

“The Italian method” and the
“Italian gesture.”
Musico-literary considerations on
W.B. Yeats, Italian music and
Italian composers

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The presence and influence of Italian music were pervasive in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Ireland. As Derek B. Scott has suggested, in the first half of the eighteenth century, even Irish traditional music “had been coming to terms with the Italian style” because “the itinerant harpers encountered the popular Italian music in the important Anglo-Irish establishments, especially in Dublin”: thus, “it is possible that Turlough O’Carolan, the best known of the harpers, met Geminiani in one of the ascendancy houses where the Italian usually stayed. Certainly, it was in these venues where the harper encountered the music of Corelli and Vivaldi.”¹ However, already around the last decade of the eighteenth century, while pondering on “Irish national and cultural identity” and presenting “perhaps the most articulate expression of the identification of Ireland with music among eighteenth-century writers”, the Irish antiquarian and intellectual Joseph Cooper Walker (c. 1762–1810) reacted precisely against this Italian domination of Dublin’s musical

1. Derek B. Scott, cit. in W.H.A. Williams, ‘Twas only an Irishman’s Dream.’ *The Image of Ireland and the Irish in American Popular Song Lyrics, 1800–1920*, Champaign, University of Illinois Press, 1996, p. 247.

taste and gave an indirectly paradigmatic definition of Italian music as a byproduct of English rule: in actual fact, he:

firmly blamed the English for the spread to Ireland of Italian music, which ‘began to reign with despotic sway’ in London, from whence ‘its influence spread so wide, that it reached these shores. Our musical state became *refined* and our *sweet* melodies and *native* musicians fell into disrepute’.²

Despite Walker’s musical and politico-cultural resistance, “during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Italian operas were produced in Dublin at irregular intervals, especially in the years 1781, 1782, 1808, 1811, and 1819”; in the following years,

the four-thousand seat Theatre Royal in Hawkins Street, which opened in 1821, presented operas of the Italian *ottocento* composers Rossini, Donizetti, and Bellini, and later Verdi. A series of spectacular Italian opera seasons featuring the world’s best singers (including Grisi, Viardot, Lind, Patti, Mario, Rubini, and Lablache) continued almost every year until the theatre was destroyed by fire in 1880.³

This dominance of Italian opera notwithstanding, it may be emblematic of the musical and musico-literary condition of Ireland in the first half of the nineteenth century that, “for much of the 1840s” – namely, the decade in which “Italian opera [...] had almost completely overwhelmed the sound of the spoken word on Irish stages”⁴ and, at the same time, the political, cultural and social movement of Young Ireland celebrated “the formative years of

2. Barra Boydell, ‘*Whatever has a Foreign Tone / We like much better than our own.*’ *Irish Music and Anglo-Irish Identity in the Eighteenth Century*, in Mark Fitzgerald and John O’Flynn (eds.), *Music and Identity in Ireland and Beyond*, Burlington, Ashgate, 2014, p. 21 (italics mine).

3. John Allen, *Opera in Ireland*, Lelia Ruckenstein and James O’Malley (eds.), *Everything Irish: the History, Literature, Art, Music, People, and Places of Ireland, from A to Z*, New York, Ballantine Books, 2003, p. 318.

4. Christopher Morash, *A History of Irish Theatre*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002, pp. 107–108.

cultural nationalism" with all its musical implications – "'Young Ireland' and Italian opera did not consort with each other."⁵ Later on, in the last decades of nineteenth-century Ireland, "musical tastes in Dublin were slowly changing" and "the golden age of Italian opera was on the wane"⁶ – which, however, seems to be contradicted, e.g., by Joyce's dialectically musico-literary representation of his country as the *Land of Belcanto* (where the term *Belcanto* is to be understood *lato sensu*) in *The Dead*.

