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**Internationalization practices applied to the management of opera houses:
empirical evidences from Italy and China**

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Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Background

Opera was invented in Italy and spread globally becoming a national cultural landmark. In fact Italy owes to opera a good part of its cultural reputation and the possibility to have Italian language being spoken globally. Opera is a prime example of merging renewal and modernization with strong anchors in tradition and cultural identity. In particular in the Italian cultural landscape, it can be considered as a standard bearer of universal culture, fully integrated in that set of attractions and opportunities defined as Made in Italy.

This high international prestige is one of the peculiarities justifying State investment in opera, a sector where management difficulty is directly proportional to the product's nature, extremely sophisticated as well as ephemeral¹. Nowadays, the heavily state-funded foundations, following the rigidity of the organizations and their management in adapting to the changing environmental and market conditions, are now undergoing major stress². However, global recognition of Western and in particular Italian opera's reputation as a relevant component of the cultural heritage and the increase of

¹The Legislative Decree n. 367 in 1996 and the Decree Law n. 134 in 1998 introduced private foundations institutions in the Italian opera houses sector.

²Decree Law n. 91, August 8th, 2013 converted in Law n.112, October 7th, 2013, "Legge Valore Cultura", art.11 predisposed "Urgent measures for the restoration of Lyric and Symphonic Foundations and the revival of the national musical system of excellence" to avoid compulsory administrative liquidation procedures (bankruptcy) for opera houses in deep crises.

new interested markets offer a fertile ground for a discussion on the importance of international activities for Italian opera in the cultural institutions' agenda, since from the internationalization of cultural goods both cultural and economic consequences arise.

In the media debate around the economic crisis in some European countries and their cultural policy, these deep financial troubles affecting opera houses have played a dominant role. The reflection written by the tenor Gialuca Floris - "Restarting Italy by Liric Opera. Why not? (Floris, 2013)" in reply to the article "Italy breaks your heart (Bruni, 2013)", written by Frank Bruni for the New York Times - raises several interesting points in favor of a new Italian Renaissance starting from national cultural strengths, among which Opera. Driven by the underlying assumption that overseas touring opera is becoming a testimony of our history and cultural traditions, he argues:

"Opera would be an extraordinary induced driving force for the whole nation, both as an export wealth and as a phenomenal tourist and investment attraction. It would be an opportunity for employment, as well as a vocational and artistic training possibility also for future generations. [...] We could instead start right from the opera house, which has great appeal around the world, and rebuild our nation [...]".³

Floris' words represent a simple and obvious yet fundamental reasoning, generally amplified when speaking of the binomial Italy-Culture. This kind of argument is so widespread that it seems a *cliché* taken for granted excluding any feasible application in a structured cultural policy agenda. Opera, however, is particularly suitable in the prospect of internationalization investment for its specific characteristics. Despite directors, composers, artists and technicians are continuously moving through a close network of connections, opera houses are promoting, directly and indirectly, internationalization activities without a conscious knowledge of their potential effect on the whole institution. Such activities need only to take place in a methodical way, taking into account the specific interests of each stakeholder in spreading Italian opera culture beyond the Italian borders: from the government's point of view, sending an opera house ensemble to a potential trading market may increase mutual understanding between countries and facilitate trade deals in commodities far removed from arts and culture. On the other hand, the artistic management will be more interested in quality enrichment development while the attitude of the administrative department will be directly affected by government's

³ Author's translation from Italian to English.

