

On Acting in Late Eighteenth-Century *Opera Buffa*

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In 1856 the German poet and music critic Johann Peter Lyser wrote about the beginning of the supper scene in the second finale of *Don Giovanni*, written for the comedians Luigi Bassi and Felice Ponziani: "Unfortunately, it is not performed in Mozart's spirit nowadays, for the Don Giovannis and Leporellos of today are no *Bassis* and *Lollis* [recte: *Ponzianis*]. These played the scene differently in each performance, sustaining an uninterrupted crossfire of improvised jokes, droll ideas and *lazzi*, so that the audience was thrown into the same state of mirth in which it was Mozart's intention that master and servant should appear to be on the stage. These were the skills of the *opera buffa* singers of old; the *modern* Italian singers know as little how to do it as the Germans ever did."¹

Though written more than 150 years ago, this longing for the musical and theatrical immediacy that reigned in the opera houses of the late eighteenth century may still resonate with adherents of the Historically Informed Performance (HIP) movement. At least since Georg Fuchs coined the motto "rethéâtraliser le théâtre" in 1909² the theatrical practices of the past has, indeed, been an important source of inspiration for theatrical reformers, and the *commedia dell'arte*, with its reliance on virtuoso improvisation rather than on written text, has appealed to many directors. Yet as the Lyser quotation suggests, the idealization of a lost tradition as the positive counter-image of the restrictions of the modern stage is not a new phenomenon. *Opera buffa* –

¹ "Leider daß es heutzutage nicht mehr in Mozarts Sinne ausgeführt wird, denn unsere heutigen Don Giovanni's und Leporello's sind eben keine *Baffi's* und *Lolli's*. Diefe behandelten die Scene bei jeder neuen Vorstellung auf neue Weise, indem sie ein ununterbrochenes Kreuzfeuer von improvisirten Witzworten, drolligen Einfällen und *Lazzi's* unterhielten, so daß das Publikum in dieselbe heitere Stimmung veretzt wurde, in welche, Mozart's Abficht nach, Herr und Diener auf der Bühne erscheinen sollen. Dazu gehört freilich das ganze Geschick älterer Operabuffa=Sänger ; die italienischen Sänger von *heut* können es so wenig mehr, als es die Deutschen je konnten." Johann Peter Lyser: *Mozart-Album. Festgabe zu Mozart's hundertjährigem Geburts-Tage, am 27. Januar 185*, ed. Johann Friedrich Kayser, J. F. Kayser's Buch- und Noten-Druckerei, Hamburg 1856, p. 88. Lyser confused Ponziani with Giuseppe Lolli who created the double role of the Commendatore and Masetto.

² The motto occurred in his book *Die Revolution des Theaters. Ergebnisse aus dem Münchener Künstler-Theater*, Georg Müller, Munich and Leipzig 1909.

that may be considered the heir of the *commedia dell'arte* in the second half of the eighteenth century – even served as an unattainable ideal among some of the German Romantics who reacted against the respect for the letter rather than the spirit of the score, and against the emphasis on psychological introspection rather than on the free playfulness of the Carnival spirit.

The singers for whom Mozart and Cimarosa wrote, however, would surely have been offended if their spectators had associated them with the *commedia dell'arte*, since their contemporaries mostly praised them for avoiding what they saw as the vulgarity of that tradition. But what was it then that characterized these performers? In order to help identify their theatrical ideals, I will turn to Francesco Benucci, the most celebrated male singer of *opera buffa* in the last decades of the eighteenth century, for whom Cimarosa wrote the role of Count Robinson in *Il matrimonio segreto* in Vienna in 1792.

Benucci was born in Livorno around 1745 and apparently made his operatic debut in that city in 1768. He retired from the stage around 1800 and died in Florence in 1824, but during the three decades that his career lasted virtually every important composer of *opera buffa* wrote roles for him: Sarti, Traetta, Cimarosa, Paisiello, Salieri, Martín y Soler, Mozart and many others whose names have now sunk into obscurity. Among the ca. thirty roles Benucci created, four were in operas by Cimarosa, though *Il matrimonio* is the only one still performed today. The conceited nobleman Count Robinson, the self-proclaimed "man of the world", was also one of Benucci's most admired portrayals. When Luigi Bassi, the original Don Giovanni, dared to sing the role in Vienna in 1809, fourteen years after Benucci had left, one critic wrote: "Herr Bassi's good acting could not prevent one from remembering with a sigh the incomparable *Benucci* who combined masterly acting with an excellent voice".³

If Francesco Benucci's contemporaries remembered him mostly for his Count Robinson, however, he has gone down in history for the part he played in the creation of Mozart's comic operas. A particular favourite of Emperor Joseph II, Benucci was for twelve years the mainstay of the Italian opera company in Vienna, and just a few weeks after the company had opened, in Easter 1783, Mozart wrote to his father that the "Italian opera buffa has now started again and pleases greatly. The buffo is particularly good; his name is Benucci."⁴ Both the two aborted operas Mozart began writing in this and the following years, *L'oca del Cairo* and *Lo sposo deluso*, were probably conceived with Benucci in mind; in 1786 Benucci created the title role in *Le nozze di Figaro*; in 1788, for the Viennese premiere of *Don Giovanni*, Mozart wrote the so-called 'Razor Duet', "Per

³ "Das sehr gute Spiel des Hrn. Bassi konnte gleichwohl nicht verhindern, daß man sich nicht mit einem Seufzer an den unvergleichlichen *Benucci* erinnert hätte, der meisterhaftes Spiel mit einer trefflichen Stimme verband." *Der Sammler; Ein Unterhaltungsblatt*, vol. 1, no. 88, 25 July 1809, p. 352.

⁴ "Nun hat die *italienische opera Buffa* alhier wider angefangen; und gefällt sehr. – der *Buffo* ist besonders gut. er heist *Benuci*." Letter of 7 May 1783. Quoted from the Mozart Briefe und Dokumente – Online-Edition, www.dme.mozarteum.at.

queste tue mannine", as an insert for Benucci and Luisa Laschi-Mombelli, who sang Leporello and Zerlina; and in 1790 he wrote the role of Guglielmo in *Così fan tutte* for him. We know almost nothing about Benucci's performances in these operas, however, but according to the Irish tenor Michael Kelly, who created the roles of Basilio and Don Curzio in *Figaro*, the success of that opera was partly due to Benucci: "Figaro's song, 'Non più andrai, farfallone amoroso,'" Kelly writes, "Benucci gave, with the greatest animation and power of voice. / I was standing close to Mozart, who, *sotto voce*, was repeating, Bravo! Bravo! Benucci; and when Benucci came to the fine passage, 'Cherubino, alla vittoria, alla gloria militar,' which he gave out with stentorian lungs, the effect was electricity itself, for the whole of the performers on the stage, and those in the orchestra, as if actuated by one feeling of delight, vociferated Bravo! Bravo! Maestro. Viva, viva, grande Mozart. Those in the orchestra I thought would never have ceased applauding, by beating the bows of their violins against the music desks. The little man [i.e. Mozart] acknowledged, by repeated obeisances, this thanks for the distinguished mark of enthusiastic applause bestowed upon him."⁵ This is the only known first-hand account of Benucci's portrayal of Figaro, but when Luigi Bassi (who sang Count Almaviva under Mozart's direction in Prague the following year) sang Figaro in Vienna in 1807, over twenty years later, he pleased the local audience "due to the mischievousness, urbanity, humour and ideal content that he laid down in Figaro's character", as one critic observed.⁶ Perhaps the portrayal by the two original Mozart *buffos* would not have been markedly different.