In the English-speaking countries, all along the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the syntagms "Italian gesture" and "Italian method" were shorthand for the main features of the musical, cultural, social, political etc. phenomenon of Italian opera, which was itself short for Italian music. Perhaps on the basis of an analogy with Italian gesticulation, interpreted not as "the result of study, but rather of attention" and as "perfectly dramatic"⁷ as the "expressive direction and motion of [the] forefinger" of the Italian protagonist of Henry James's *The Golden Bowl*⁸, "Italian gesture" in music stood for "the vehemence of first thought and the excitement of the senses."⁹ English sopranos of Italian origin like Elizabeth Augusta Griglietti were systematically discouraged from adopting it too extensively, since, as Leigh Hunt wrote in 1810,

the Italian gesture [...] may be very well in Italians, whose climate renders them more impassioned than ourselves, and whose want of sincerity compels them to make a greater protestation of it; but this

5. Harry White, *Cultural Theory, Nostalgia and the Historical Record: Opera in Ireland and the Irishness of Opera during the Nineteenth Century*, in Michael Murphy and Jan Smaczny (eds.), *Irish Musical Studies. 9. Music in nineteenth-century Ireland*, Dublin, Four Courts Press, 2007, p. 27.

6. Ita Beausang, *Echoes of the Lied: Women's Vocal Repertoire in Nineteenth-Century Ireland*, in Aisling Kenny and Susan Wollenberg (eds.), *Women and the Nineteenth-Century Lied*, Farnham, Ashgate, 2015, p. 256.

7. Anon, (review of Andrea De Jorio, *La mimica degli antichi investigata nel gestire napoletano* [1832]), *Dublin Review*, July 1837, p. 13.

8. Henry James, *The Golden Bowl*, London, Methuen, 1905, p. 188.

9. Arthur Symons, *Notes on Wagner in Bayreuth*, in *Plays, Acting, and Music. A Book of Theory*, London, Constable, 1909, p. 313.

style will always contain something very ridiculous to the judgement and feelings of Englishmen.¹⁰

To the more famous Louisa Bassano (1818–1908), an anonymous reviewer of *The Spectator* dictated a somewhat peremptory suggestion: “*If she keep clear of Italy*, she will probably turn out a very charming English singer.”¹¹

The syntagm “Italian method”,¹² instead, may have been present in Ireland since the times when Johann Sigismund Cousser (1660–1727) – who, according to John Hawkins, had introduced “the Italian method of singing” in Hamburg “about the year 1693”¹³ – “arrived in Dublin on 4th July” 1707 and influenced its musical life in such a “philo-Italian” way as to “be credited for the adoption of Italian music in Dublin”, where the first concert hall was built in 1730 exactly “for the practice of Italian Musick.”¹⁴ Some decades afterwards, immediately before the Acts of Union 1800, traces of the interaction between the “Italian method” and Irish cultural-musical experience can for example be found in the strong influence of the famous Italian castrato Giuseppe Aprile (1735–1813) – author of *The Modern Italian Method of Singing* (1795) – on the celebrated Irish tenor Michael Kelly (1762–1826) – that is, “Chelli Michele” in

10. Leigh Hunt, in Theodore Fenner, *Leigh Hunt and Opera Criticism: the “Examiner” years, 1808–1821*, Lawrence, University Press of Kansas, 1972, p. 131.

11. Anon. (section “The Theatres”), *The Spectator*, 1847, p. 135 (sic; italics in original).

12. In Yeats’s days, Dyneley Hussey, English war poet and music critic (1893–1972), defined it as follows: “(in drama yielding to music) the action cannot remain static, which is what usually happens whenever music is allowed to have its way. Here is the central problem of opera, and it has been solved in various ways. The first is the *Italian method*, by which the opera was frankly divided into recitatives in which the action was carried on, and airs in which the emotional situation is reviewed while the drama stands still. [...] The *Italian method* does at least allow for the maintenance throughout the opera of musical tone, so that the adherence to one main tonality varied with excursions into contrasting keys can make its musical and dramatic effect – an effect which plays a very large part in the operas of Mozart and Verdi” (“A Note on the nature of opera”, *The Musical Times*, 70:1032 [1929], p. 119; italics mine).

