the time there were only 7 first violins,

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(pp. 73-74). The number of trumpets was undoubtedly augmented for the performance of this work.

<sup>12</sup>Verdi frequently spoke of

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his unhappiness with the orchestra in performances of his works. See, for example, a letter of 20 March 1868 to the conductor Alberto Mazzucato cited in Chusid, pp. 155-56.



6 seconds, 2 violas, 2 cellos, and 4 double-basses.

Undoubtedly the most famous school in the region was the Liceo Musicale in Bologna, whose roots go back to a "Società dei Dilettanti" organized in 1803. This group held practice sessions every Thursday alternating full orchestra one week and chamber ensembles the next. Their playing was supervised by a small group of paid professionals including a first violinist, a second violinist, a clarinetist, an oboist, a horn player, a double-bass player, a violist, and a bassoonist (p.372). Although the school was not founded to supply players for the local orchestra, this became a crucial role by the middle of the century.

Turning to another area, relatively little has been published on instrumental ensembles in Italian religious chapels during the nineteenth century. *Orchestra in Emilia-Romagna* includes a chapter on the Basilica of San Petronio in Bologna, particularly noted for its orchestra. Gaetano Gaspari, the *maestro di cappella* from 1857-81, wrote in a letter to the vestry board, "In and outside of Italy, many chapels make music with only voices and the organ; but one like ours, composed solely of instrumentalists, is certainly not found in all of Europe" (p. 345). The chapel, in fact, did not include any salaried singers after 1838. During the previous year, the vestry board had decided to exclude singers from salaried positions because of their annoying habit of leaving before the end of every function. Thereafter, they performed at the chapel only upon special invitation from the *maestro di cappella*. In 1858, the orchestra at San Petronio, closely associated with other major Bolognese musical institu-

tions, boasted 10 violins, 2 violas, 1 cello, 3 double-basses, 1 flute, 1 oboe, 2 clarinets, 1 bassoon, 2 horns, 1 trombone, and an organ (p. 345). Clearly other instrumental groups of the area also deserve investigation.

The most acclaimed ensemble of the region was the Ducal Orchestra in Parma, historically significant also because it was the center of an important orchestral reform led by Paganini. The famous violinist, who had intended to retire to a villa outside the city, was appointed by the ruling monarch, Marie-Louise, to study possible changes for her orchestra. Paganini's proposals occupy a major portion of the chapter by Minardi and is the subject of another chapter by Dall'Acqua. His suggestions were sweeping in nature and included: 1) an increase in orchestral size, 2) a redistribution in balance of instruments to conform more closely with continental standards of the day,<sup>13</sup> 3) new regulations for orchestral discipline and penalties, 4) a policy for replacement of poor players and for more exacting auditions, and 5) the establishment of a subscription concert series, which would include contemporary continental repertory, such as the Beethoven symphonies.

The execution of Paganini's reform was blocked, primarily by court intrigues. Nevertheless, it remains an important milestone in the history of the orchestra in Italy. Paganini, however, was not the sole reformer of the period; other

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<sup>13</sup>Specifically (p. 136) 13 violins, 6 violas, 5 cellos, 5 double-basses, pairs of woodwinds, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, 1 serpent or cimbasso, and a pair of timpani.

musicians in the area were active in pressing for change. As early as 1817, Gaetano Zocca, director of the orchestra at the Teatro Comunale in Ferrara from 1829-34, submitted a proposal to organize a society of orchestral musicians. Rejected at the time by the city government, two years later the idea resulted in the establishment of a Società filarmonica (p. 300-2). This chapter reproduces many valuable materials, including Zocca's contract as *primo violino*, and a proposal, thought to be in his own hand, reviewing the sections of the orchestra and making recommendations for strengthening the balance of the ensemble and replacing weak or aging players. Also included is a public advertisement for the position of first violinist after his death (pp. 300-7).

One of the striking points to emerge from the book is how strongly musical institutions in Emilia-Romagna were affected by the economic, political, and cultural turmoil that characterized the ottocento. During this period, parts of Emilia-Romagna were governed by France and Austria, and their military and police bands played an important role in local musical life including the local theaters. The socio-economic changes during the century saw the entrenchment of the middle class as a powerful commercial force whose influence was felt, in part, by increased demands for theatrical entertainment. In Emilia-Romagna alone, at

least 20 theaters originated between 1804 and 1861 - not only in the largest cities of the region, but also in smaller towns, such as Bagnacavallo, Fiorenzuola, Pieve di Conto, and San Donnino (p. 16).

The growth of orchestras in Emilia-Romagna paralleled this surge of theatrical activity which was also reflected in the organization of amateur orchestral societies, and subscription concert series similar to those in England, France, and Germany. The great demand for theatrical music is further demonstrated by the large number of regular theatrical seasons, - shown in a series of maps prepared for the volume.

The numerous insights into musical life in Italy during the nineteenth century and its relation to the society and culture of the time constitute, perhaps, the outstanding contribution of *Orchestra in Emilia-Romagna*. Indeed, as Conati suggests, the volume departs from traditional musicological studies which have tended to focus on a single composer or individual composition. It also lays the groundwork for further studies as scholars locate additional documents that shed light on orchestral activity. Verdi specialists and others interested in the nineteenth century will find the book useful and interesting. May it soon be joined by studies covering other areas of the peninsula.