This leads on to the question what the qualities were that inspired some of the greatest composers of the age to write some of their best-known operas for Benucci. The musicologist Dorothea Link, who has surveyed all the operas written for him and published a selection of his arias by composers other than Mozart, has focused on what has been called his 'vocal profile', i.e. his range and preferred tessitura, but also on specific vocal gestures that were designed to showcase his vocal and musical strengths.⁷ I am more interested in Francesco Benucci as an actor, however, and will therefore look on what may be gathered from contemporary reports about him as a stage performer.

In November 1782, when the Emperor was on the lookout for Italian singers for his new *buffa* company, the poet Giambattista Casti described Benucci as follows in a letter to the Austrian Prince Kaunitz: "rich vocal timbre, most excellent singer: the most graceful buffo known to me, without vulgarity and poor taste, but with elegance and

⁵ Michael Kelly: *Reminiscences of the King's Theatre, and Theatre Royal Drury Lane, Including a Period of Nearly Half a Century; with Original Anecdotes of Many Distinguished Persons, Political, Literary, and Musical*, I-II, Vol. 1, Henry Colburn, London 1826, p. 259.

⁶ "Allgemein gefiel aber Herr Bassi, der durch die Verschmitztheit, Gewandtheit, Laune und Idealität, welche er in den Charakter Figaros legte, den unerreichbaren Lohn in dem Herzen der befriedigten Kenner und Freunde der Bühne fand." *Zeitung für Theater, Musik und Poesie*, 1807, no. 16, p. 61.

⁷ Dorothea Link (ed.): *Arias for Francesco Benucci, Mozart's First Figaro and Guglielmo*, A- R Editions, Inc., Middleton (Wisconsin), 2004.

intelligence."⁸ And after the singer's debut in Vienna the following year, a critic wrote: "the acting [...] of the *buffo* is so natural that he is regarded as the best ever seen here."⁹ In 1790 another critic wrote: "In the Italian company there is only Benucci – previously there was [also] Mandini – who knows how to elevate the plot with his acting and singing. If he had Fischer's voice, then he would be peerless."¹⁰ In 1793 a third critic reflected the anti-Italian sentiments that had now begun to flourish: "*Benucci*, one of the premier buffos in *opera buffa*, combines unaffected, excellent acting with an exceptionally round, beautiful, and full bass voice. He is as much a complete singer as a choice actor. He has a rare habit that few Italian singers share: *he never exaggerates*. Even when he brings his acting to the highest extremes, he maintains propriety and secure limits, which hold him back from absurd, vulgar comedy. I like him particularly in the opera *Il matrimonio segreto*. He acts and sings the role of the Count in a masterly fashion. I wouldn't have believed that, in spite of being a comedian, he nonetheless still manages to portray Axur by Salieri in a rather serious manner."¹¹ An Italian writer, Giuseppe Voltiggi, who lived in Vienna, wrote a pamphlet about the opera company in the same year, which has escaped the attention of scholars, but in which he used Benucci as an example in his defence of Italian actors: "One must understand in regard to the Italian *buffo* that he is almost nothing but an *acting musician* [*comico musico*] who is ever so burlesque, playful and facetious, but is also bred to teach and delight. For eleven years we have seen here one *Benucci* from Livorno – with his unattainable finesse and comical naturalness, and accompanied by his big, clear, strong and melodious bass voice that fills and shakes the theatre – extract the ridiculousness from his characters and from the small circumstances of his subject, which are perfectly placed, and present this ridiculousness with decorum in its true and natural likeness in every accent, in every gesture, in every glance, in every movement to the attentive and cultivated spectator who, without ever being satiated, beholds it, enjoys it, applauds it and celebrates it throughout." Voltiggi then highlights eleven of the roles which "this most judicious Proteus" had sung in Vienna, in operas by Salieri, Sarti, Paisiello, Guglielmi, Martín y Soler and Cimarosa, including *Il matrimonio segreto* but none of his

⁸ "[...] gran metallo di voce, buonissimo cantante: il più grazioso buffone che io conosca, ma senza bassezza e indecenza, ma con grazia e intelligenza." Letter of 27 November 1782. Original and translation quoted from *ibid.*, p. viii.

⁹ *Litteratur- und Theater-Zeitung*, vol. 1 (1784), p. 313. The translation quoted from Hermann Abert: *Mozart*, trans. Stewart Spencer, ed. Cliff Eisen, Yale University Press 2007, p. 802n40.

¹⁰ Quoted from Link, p. viii. Stefano Mandini created the role of Count Almaviva in *Le nozze di Figaro*. Ludwig Fischer created the role of Osmin in *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* (1782).

¹¹ "*Benucci*, einer der ersten Buffon in der *Op. Buffa*, vereinigt mit seinem ungezwungenen vortrefflichen Spiel eine äußerst runde, schöne, volle Baßstimme. Er ist eben so vollkommener Sänger als er ein trefflicher Schauspieler ist. Er hat die seltene, so löbliche Gewohnheit, die wenigen italien. Buffons eigen ist: *daß er nichts übertreibt*. Wenn er auch sein Spiel bis auf den äussersten Grad treibt, so behält er doch immer eine Anständigkeit und gewissen Schranken bei, die ihn von dem absurden Pöbelhaft-Komischen zurückhalten. Vorzüglich hat er mir gefallen in der Oper *il matrimonio segreto*. Die Rolle des Grafen spielt und singt er meisterhaft. Ich hätte nicht geglaubt, daß er Axur von Salieri, trotz dem, daß er ein Komiker ist, doch noch ziemlich ernsthaft spielt". *Berlinische musikalische Zeitung*, 1793, pp. 138-39, original and translation quoted from *ibid.*, p. viii. Benucci had created the title role in *Axur re d'Ormus* (1788) by Antonio Salieri.

three Mozart roles, probably reflecting many Italians' reserved attitude towards the German composer.¹²