subsidies and national objectives regarding the possibility of promoting trade prospects, with the consequent benefit of the sponsors. However, in order to prove that although the supposed primacy, Italian opera is similar to the opera of other European countries and in discussing the traditional binomial 'Opera'-Italy', in her book on the political function of opera, Bereson asks: "Why has opera in Italy shared financial difficulties [with other European opera houses] if it so universally popular within the Italian borders?" (Akira et. Al., 1999, pp. 210-214 and Bereson, 2002, p.18). A legitimate question that Italian citizens themselves might have wondered often. Bereson's intention is to show that opera is not state specific, reminding that Italy until 1870 was occupied by foreigners and thus refuting the shared perception of Italy as birthplace and home of opera. However, her arguments focus on opera appreciation within the Italian borders, rather than bring such notoriety to a broader international perception. The initial assumption that opera is loved by Italians more than by any other people, means deviating from the correct path for a discussion on *opera italianity*. In Italy as in any other country, opera is followed by a niche audience and probably such audience would be even less interested in Italian melodrama if not accompanied by the international audience coming every year to watch performances in the most renowned Italian opera houses and festivals, Scala and Arena di Verona among all. This background and Bereson's argument would have rather give rise to another question: "Why has Italian opera experienced financial difficulties if it so universally popular out of the Italian borders?". Clearly, the intention of such a question is deeply provocative, since every opera house is – as generally reflected - unable to achieve financial balance solely through ticket sales, in spite of differences in prices and seating capacity of each theatre. However, the truth is that Italian opera is particularly appreciated abroad and considered a synonym for quality and excellence (Gosset, 2012).

Data show how well Italian opera is received abroad: among the top 10 opera composers from 2008 until today, four are Italian (Verdi and Puccini are respectively first and second), such as more than a fourth of all operas performed in the rest of the world (La Traviata is the most popular among these).

Such international resonance could be easily brought back to the skills of nineteenth-century music publishers who, through their entrepreneurial ability, have allowed the marriage between art, industry and market. We think about the role of Casa Ricordi and the promotion of Verdi and Puccini as catchy and popular authors, that with their operas embraced distant worlds, widening the interest to Italian opera beyond European borders (Baia Curioni, 2011).

Notwithstanding the shared perception of opera as international for its inner nature, history tells how instead opera was global but in a world of similars: the circulation of music was controlled by an élite and the geographical trade hub was restricted.

According to research, the international reputation of Western operas - with artists and producers moving across the world's opera houses - has become even more global in recent years (Agid and Tarondeau, 2010). Globalization posed challenges to a sector that now needs to face new audiences and be able to adapt and shape while maintaining its own identity.

It is well known that Western performances have a strong appeal in Asia, as shown by the high percentage of Chinese and Japanese classical singers and the growing number of opera houses recently built in the major cities of China, among all the National Centre for Performing Arts in Beijing. At the moment it is estimated that about 50 theaters in China (Stabler D., 2013; Allison J., 2012) stage operas or hybrid musicals: Beijing NCPA, Shanghai Grand Theatre, Guangzhou, Hangzhou and Tianjin opera houses are the most famous ones in the country, all built by famous Western architects. Simultaneously, following the global diffusion of opera, the internationalization of musical theatre productions could be considered a potential source of sustainability (Zur Nieden, 2014).

In the global market era, the fast pace of globalization forces countries to compete with each other for their share of consumers, tourists, investors, students, entrepreneurs, international sporting but also cultural events (Anholt, 2007). As stated by the study referring to Festival Rossini of Pesaro ⁴, international media focus on Italy's specialty areas, and renowned newspapers show again the newer countries' increasing interest for Western opera. But even if media indicate a widespread phenomenon, there is no evidence or complete data on the topic yet. Further research based on complex and comparable data is necessary to allow a full understanding of this globalized phenomenon and of its opportunities for the Italian opera sector.

In light of this exploration of the Italian context and the analysis and theorization of an international strategy for theatres, the Chinese case appeared to be the most representative among what Bereson's (2002) defines "Other operas". After an initial shaping influence coming from the Western colonies, followed by a radical detachment, China seemed to receive the Western tradition quite gradually until the recent architectural boom, which is currently

⁴ See Mazzoli L. e Antonioni S. (2013), "L'immagine di Pesaro e del Rossini Opera Festival nella stampa nazionale e internazionale".

enriching Chinese cities with marvelous opera houses ready to be filled. The research on Chinese opera landscape with the peculiar case of NCPA, “the most visible and famous” grand theatre (Allison, 2012, p.1459) shaping its reputation in the international arena, completes and deepens the analysis on Italian institutions’ international activities: it allows particularly to explore the way in which a relatively new performing arts institution builds its reputation and how it acquires competencies in the field of opera. The variety of activities carried out by an Opera House to promote a product’s international nature, need a description relative to their context and the changes brought on by globalization on culture and artistic networks.