These contemporary reports are valuable for indicating the standards according to which Francesco Benucci was regarded as the greatest *buffo* in Europe. Apart from mentioning the fact that his voice was remarkable for its richness of timbre rather than for its volume (though contemporaries tended to differ on that point), critics referred – if we sum up – to the decorum, taste, gracefulness, elegance, finesse, intelligence and naturalness of his acting. He was praised for elevating the plots of the operas in which he appeared (and which were not all of great literary merit), for avoiding the vulgarity and exaggerated antics of the low farce, and for his ability to teach and delight the cultivated audience by extracting the ridiculous sides of his characters. It is also noteworthy that he was described as a 'Proteus', i.e. as an actor who would transform himself into his character, and that he was convincing as the villainous tyrant Axur in Salieri's and Lorenzo Da Ponte's *Axur re d'Ormus*, which was unusual for a *buffo* and suggests that he was able to strike a balance between the comic and the serious. The reports show that Benucci acted in accordance with the enlightened theatrical reforms of the mid-eighteenth century, which had been initiated, among others, by Diderot and Beaumarchais in France and by Lessing in Germany. Striving for a theatre that could serve as a model for a more enlightened society, these influential playwrights and theorists believed that drama should appeal to the human sympathy and recognition rather than merely to the wit and rational faculties of the audience, for which reason satire and caricature were excluded. In the name of naturalness, the watertight boundaries, which the Aristotelian classicists of the seventeenth and earlier eighteenth centuries had erected between comedy and farce on the one hand and tragedy and heroic drama on the other, were softened, as were the boundaries between the traditional 'types' or lines of roles: a tragic protagonist was no longer necessarily of royal descent, but could be the son or daughter of the bourgeoisie, which characters had till now only appeared as lovers in the comedy; and a servant was no longer simply the comical servant, but could be a more rounded character that might appeal to the sensibilities of the spectators. The Molieresque comedy of character gradually gave way to the enlightened comedy of manners that aimed to expose the absurd and prejudicial structures of society and therefore centred more on the interaction

¹² "Tutto altro d'è intendersi del *Buffo* italiano, che strettamente non è che un *comico musico*, il quale è sì burlesco giocoso faceto, ma è altresì costumato che insegna e diletta. Per un corso di XI. anni veggiamo qui un *Benucci* livornese con inarrivabile finezza e naturalezza comico, accompagnata dalla sua gran voce, netta, forte, bassa, canora che empie e scuote il teatro, ricavava il ridicolo dai caratteri e dalle altre piccole circostanze del suo soggetto, di cui perfettamente s'investe, e questo ridicolo presentare con decoro in ogni accento, in ogni gesto, in ogni sguardo, in ogni movimento nel suo vero natural sembiante all' attento e colto spettatore, che senza saziarsene giammai la guata, lo gode, gli applaude, e dappertutto lo celebra. Considera questo giudiziosissimo Proteo nelle Opera *la Scuola de' Gelosi*, *tra i due Litiganti*, nel *re Teodoro*, nella *Grotta di Trofonio*, nella *Cifra*, nella *Pastorella nobile*, nella *bella Pescatrice*, nel *Pittore Parigino*, nel *Burbero di buon cuore*, nel *Barbiere di Siviglia*, nel *Matrimonio secreto* e in tante altre per accertarsene, che il termine *Buffo* non ha bisogno per nessun verso d'essere interpretato più *civilmente* che *fedelmente*." Giuseppe Voltiggi: *Lettera apologetica intorno al teatro italiano in Vienna contro le censure del Mercurio Austriaco*, Alberto Antonio Patzowsky, Vienna 1793, pp. 17-18.

between characters. The concept of 'decorum', which to the Aristotelian classicists primarily had a social meaning – the princes, the lovers and the servants should behave on stage in accordance with their class – now acquired aesthetic and moral significance: in the enlightened theatre, it was no longer a breach of decorum to represent a servant as a character of 'bourgeois' sensibilities but, on the contrary, to portray him as grotesque, caricatured and thereby ugly and repulsive. In the name of the Good, the True and the Beautiful, all characters were at the same time individualized and idealized, 'taste', 'grace', and 'elegance' becoming universal terms of praise. The new standard of acting was encapsulated in the concept of the intelligently applied 'finesse' (alternatively known as 'shade' or 'nuance') in which the performer revealed the character's relation to the other characters by means of vocal inflection, facial expression or other forms of visual acting.

One who deplored the demise of this theatrical aesthetic in the nineteenth century was the novelist Caroline Pichler, a former pupil of Mozart's, who in the 1830s wrote an essay about 'the characters in contemporary novels and dramas', in which she complained about the influence on the German theatre by contemporary French comedies, probably especially those by Eugène Scribe, the inventor of the well-made play (also known as the principal librettist of the Parisian genre of *grand opera*). Her essay gives a vivid impression of the difference between the character portrayals in Vienna in the late eighteenth century and those of the post-Napoleonic period. The modern French comedies, she said, "show the greatest frivolity of social life, the craziest urges of light-headedness in a corrupted high society and its imitation by the lower classes, while surprising effects are produced without any regard for characterization, motivation or internal and external plausibility. / These examples are now copied by the Germans, especially in comedies, the entire expression, development and tendency of which are modelled according to the French taste. In accordance with these patterns, ridiculous or blameworthy characters in whose errors or weaknesses we recognize our own or (if we are not that unassuming) those of our acquaintances, at which we may laugh, do not appear here alongside worthy and serious personages. All of them – young and old, noble and base – are now *wicked* or *silly*. [...] On average, those of the men who are meant to be amiable – young husbands or lovers – are debtors, good-for-nothings or at least most thoughtless people who deserve no respect, for which reason they can arouse no interest save the excitement of curiosity or surprise. The others, who are cheated or made fools of by these, or are used as means for their purposes, appear extremely silly, for in order to make possible the tightening of a loose knot that is calculated to produce curiosity and surprise, they must often be deprived of the most common human intellect, and in some cases even of the acuteness of the senses in order not to notice what could not possibly have been missed otherwise. / Certainly, such things also occurred earlier in comedies of the lower sort, or in farces; but the elevated comedy spurned such means to excite laughter and preferred to deal with a more correct development of the emotions and with the psychologically true representation of the driving forces in the human souls of misguided, foolish or ignoble characters who thereby caused comical or blameworthy

aberrations or imbroglios. / These ridiculous and faulty characters always appeared, however, alongside worthy and estimable characters who served as their foil. There were also plays in which the ridiculous and the faulty appeared in noble souls, which often made them the more interesting. Who does not remember – at least by tradition – *Der gutherzige Murrkopf* (*Le bourru bienfaisant*), which we also saw performed as an opera, and here in Vienna performed with great artistry by the famous comedian *Benucci*;¹³ or the misanthropic colonel in *Der Fähndrich* who finds the missing silver spoon in his own pocket;¹⁴ or the soldierly stiff yet so kind-hearted Paul Werner in *Minna von Barnhelm*? But in which contemporary plays do we find noble characters like Tellheim,¹⁵ Major Selting in *Der Ring*,¹⁶ etc.? It would not be difficult but exhausting to expand the list of such examples. Anyone who knows the theatre could name more such that might occur to him, and anyone who wishes to be impartial will remember the quiet pleasure with which he has seen the actions of these images of a nobler mankind, these estimable if sometimes weak, these noble if humorous or exaggerated characters, how he felt

¹³ *Le Bourru bienfaisant* (1771) is a comedy by Carlo Goldoni, adapted for the operatic stage by Lorenzo Da Ponte and Vicente Martín y Soler as *Il burbero di buon cuore* (1786).

¹⁴ *Der Fähndrich oder Der falsche Verdacht* (1786) is a comedy by Friedrich Ludwig Schröder.

¹⁵ Paul Werner and Major von Tellheim are both characters in the comedy *Minna von Barnhelm oder Das Soldatenglück* (1767) by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing.

¹⁶ *Der Ring oder Die unglückliche Ehe durch Delikatesse* (1786) is a comedy by Friedrich Ludwig Schröder.

pleasantly stimulated, and how he even felt pleasure in the echoes after he had left the theatre."¹⁷

What Caroline Pichler longed for was the Late Enlightenment theatre of the 1780s, but it is remarkable that she highlights Francesco Benucci's portrayal of Farramondo, the title role of Lorenzo Da Ponte's and Vicente Martín y Soler's *Il burbero di buon cuore* from 1786, as a model example of this type of comical character. It is also remarkable that she mentions Benucci's performance alongside characters created by two of the most prominent German playwrights who were performed in Vienna at the time: Lessing and Friedrich Ludwig Schröder. Especially since Schröder was not only a playwright, but also one of the most prominent German actors performing in Vienna in the 1780s to whom Benucci was sometimes compared. In August 1783, about four months after his arrival in Vienna, Benucci sang Bartolo in the local premiere of Giovanni Paisiello's *Il barbiere di Siviglia*, in the same month that Schröder, at the same theatre, played Bartolo in a German-language performance of Beaumarchais' comedy on which the opera was based. The Emperor wrote to his theatre manager Count Orsini-Rosenberg after having seen the operatic version that the singers "truly exceeded what we had

¹⁷ "Im [französischen] Lustspiele hingegen ist [...] die höchste Frivolität des geselligen Lebens, das tollste Treiben des Übermuthes der verderbten großen Welt, und der ihr nachhaffenden niedrigeren Classen dargestellt, und überraschende Effecte sind ohne alle Rücksicht auf Characterzeichnung, Motivirung oder innere und äußere Wahrscheinlichkeit hervorgebracht. / Diesen Vorbildern ahmt nun der Deutsche nach, besonders im Lustspiel, dessen ganzer Ausdruck, Gang und Tendenz sich nach französischem Geschmack modelt. Hier erscheinen, jenen Mustern zufolge, nicht bloß lächerliche oder tadelnswerthe Charactere, an deren Fehlern oder Schwächen wir die unsrigen erkennen, oder wenn wir nicht so bescheiden sind, die unserer Bekannten finden und über sie lachen können, neben würdigen, ernsthaften Gestalten. Jetzt sind sie *Alle*, Jung und Alt, Vornehm und Niedrig, *schlecht* oder *albern*. Die Weiber sind frivol, eitel, mehr oder weniger kokett, und wenn sie nicht ganz im Unrecht untergehen, so haben sie sich eben noch durch Zufall am äußersten Rande erhalten. (Das ist's aber, was uns die Franzosen als ein Zeichen von Verbesserung der Sitten in ihren Stücken rühmen!) Die Männer, nämlich die liebenswürdig gemeinten, jungen Ehegatten oder Liebhaber, sind im Durchschnitte alle Schuldenmacher, Taugenichtse, oder wenigstens höchst leichtsinnige Menschen, die keine Achtung verdienen, und daher auch, außer dem Reiz der Neugier oder der Überraschung, keinerlei Interesse erregen können. Die Andern, welche von diesen übervorthelt oder gefoppt, oder als Mittel zu ihren Zwecken gebraucht werden, stellen sich äußerst albern dar, und müssen, um die Schürzung eines lockeren, auf Neugier und Überraschung berechneten Knotens möglich zu machen, oft des gemeinsten Menschenverstandes, ja in manchem Falle sogar der Schärfe der Sinne entbehren, um nicht zu bemerken, was sonst unmöglich übersehen werden könnte. / Solche Dinge sind nun freylich auch früher in Lustspielen niedrigerer Art oder in Possen vorgekommen; das feine Lustspiel aber verschmähte solche Mittel, um Lachen zu erregen, und beschäftigte sich am liebsten mit richtiger Entwicklung der Empfindungen, mit Darstellung psychologisch wahrer Triebfedern in der menschlichen Seele, die dann bey verkehrten, thörichten oder unedlen Characteren komische oder tadelnswerthe Verirrungen und Verwirrungen zu erzeugen vermochten. / Diesen lächerlichen fehlerhaften Personen standen aber stets würdige, schätzbare zur Seite, denen jene zur Folie dienten. Auch gab es Stücke, wo das Lächerliche und Fehlerhafte an edlen Gemüthern erschien, und oft um so interessanter wurde. Wer erinnert sich nicht, wenigstens durch Tradition, an den „gutherzigen Murrkopf“ (Le bourru bienfaisant), den wir auch als Oper, und zwar hier in Wien, von dem berühmten Komiker *Benucci* mit großer Kunst darstellen sahen; an den misanthropischen Oberst im „Fähnrich“, der den vermißten Silberlöffel in seiner eigenen Tasche findet; an den soldatisch-steifen und doch so gutherzigen Paul Werner in der „Minna von Barnhelm?“ Aber wo erscheinen in neueren Stücken edle Charaktere, wie ein Tellheim, Major Selting im „Ringe“ u. s. w.? Es würde nicht schwer, aber ermüdend seyn, die Liste solcher Beyspiele zu vergrößern. Jeder, der das Theater kennt, wird mehrere, die ihm vorgekommen, zu nennen wissen; und Jeder, wenn er unpartheyisch seyn will, sich des stillen Vergnügens erinnern, mit dem er diese Bilder einer edleren Menschheit, diese, zuweilen schwachen, aber achtungswerthen, diese, bey Launen oder Übertreibungen dennoch edlen, Charactere handeln gesehen, sich angenehm davon angeregt gefühlt, und selbst nachdem er das Theater verlassen, im Nachklange noch Vergnügen genossen hatte." Caroline Pichler: ‚Zeitbilder‘ in *Sämmtliche Werke*, vol. 51, Pichler, Vienna 1839, pp. 263-66.

hoped in their acting, above all Benucci who in certain moments has copied and almost grazed Schröder."¹⁸