1.2 The aim and the scope of the thesis

The purpose of the thesis is first to address the literature gap on internationalization practices applied to performing arts, bridging together business studies, arts management’s research and field-work in cultural institutions.

Starting from an analysis on the definitions of culture globalization and internationalization, the focus is then directed towards the specific case of opera with the aim of creating a suitable definition and a model to investigate internationalization practices for opera production and representation. Through a list of categories considered determinants in the expression of internationalization in performing arts institutions, the thesis will then analyze different patterns of opera houses. Such choice will permit to explore the variety of strategic paths in Italy, a context where opera is an identity element. The research will then investigate the process of international reputation creation of an opera house based in a country with an entirely different operatic tradition, demonstrating a strong interest precisely on Western and Italian opera.

Given the growing interest on opera by China, the thesis focuses on how Italian opera knowledge could be a resource for China. It thus explores how a Chinese theatre specialized in Western opera enhances its reputation in the industry, by creating a platform of know-how exchanges where international opera experts cooperate with Chinese artists.

This study stands also as an introductory description of less known opera realities, frequently quoted by the media but not formally analyzed as a real opportunity. A detailed analysis of an emerging scenario would fulfill the need

for a more complete survey on opera in the international market. In this way, the research intends primarily to represent a significant contribution through the observation of more facets of the same phenomenon, in similar institutions with different tradition. Secondly, through the analysis of a selection of Italian cases and one Chinese case, it aims to illustrate the complementarity of two operatic contexts that could mutually put into practice policies of internationalization.

1.3 Research Questions

In line with the aim and scope of the thesis, the main research questions can be synthesized as follows:

- What is the meaning of the term internationalization applied to the opera sector? How is internationalization conceived and practiced?
- Which internationalization strategies exist in Italian theatres and can they represent a differentiation tool in the positioning and sustainability of opera houses?
- In which ways a theatre located in a country with a different operatic tradition can build an international reputation on Western Opera?
- How can a theatre located in a country with a different operatic tradition develop competencies on Western opera production?

1.4 Research Design and Methodology

This study integrates quantitative and qualitative methodologies. The preliminary research has been accomplished through an extensive analysis of literature on cultural management and internationalization practices, and, since the sector is widely unexplored, a work on the adaptation of literature from other sectors applicable to our area of interest has been carried out. In order to establish an introductory framework on the topic, sites and available publications have been critically studied and analyzed in the form of a literary

review. In the interest of portraying the phenomenon, an analysis of data to be examined and compared has been carried on by accessing institutional websites and database -Opera Europa, Operabase-, and from opera houses directly concerning the number of productions performed in each theatre, the number of performances of each production and the nationality of the creative teams.

Since the real market for culture is very different from the way it is perceived by institutions from the point of view of quality, specific sites and publications containing information on the researched topic have been critically studied.

Interviews have been carried out and questionnaires have been addressed to experts in the field, in order to outline the whole picture of the international scenario and understand existing gaps.

Considering the limited extent of awareness on strategies of internationalization and the difficulties in proposing a generalized structure due to the peculiarities of the sector and its markets, to deeply explore internationalization practices in opera houses, a case study approach⁵ was considered the most appropriate research methodology. Existing theatres therefore, constitute the basis from which develop recommendations through an inductive analysis of the cases (Simons, 2009). Two different mixed method case studies, both quantitative and qualitative, have been considered to explore more ostensibly the whole internationalization phenomenon applied to opera houses:

1. The first case includes four established Italian opera houses' and aims to depict the state of internationalization practices in order to deduce strategies and possible recommendations for a conscious exploitation of such possibilities.
2. The second case responds to a double objective in relation to the aim of the research: first, the need of exploring only partially known markets for opera - from there the choice of Chinese context- and secondly the wish to investigate the process of creation of an international reputation for a theatre performing western opera but pertaining to another opera tradition.