The similarities between Schröder and Benucci may have given rise to the general opinion that the critic Johann Baptist von Alxinger expressed ten years later, when he asked rhetorically whether even such acclaimed *buffos* as Stefano Mandini and Francesco Benucci had not first become excellent actors in Vienna.¹⁹ That the German-speaking world was the fountainhead of all good acting was a view that had gained momentum in the years after the French Revolution, with its resulting upsurge in German nationalism that accompanied anti-Habsburg, and hence anti-Italian, sentiments. Italian acting became associated with exaggeration, grimaces, *lazzi*, vulgar jests and clichéd and sketchy characterization, in short as lacking in taste, refinement and psychological appropriateness, which were regarded as the hallmarks of German acting. This prevalent negative attitude towards Italian actors – according to which the greatest praise one could bestow on them was to say that they acted like Germans – incensed Voltiggi, the Italian observer in Vienna, who reacted against Alxinger's "prejudices" regarding Benucci and Mandini in his 1793 pamphlet: "Those who have a good memory will remember that Benucci in the first opera [in Vienna], *La scuola de' gelosi*, and that Mandini in the second one, *Fra i due litiganti*²⁰ were that from the beginning, which they always were afterwards. He will know that Italians are actors, singers, and musicians by nature; that Italy has had comedies, tragedies, opera and theatre for three hundred years [...]; that Italian acting is, in the gestures, in the movements, in the postures, in the groupings, in the face, in the arms, in the feet, in the gait, in the turmoil, and in the corresponding declamation, quite different from all foreign acting and entirely analogous to the customs of the nation where the mentioned singers and actors can very well have perfected themselves by virtue of their own gifts, art and practice, but never by imitating foreigners." Voltiggi then turns to the well-known portrayals of Bartolo in *The Barber of Seville*, of which the Emperor had written that Benucci "in certain moments" had copied Schröder and that he "almost grazed" him. Voltiggi wrote, however, that one in these productions observed "no small difference between the acting of the famous comedian *Schröder* and that of the opera singer *Benucci*. Joseph II, that most sensible Emperor who, as a great lover and connoisseur of acting and singing, almost never neglected a performance, obviously had this to say after having seen the two celebrated competitors: 'the former imitated nature marvellously, while in the latter that same nature was at work, and Benucci

¹⁸ "[...] surtout Benucci qui dans des certains moments a copié et presque frisé Schröder." Letter of 14 August 1783, original quoted from Link, p. xviii. Link translates the quotation as follows, however: "Benucci [...] in certain moments copied Schröder almost to the hair" (Link, p. viii).

¹⁹ "Den 4. May gab man das Salierische Meisterstück *Axur*. [...] Haben sich nicht selbst Mandini und Benucci erst hier zu vorzüglichen Schauspielern gebildet?" Johann Baptist von Alxinger (ed.): *Österreichische Monatsschrift*, vol. 2, Calve & Schrämbel, Prague and Vienna 1793, p. 60.

²⁰ *La scola de' gelosi* (1779) was a comic opera by Antonio Salieri, and *Fra i due litiganti il terzo gode* (1782) a comic opera by Giuseppe Sarti. They both received their Viennese premieres in 1783.

surpassed himself."²¹ There need not be a contradiction between the Emperor's two observations: Benucci could have copied certain details of Schröder's portrayal even if his overall approach was different. The difference between imitating nature and embodying nature might correspond to the famous distinction between the 'cold' and the 'warm' actor that Diderot had drawn in his *Parodoxe sur le comédien* less than ten years before the two Viennese *Barbers of Seville*. As with Mozart's Figaro, a hint of how Benucci may have acted Paisiello's Bartolo may be found in a review of Luigi Bassi's portrayal of the same role – albeit in Francesco Morlacchi's rather than Giovanni Paisiello's setting of Petrosellini's libretto – in Dresden in 1816. The critic especially praised "the natural and true way he knew how to enforce the Spanish demeanour and solemnity alongside the general affections of jealousy, irascibility etc.: a truly artistic problem, nobly solved."²² The said problem clearly consisted in portraying the character as ridiculous and faulty and, simultaneously, as natural and noble, to use Caroline Pichler's terms.

Unfortunately, we possess no detailed descriptions of any of Benucci's portrayals, so if we want to get an impression of how an accomplished *buffo* of the late eighteenth century would have acted, it seems more meaningful to turn to the two accounts of Luigi Bassi's portrayal of Don Giovanni, recorded by the Dresden singing pedagogue Marie Börner-Sandrini, the daughter of the Italian soprano Luigia Sandrini-Caravoglia who in the years 1802-6 had sung both Donna Anna and Zerlina to his Don Giovanni in Prague and Raudnitz, and in 1817 Donna Elvira to his Masetto in a production that he directed in Dresden. In this context, I will not read these accounts for what they convey about the interpretation of the character Don Giovanni, but

²¹ "Il pregiudizio è un gran seduttore del diritto pensare. Ella dice: *non si sono gli stessi Mandini e Benucci qui per la prima volta formati eccellenti attori comici?* Chi ha buona memoria si ricorda, che il Benucci nella prima Opera *la Scuola de' gelosi*, e il Mandini nell'altra *fra i due Litiganti* erano stato dapprincipio quello, che furono sempre dipoi. Ella saprà che l'italiano è per natura attore, cantore, musico; che l'Italia ha commedie, tragedie, opera, teatro da 300. anni addietro [...]; che l'azione italiana nei gesti, nei movimenti, nelle attitudini, nei gruppi, nel viso, nelle braccia, ne' piedi, nel portamento, nell'agitazione, nella corrispondente declamazione è affatto da ogni straniera differente, e puramente analoga alle costumanze della propria nazione, onde possono essersi bensì gli accennati cantori ed attori perfezionati per virtù del proprio genio, arte e pratica, ma non mai per avere gli stranieri imitati. [...] Parimenti nel *Barbiere di Siviglia* rappresentato in commedia, e poscia in Opera si osservò non piccola differenza d'azione tra il famoso *Schröder* comico, e tra il *Benucci* operista. Giuseppe II. Augusto sensibilissimo, il quale quasi mai non trascurava una rappresentazione come gran amator e conoscitore dell'azione e del canto, dopo avere veduti questi due celebri emoli, ebbe a dire palesamente che *il primo a meraviglia imitava la natura, e che nel secondo operava la stessa natura, e che il Benucci avea superato se stesso.* [...] Qui vorrei che ella da filosofo disappassionato penetrasse chiaramente, che l'azione di un Operista è assai più difficile di quella d'un Comico, perchè l'Operista dee cantare ed agire a battuta musicale, e ripetendo la musica le stesse parole e gli stessi sentimenti, oltre il vacuo di tanti ritornelli, deve l'Operista variare sul fatto l'azione e moltiplicarla: laddove il Comico sciolto dagli imbarazzantissimi legami della musica e del verso corre a galoppo nella sua prosa senza fermarsi mai, nè ritornare sugli stessi passi, e conseguentemente senza dover moltiplicare a misura la galoppante sua azione." Giuseppe Voltiggi: *Lettera apologetica intorno al teatro italiano in Vienna contro le censure del Mercurio Austriaco*, Alberto Antonio Patzowsky, Vienna 1793, pp. 21-23.

²² "Hr. Bassi, als Bartolo, zeichnete sich als braver Schauspieler aus; besonders scheint zu rühmen, wie natürlich und wahr er, neben den allgemeinen Affecten der Eifersucht, Zornmüthigkeit etc., die spanische Haltung und Gravität durchzuführen wusste – eine wahrhaft künstlerische Aufgabe, wacker gelöst." 'Nachrichten', in: *Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung*, vol. 18, no. 23, 5 June 1816, p. 386.

rather for what they convey about the acting style of the *buffos* for whom the great composers of the late eighteenth century wrote their major roles. In 1876 Börner-Sandrini wrote as follows in her collected reminiscences:

"With his impeccable, chivalrous elegance and seductive amiability towards the women, my mother always called [Bassi] the unparalleled interpreter of [Don Giovanni], and she would frequently highlight some exceptional nuances that she never encountered in later famous performers of this role. / In the scene in Act One, for example, when Don Giovanni in his encounter with Ottavio and Anna offers his services to the latter, he unfolded some gallantries at his leave-taking, which through an ardent kiss on Donna Anna's hand built up to a fervour that made the rake defeat the wise man of the world and lent his words 'bellissima Donn'Anna' an almost painfully reproachful expression of rejected love. / This brilliant twist offered the dramatic intelligence of Caravoglia as Donna Anna, when she recognises the culprit, the more opportunity to lend the words 'Don Ottavio, son morta!' that expression of disgust, which increased continually during the subsequent narration of the assault until reaching its point of culmination at the end, 'compie il misfatto suo col dargli morte' (completes his misdeeds by taking his life), evoking an endless storm of applause. / Bassi placed another nuance before the beginning of the minuet in the first finale when he, in accordance with his duty as host, first asked Donna Anna and Donna Elvira for a dance with respectful gallantry. Only then, when his invitation had been declined by both, did he turn – with an indescribable gesture of indifference – to Zerlina, dancing the minuet with her according to all the rules and with the greatest nobility (not just letting her turn around a few times under his arm, as is customary nowadays), and first in the figure where the couples join hands did he lead her away. / A third highlight was Bassi's acting in the last scene with the Governor's ghost: here he differed entirely from later renditions. / It is well known that Don Giovanni withdraws in order to open the door, holding the candelabrum and a napkin. With the latter, the modern Don Giovannis usually wipe off their makeup behind the scenes, whereupon they run, half backwards, in front of the ghost, displaying signs of extreme horror. They stagger towards the supper table, pour out champagne repeatedly in order to prime themselves with Dutch courage, dry the cold sweat from their foreheads and stagger from time to time towards the ghost, only to return in a tremble. In short: they display a fear completely alien to Don Giovanni the non-believer, the atheist. How different Bassi was! / In addition to the candelabrum, he had, when withdrawing towards the door, his bared rapier in hand. He kept holding on to the rapier, the light in his other hand, as he cautiously and calmly went to the supper table, never letting the figure of the Governor out of his sight. He put down candelabrum and rapier on the table and remained standing there with folded arms as he gave Leporello his order about new servicing. In short, he behaved as a completely calm, fearless and composed gentleman who, surmising an attempt on his person or at least a bad joke, is most unpleasantly affected by the scene. / Bassi knew how to suggest this mood excellently through a continuous, threatening frown and an apprehensive darkening of his noble features. Thus he remained composed until the moment when he in defiant

foolhardiness gave the ghost his hand in pledge. Here – at which moment Bassi's dramatic talent triumphed – the magnificent intensification of the situation set in (which becomes impossible in the customary interpretation). The bold criminal was now seized with despair, his hair standing on end: his features and gestures expressed horror, he turned to and fro, writhing at the ghost's handshake, and having disengaged himself after unspeakable efforts he finally fell to the ground in fear of death, tormented by the furies of his conscience."²³

Some years later, in an essay published in 1888, Börner-Sandrini elaborated on her account by adding descriptions of Bassi's acting in two other scenes: "My mother always spoke with the greatest satisfaction of the artist's rendition of this the most amiable of rakes, especially highlighting the contrast in Don Giovanni's behaviour towards the three female characters. Thus, Bassi's Don Giovanni always sported a certain kind of suppressed tenderness combined with reverence before Donna Anna. Towards Donna Elvira, on the other hand, he behaved as the perfect gentleman who

²³ "Von tadelloser, ritterlicher Eleganz und verführerischer Liebenswürdigkeit den Frauen gegenüber, nannte ihn meine Mutter stets unerreichten Vertreter dieser Partie und wurden einige befondere Nüancen häufig hervorgehoben, welche sie niemals bei spätern berühmten Inhabern dieser Rolle wahrgenommen hat. / Beispielsweise die Scene des ersten Actes, wo Don Juan bei der Begegnung mit Octavio und Anna dieser seine Dienste anbietet, wobei er eine Galanterie entwickelte, die sich beim Abschied durch einen feurigen Handkuß bei Donna Anna zu einer Leidenschaftlichkeit steigerte, welche den Wüfling über den klugen Weltmann siegen machte und seinen Worten: „bellissima Donn' Anna" (schönste Donna Anna) einen fast schmerzlich vorwurfsvollen Ausdruck gekränkter Liebe verlieh. / Diese geniale Wendung bot nun der dramatischen Begabung der Caravoglia als Donna Anna um so mehr Gelegenheit, bei dem Erkennen des Verbrechens ihren Abcheu mit den Worten: „Don Ottavio, son morta!" (Don Octavio, ich sterbe!) jenen Ausdruck zu verleihen, welcher sich, während der darauf folgenden Erzählung des Attentates fortwährend steigend, bis zu deren Abschluß: „Compia [sic] il misfatto suo, con dargli morte!" (häuft seine Missethaten, raubt ihm das Leben) den Culminationspunkt erreichte, um einen endlosen Beifallsturm hervorzurufen. / Eine zweite Nüance brachte Bassi im ersten Finale vor Beginn des Menuetts, wofelbst er, seiner Pflicht als Hausherr genügend, zuvor Donna Anna und Donna Elvira mit respectvoller Galanterie zum Tanzen auffordert, von Beiden abgelehnt – mit einer unbeschreiblichen Geberde von Gleichgültigkeit – sich nun erst zu Zerline wendet, mit ihr das Menuett nach allen Regeln mit der größten Noblesse (nicht wie jetzt gebräuchlich dieselbe bloß einigemal unter dem Arme herumdrehen lassend) tanzte und erst bei der Tour, wo die Paare sich bei beiden Händen fassen, Zerline bei Seite führte. / Ein dritter Glanzpunkt war Bassi's Spiel in der letzten Scene mit dem Geiste des Gouverneurs; hier wich er vollständig von der späteren Wiedergabe derselben ab. / Bekanntlich entfernt sich Don Juan, um die Thüre zu öffnen, mit dem Armleuchter und einer Serviette versehen; mit Letzterer pflegen sich in der Regel die Don Juan's der neueren Zeit hinter der Scene die Schminke wegzuwischen, stürzen mit den Zeichen höchster Entsetzens halb rücklings vor dem Geiste auf die Bühne, wanken zum Speisetisch, schenken sich wiederholt Champagner ein, um sich damit Courage zu trinken?! wischen sich den Angstschweiß von der Stirne, wanken von Zeit zu Zeit dem Geiste etwas näher, um schauernd wieder zurück zu treten, kurz – documentiren eine Furcht, welche dem Atheisten, dem Gottesleugner Don Juan, vollständig fern liegt. Wie anders Bassi! / Derselbe hatte beim Hinausgehen außer dem Armleuchter seinen entblößten Degen zur Hand genommen – trat vorfichtig, stets diesen festhaltend und das Licht in der andern Hand, die Gestalt des Gouverneurs nicht aus den Augen lassend, ruhig zum Eßtisch, setzte Leuchter und Degen weg, blieb mit verschränkten Armen hier stehen, um Leporello seine Befehle wegen neuer Bedienung zu ertheilen, kurz, benahm sich wie ein vollständig ruhiger, furchtloser, gelassener Cavalier, welcher indessen, einen bösen Anschlag auf seine Person, oder mindestens einen schlechten Spaß muthmaßend, von diesem Auftritt höchst unangenehm berührt ist. / Bassi verstand diese Stimmung durch ein anhaltendes, drohendes Stirnenrunzeln und eine bedenkliche Verdüsterung seiner edlen Gesichtszüge vortrefflich zu bezeichnen – so blieb er gelassen bis zum Moment, wo er in frecher Tollkühnheit dem Geiste die Hand, zum Pfande reicht, hier – und dies war der Triumph von Bassi's dramatischem Talente, konnte nun die großartige Steigerung der Situation eintreten (welche bei der gewöhnlichen Auffassung unmöglich wird). Hier kam Verzweiflung an den kühnen Verbrecher, seine Haare sträubten sich – seine Zügel und Geberde drückten Entsetzen aus, er wand sich unter dem Händedruck des Geistes krümmend hin und her, um nach unfähiger Anstrengung sich loszureißen und in Todesangst, von den Furien seines Gewillens gepeinigt, zur Erde stürzend, zu verlinken." Marie Börner-Sandrini: *Erinnerungen einer alten Dresdnerin*, Hermann Burdach, Warnatz & Lehmann, Dresden 1876, pp. 213-16.