The Italian cases were selected on the basis of several parameters considering the landscape of Lyric Symphonic Foundations. Diversity in size, status of the

⁵Eisenhardt and Graebner (2007), consider building theory from case studies as a research strategy that involves empirical evidence using one or more cases to create theoretical constructs propositions and/or midrange theory from case-based (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007).

organizations and geographical variety were the selection's starting points. The aim was to get as wide a differentiation in the n. criteria and as uniform a corpus as possible in the n. criterion, also trying to reduce practical limitations and foster easiness in retrieving data. We looked at two theaters in problematic situations, both included in the Recovery Plan established by Law 112/2013 and both located in the major Italian art capitals, Opera di Firenze and Teatro dell'Opera di Roma (the latter recognized for its representational role in the Capital, Law n. 800/1967 and law n.106/2014). Both had large potential with respect to international activities, in the case of Florence also for the presence of an estimated and recognized historical Festival. In parallel, the selection included two "healthy" theaters, performing the best at the national level (with the exception of La Scala): La Fenice di Venezia and Teatro Regio di Torino. We ended up with three opera houses located in cities of art, with a strong touristic vocation (2869 thousands foreign tourists overnight stays in 2014 in Venezia, 2933 in Firenze and 8483 in Roma) and a fourth one in Torino, that, despite not being recognized properly as a touristic city (Torino reports 1786 thousands foreign tourists overnight stays in 2014), however, as a result of its repositioning, in recent years has seen a significant increase in the number of visitors.

As for the second case study, China was chosen as representative market, where Western opera is becoming more and more popular, an appealing and still unexplored context for the recent opera houses pop-up phenomenon. In order to explore the way in which a relatively new performing arts institution builds its reputation and acquires competencies in the field of opera, Beijing National Centre for the Performing Arts (NCPA) was chosen due to its peculiarity: it can be defined as the most important performing arts centre staging Western opera in China and, since its inauguration in December 2007, it has succeeded to gain a positive recognition in the international landscape as a reference for opera performances in Asia. The Chinese case study was taken on through the assistance for the entire period of rehearsals and performances of a new Western opera production, the Chinese premiere of Norma at National Centre for Performing Arts in Beijing. The field work was carried out between August and September 2014. During that period, an analysis of theatres' archives has been taken on, together with exchanges with experts through personalized semi structured interviews and questionnaires to artists, the creative team, artistic and management department. Simultaneously the response of the international press has been analyzed and thus compared with the empirical results collected previously.

We have decided to adopt a mixed methodology perspective in order to cope

deeply with the specificity of the sector and to be consistent with the artistic-economic dichotomy (Auvinen, 2001) inherent to the management of performing arts. Since the research interest is in the observation of practices, methodology combining historical and longitudinal case study approaches has been considered appropriated (Boari and Riboldazzi, 2014). The intent of the analysis is not only exploratory, but it aims to develop a categorization of activities, to illustrate institutions behavior in a domain that appears not to be consciously monitored, and to depict a market situation not yet explored.

The inductive methodology will thus permit to support or challenge theoretical assumptions on internationalization and cultural transfer, while the deductive approach will permit to elaborate recommendations for the subjects studied.

1.5 Contribution of the thesis

The lack of studies in internationalization applied to opera houses, makes the research particularly relevant for future insights and in depth reflections. Owing to the current difficult situation of Italian Opera Houses and the need for a sustainable development- which looks into the future and into the new reality of a traditional context, such as opera-, research on internationalization prospects in partially explored territories, is a valid pathway for preserving and developing an intangible cultural heritage, which is already fundamental for the national cultural identity. Information provided by media and activities promoted by several opera houses, already indicate the strong interest of newer countries for high quality opera. In order to allow opera houses to pursue a rational strategy and attract new investments, an objective and complete survey of the international picture and a rational reflection on the system, yet has to be made.