may still treat his former lover with chivalrous amiability, but who at well-chosen moments shows clear signs of some impatience, however, which he always, quickly and cleverly, tries to suppress. Towards the coquettish and rather narrow-minded Zerlina he behaved with that deliberate gallantry which manifests itself in all kinds of exaggerated flatteries whose feeble worth a cleverer girl soon recognises, but which this one accepts at their face value. – In addition, my mother always highlighted Bassi's peculiar, almost cheerful courtliness even in a few of the tragic moments of the [opera], as after the killing of the old Commendatore right in the first scene, to which he to some extent had resorted partly under compulsion, however. Here Bassi as Don Giovanni showed a kind of human compassion and regret at the sad outcome of this adventure, yet with a quick transition to the frivolous, cheerful aspect of the role at the speedy escape together with his waiting servant, Leporello".²⁴

What should first strike us in Börner-Sandrini's retelling of her mother's anecdotes is the emphasis on the lifelike yet idealized character's chivalrous behaviour and amiable nature: Don Giovanni's nobility was not simply a class marker, but a moral and aesthetic quality, which should earn him the respect of the spectators and invite them to be more accepting of his central fault: his excessive libidinous drive, which occasions most of the opera's comic situations, such as his "exaggerated flatteries" when seducing Zerlina and his inability to control himself in the presence of Donna Anna. Clearly, this Late Enlightenment conception of the seducer contrasts with the frivolous, fraudulent and even murderous conception, which we know from Romantic and modern tradition, and which was, ironically, introduced by Benucci's competitor Friedrich Ludwig Schröder in the first German-language adaptation of the opera, in Hamburg in 1789.

Secondly, it is important to note that the performer's conception of the character, in accordance with the eighteenth-century acting reforms, was communicated in "nuances" that all emerged from contrasts in Don Giovanni's interaction with the other characters, and that all the nuances involve a transition from one attitude to another. Thus we hear of the transition from Don Giovanni's compassion with the dying

²⁴ "Mit größter Befriedigung sprach meine Mutter stets von des Künstlers Wiedergabe dieses liebenswürdigsten aller Wüftlinge, namentlich hob sie den Gegensatz hervor im Verhalten Don Juans den drei Frauenrollen gegenüber. So trug Bassi Don Giovanni bei Donna Anna stets eine Art unterdrückte, mit Verehrung gepaarte, gewisse Zärtlichkeit zur Schau, Donna Elvira gegenüber trat er dagegen als vollendeter Cavalier auf, der seine einstige Geliebte mit ritterlicher Liebenswürdigkeit wohl noch behandelt, doch aber in geeigneten Augenblicken eine gewisse Ungeduld, die zwar stets schnell und klug möglichst unterdrückt wird, deutlich merken läßt. Der gefallfüchtigen, ziemlich bornirten Zerline gegenüber trat er mit jener überlegenen Galanterie auf, die sich in allerhand übertriebenen Schmeicheleien bekundet, deren geringen Werth ein klügeres Mädchen bald erkennt, die aber jene für baare Münze nimmt. — Außerdem hob auch meine Mutter die eigenthümliche, fast heitere Vornehmheit Bassi in einzelnen, selbst tragischen Momenten der Rolle hervor, z. B. nach Tödtung des alten Comthurs gleich in der ersten Scene, zu welcher er doch gewissermaßen halb gezwungen schreitet. Hier zeigte Bassi als Don Juan eine Art menschliches Rühren und Bedauern über den traurigen Ablauf dieses Abenteuers mit schnellem Uebergange jedoch in den leichtlebigen heiteren Charakter der Rolle bei der eiligen Flucht mit dem wartenden Diener Leporello (trefflich von Ponziani dargestellt)." Marie Börner-Sandrini: „Eine Erinnerung an Luigi Bassi, Mozarts ersten Don Juan“, in: *Dresdner Anzeiger*, 15 September 1888, vol. 159, no. 259, pp. 17-18.

Commendatore in the introduction to his frivolous and almost cheerful dialogue with Leporello in the subsequent recitative; of the transition from his reverential "bella Donn'Anna" before the quartet to his intimidating "bellissima Donn'Anna" after the quartet; of his transition from the "respectful gallantry" with which he asked Donna Anna and Donna Elvira for a dance in the first finale to the "deliberate gallantry" with which he then dances the minuet with Zerlina; and of the transition from his "completely calm, fearless and composed" behaviour when receiving the Stone Guest to his subsequent "despair", "horror" and "fear of death". Clearly, the effect of these scenes largely depended on gradual build-up rather than on the rhetorical dialectics of Baroque acting, but within the small units of scenes.

Thirdly, the effect also relied on a unique quality in the performer's behaviour in each of these theatrical moments: a particular combination of posture, gesture, facial expression and vocal inflection, which Börner-Sandrini works hard to capture in words. In the introduction Bassi showed "*a kind of* human compassion and regret" that must have been reflected vocally in his lines in the trio, and which then gave way to "*a peculiar, almost cheerful* courtliness" in the recitative. His contrasting behaviour towards the three women must especially have found expression in the scene with Zerlina and Donna Elvira after "Là ci darem la mano" and in the quartet since it is here that Don Giovanni is forced to address two of them at a time, and Mozart's contrasting settings of his addresses to Elvira and Anna in the quartet in themselves read as an invitation to the singer to employ different vocal colours, just as the "*certain kind of* suppressed tenderness combined with reverence" with which he addresses Donna Anna before the quartet and the "*almost painfully* reproachful expression of rejected love" with which he addresses her afterwards must also have had a unique both visual and vocal quality. Börner-Sandrini also mentions that Bassi's gesture of indifference after Anna and Elvira have refused his dance invitation in the first finale was "indescribable" and that he "knew how to indicate" the unpleasant mood in the second finale with his facial expression, though this must also have been reflected in the contrasting vocal inflections with which he addressed the Stone Guest and Leporello. The creation of such subtle and complex expressive effects clearly poses an important challenge to the adherents of HIP.

Although the German critics and pamphleteers of the post-revolutionary period were loath to admit it, both the late eighteenth-century buffo tradition to which Benucci and Bassi belonged and the Lessing tradition to which Schröder belonged had received their most important impulses from French theatre, and hence it is interesting to note that Benucci had little success when he in 1789 performed in London, which was less exposed to French influence. The Italian impresario in London, Giovanni Andrea Gallini, wrote to Earl Cowper in Florence that the current taste of the Londoners "runs more in favour of strong Base voices, than a finer or clearer sort. For instance, Benucci did not please much yet Morelli and Taschi succeeded."²⁵ The critic of the London

²⁵ Quoted from Link, p. viii.

Morning Post thus probably represented the general opinion when observing that "Benucci, the new buffo, possesses a tolerable person, a very good voice, and considerable judgment. His voice is, however, not so good as Morelli's, nor has he so much humour as that performer, but Benucci is more of a gentleman, and is a better musician."²⁶ While the emphasis on strong voices at the expense of taste, finesse and musicianship could be due to the fact that London operagoers were probably less generally familiar with the Italian language than the Viennese – Vienna being, after all, the de facto capital of a great part of Italy – the emphasis on humour and physical appearance at the expense of gentlemanly demeanour may be due to the fact that satire and caricature were still central to the English comedy tradition, while these had become terms of abuse after the reforms on the continent.

Luigi Bassi encountered similar reservations when he in 1819, at the very end of his career, appeared in a spoken play in Dresden, in a German adaptation of one of those French comedies that Caroline Pichler found so repulsive, Eugène Scribe's and Charles-Gaspard Delestre-Poirson's *Une visite à Bedlam*. The critic Karl August Böttiger wrote extensively of Bassi's portrayal of the comic Italian Kapellmeister Crescendo, including that he "proved himself to be a master of his art by never, even in the sweetest ecstasies of his musical enthusiasm and delightful smugness, tending to caricature, which in this context would have been a mere jarring dissonance. Thus his attire was elegant, his facial expression delicate, his movements and gestures southern-swift, yet always agreeable. The smugness, which extended to his whole being, the obtrusiveness, which did not characterize the hungry soldier of fortune, but the self-satisfied virtuoso, earned him a well-deserved success. How sweetly he pronounced his 'che gusto', how he indicated the instrumentation and the safely struck octaves! How genuinely comical the unwrapping of his attestations and his fear when the feigned madman grabs him! In such a role it is allowed to add a great deal and to improvise in a *dell'arte* manner. We ask Herr Bassi to be more generous with such things and to emphasize the exotic pronunciation even more. Some things, such as the decisive 'paid for' at the end of the first couplet [may] receive further emphasis".²⁷ Although Böttiger praised Bassi for avoiding caricature in his both idealized and ridiculous portrayal of the Italian Kapellmeister, he clearly contradicted himself when later criticizing the

²⁶ *The Morning Post*, 11 May 1789, quoted from *ibid.*, p. viii.

²⁷ "Um nur gleich von dem ergötzlichen Kapellmeister zu sprechen, so bewieß Hr. Bassi (beim ersten Eintritt durch das Ungewohnte etwas verlegen) sich schon dadurch als einen Meister, daß er bei den süßesten Ekstasen seiner musikalischen Begeisterung und holden Selbstgefälligkeit die Sache doch nie bis zur Carricatur trieb, welches in dieser Umgebung nur ein schreiender Mißlaut gewesen wäre. Daher war auch sein Anzug elegant, sein Mienenspiel zierlich, seine Bewegungen und Geberden zwar südlich-rasch, aber doch stets gefällig. Die Behaglichkeit, die über sein ganzes Wesen ausgebreitet war, seine Zudringlichkeit, die nicht den hungernden Glücksritter, sondern den in sich selbst seligen Virtuosen characterisirte, machte verdientes Glück. Wie süß sprach er seinen che gusto aus, wie bezeichnete er die Instrumentirung und die glücklich erhaschten Octaven. Wie ächt komisch das Auspacken seiner Beglaubigungen und die Angst, als ihn der Scheinbar-Tolle packt. In einer solchen Rolle läßt sich vieles hinzusetzen und in dell'arte hinzu improvisiren. Wir bitten Hrn. Bassi, damit noch freigeibiger zu seyn, auch das Fremdartige der Aussprache noch mehr hervorzuheben. Manches, wie das entscheidende *bezahlt* am Schlusse der ersten Couplets, wird bei größerer Sicherheit des ersten Auftretens noch stärker gehoben werden!" *Abend-Zeitung*, vol. 3, no. 291, 6 December 1819.

actor for not improvising in the manner of the *commedia dell'arte* and for not emphasizing his Italian accent sufficiently (Bassi, who had lived in German-speaking countries for thirty-five years of course spoke German fluently). The review is clearly symptomatic of the change of taste that had occurred since the revolutionary era and which Caroline Pichler characterized: whereas Italian *buffos* had formerly been criticized if their acting featured too many traces of the *commedia dell'arte*, now they were criticized if it featured too few. Probably, this both reflected the more highly-strung and sometimes grotesque characterizations of Romantic drama and theatre, and the fact that Italian opera, in the Biedermeier period, was seen less as the artificial emblem of an odious court culture than as a charming echo of "das Land, wo die Zitronen blühen", in which the *commedia dell'arte* was the natural expression of the spirit of the people. The Romantic myth of Italy, which underlay Johann Peter Lyser's longing for "the skills of the *opera buffa* singers of old", had been born, and the actual artistic ideals of the *buffa* performers for whom Mozart and Cimarosa wrote had been forgotten.