The topic is particularly relevant primarily in terms of theoretical research, since the literature on internationalization has been focused mainly on multinational corporations and there are only few recent examples trying to apply those principles to the creative field (Gullander, 2006; Leung et al., 2005). Secondly, Italy and China are two hot fields of research allowing to tackle internationalization from two sides, countries already legitimated due to an established culture and new countries involved in this process. Italy has a leading role in terms of operatic tradition and paradoxically its opera houses are now experiencing a deep crisis while China, because of the impressive

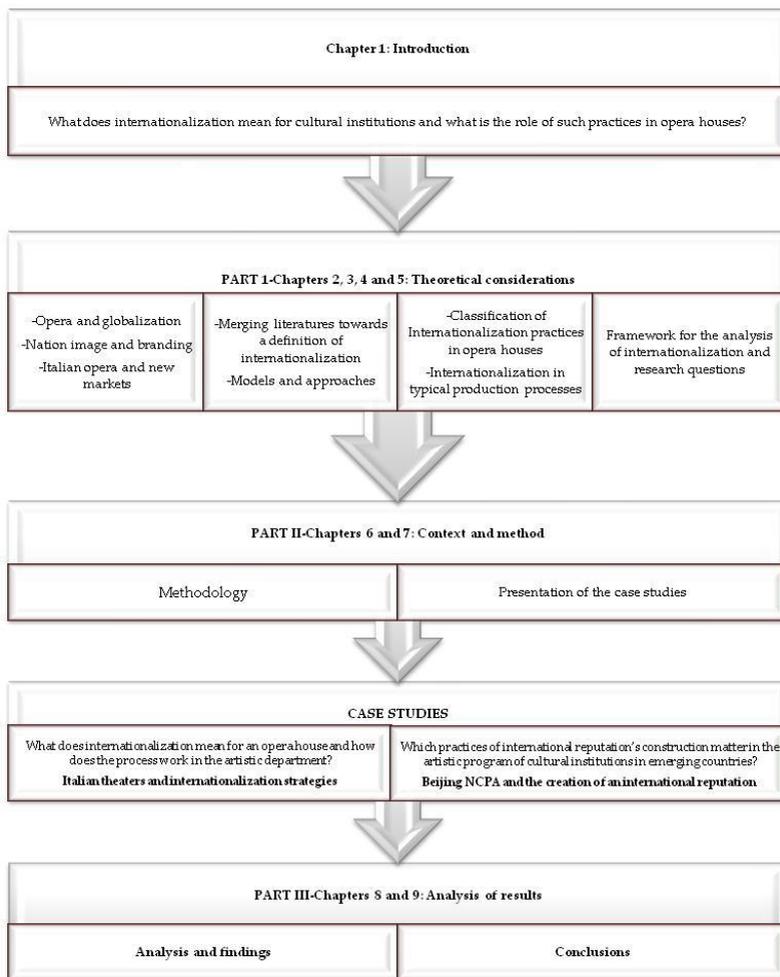
recent development of venues specialized in Western opera, represents undoubtedly a growing potential market.

The thesis aims first, at contributing to the theoretical landscape through the development of a suitable definition on internationalization applied to opera. Secondly, it provides a new perspective based on evidences on one of the most popular contexts, Italy, and on the unexplored and unknown Chinese setting.

The ultimate contribution is addressed directly to Italian opera institutions and political bodies dealing with culture: the research consents to come up with a management and cultural policy framework in order to ensure awareness of Opera theater and market potential. Final recommendations aim to draw opera houses management and cultural policy makers' attention on strategic deficiencies partially bridgeable through a comprehensive and detailed vision, in line with their interests and priorities.

1.6 Structure of the thesis and disposition of the chapters

Fig. 1.1: Structure of the content



Following the Introduction, the thesis is structured into three main parts: the first introduces the main theoretical considerations, the second presents the contexts of the field work and the methodology applied for the investigation, the third shows the process of analysis and the main results with a final

discussion.

The analysis of the literature is divided in three main sections (Part I): in Chapter 2 the theme of globalization and how it poses challenges in the arts and cultural sector is examined. Given the relevance of the sector in defining the Country's image, Italian opera houses need to build a brand and support the overall cultural positioning and contribute to Italy's cultural branding. Hence, the attention is focused on opera as a form of artistic expression to analyze the challenges of globalization. Its complex cultural expression, able to attract multiple audiences, and its global vocation and rootedness within Italian Cultural Heritage, it is then examined in light of its role in conveying the Italian culture around the world. In order to prove the effects of globalization on the opera sector and the international resonance of Western and Italian opera, the last section of Chapter 2 shows the existence of an international distribution of opera and the comparative advantage of Italy in this industry.

Chapter 3 introduces the need to transpose the focus from opera as a complex expressive art form in a global context, to institutions producing and representing it. The section presents the attempt of merging existing literatures on internationalization from four different disciplines (business, cultural industries, museums and education) in order to establish a common understanding on the concept, and to develop a suitable internationalization definition for opera industry. Chapter 4 applies the definition to the research context and provides an in-depth analysis of the international activities taking place inside opera houses. The section ends with the theoretical positioning, presenting the research question and a model for the investigation of internationalization in the artistic and in the production sectors of opera houses, to be considered as a reference for the following field investigation (Chap. 5).

The second part introduces the case studies considered, by presenting the methodology adopted for the research, the two different contexts investigated, Italian and Chinese opera landscape, and the sample analyzed, namely four Italian opera houses and the Chinese most famous performing arts center.

The case-studies' part of the thesis, is divided into two sections. Initially, Part II, is an introduction into the case studies and, in Chapter 6, discusses the methodology, the selection of the two samples and the process of data collection. Chapters 7 presents the contextual framework and the presentation of the samples, first for the Italian cases, then for the Chinese case. With the same order, in Part III, the analysis and results of the each field work are presented. Since the two cases required a distinctive approach, the analysis

and the results are presented separately in Chapter 8, while in Chapter 9, the discussion and conclusions are exposed with the idea of bringing together the findings obtained through the two studies. Final considerations aiming to address the research questions with a comprehensive approach, are proposed at the end of this thesis.

1.7 Terminology

Internationalization: Considering the way literature presents internationalization, a difference exists between authors using the term in a generic way, and others using it to refer to the degree of multinationality, or transnationality, or to the degree of globalization. A comprehensive definition of internationalization is presented in the literature review section, but it is relevant to state since the beginning, that my position refers to the term internationalization in a general and inclusive way.

New markets and new countries: In this study the term 'new markets' or 'new countries' refers to Bereson's (2002) definition of "Other operas" with some implementations. She groups South America, Africa, Asia and Asia Minor arguing that "They all in some way have taken opera from the European operatic tradition and translated it into their own environment" (Bereson, 2002, p.77). However, this definition is too generic and by grouping diametrically different countries, it does not take into account some crucial aspects, such as the different times in history when opera arrived to these countries, when audiences started to appreciate it, the difference between developing countries and developed countries and the previous existence of a rooted indigenous opera tradition in some of them. Such distinctive aspects suggest the importance of a more specific definition; however, for the sake of convenience and generalization, we kept Berenson definition.

Western opera: the term was chosen in order to distinguish the European operatic tradition from comparable art forms from other parts of the world. Despite being independent traditions and distinct forms of musical theatre, they are commonly called 'opera' by analogy. Many of these 'operas' have ancient origins such as in the case of China. Common terminology on classical music refers to Western classical music, indicating the tradition started in Italy at the end of the 16th century (with Jacopo Peri's lost *Dafne*, produced in

Florence in 1598) and soon spread through the rest of Europe. References sharing this terminology could be found in Agid and Tarondeau (2001) and in Melvin and Cai (2004), studying exactly "How Western Classical Music Became Chinese".

Chinese opera: Chinese opera (戏曲 xìqǔ) is a popular form of drama and musical theatre with numerous regional branches usually prefaced with an adjective indicating the region. Its roots are estimated to go back to the third century BC and nowadays the performances include different art forms such as music, song, dance, martial arts, acrobatics and poetry.