13. John Hawkins, *A General History of the Science and Practice of Music. Volume the Fifth*, London, Payne and Son, 1776, p. 249.

14. Harold E. Samuel, “John Sigismund Cousser in London and Dublin”, *Music & Letters*, 61:2 (1980), pp. 170 and 167.

James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*¹⁵ – who continued his studies with him in Italy¹⁶ in 1780: as Kelly himself wrote in his *Reminiscences*, this "famous soprano singer [...] was allowed to be the greatest singer and musician of the day" and "was called by the Italians, and indeed everywhere, 'il padre di tutti i cantanti', – the father of all singers."¹⁷ Some decades before Young Ireland's celebration of music as "the first faculty of the Irish,¹⁸" it should be noticed that Aprile's technical precepts had also some impact on the socio-politically sensitive subject of musico-literary experience since, in his *Modern Italian Method of Singing*,¹⁹ he recommended both "XVI. That in pronouncing the Words care must be taken to accord with the sentiment that was intended by the Poet" and "XXI. That the Ornaments and Embellishments of Songs should be derived from the Character of the Air, and Passion of the words."

Yeatsian scholars have totally neglected William Butler Yeats's experience, knowledge, textualization and literarization of Italian art music, which is just one (although minor) aspect of the deep and far-reaching devotion to Italy and "learned Italian things"²⁰ that manifested itself in different ways all along his life and throughout his work. The number of references to Italian musical experience and culture in secondary critical sources is very scant and superficial even in Ronald Schuchard's imposing and authoritative study *The Last Minstrels. Yeats and the Revival of the Bardic Arts* (2008). For instance, when Edward Malins and Peter Davidson happen to

15. James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake*, London, Faber, 1975, p. 199.

16. Jane Girdham, "Kelly, Michael (1762–1826)", *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edition May 2007 (<http://0-www.oxforddnb.com.opac.unicatt.it/view/article/15303>, accessed 13th March 2017).

17. Michael Kelly, *Reminiscences of Michael Kelly*, London, Henry Colburn, 1826², vol. 1, p. 73.

18. Thomas Davis, *Preface*, in *The Spirit of the Nation. Ballads and Songs by the writers of "the Nation" with Original and Ancient music, arranged for the voice and piano-forte*, James Duffy, Dublin 1845, p. VI.

19. "Necessary Rules for students and dilettanti of vocal music", in *The Modern Italian Method of Singing*, London, Birchall, 1795, p. 2.

20. William Butler Yeats, *The Collected Works of William Butler Yeats. Volume I: The Poems*, edited by R.J. Finneran, New York, Scribner, 1997², p. 202, l. 157.

mention Monteverdi's typical formal technique of "aria parlante"²¹ or compositional strategy of "Parlar-cantando",²² they (somehow chauvinistically and surprisingly) attribute its paternity to the Anglophone musician and composer Henry Lawes (1595–1662), brother of the younger William Lawes (1602–1645), thus making an interpretative choice that is not documented in coeval cultural-musical sources. One has to wait for Pierre Longuenesse until 2008 to read that "Yeats se place dans une filiation qui remonte à la Renaissance et à l'époque baroque, lorsque Monteverdi cherchait à obtenir le 'parlancantando' de son opera *Orfeo*."²³

However, Yeats did not lack friends and acquaintances, fellow writers and collaborators who could help him mediate with art music from Italy, either encouragingly or discouragingly. He had contacts with Italian contemporary composers active in Dublin like Michele Esposito (1855–1929) and Franco Leoni (1864–1949). On the one hand, Michele Esposito, a Neapolitan musician and composer whose family and actress daughter Vera Yeats he had known since the 1890s or so²⁴, had been Professor of the Pianoforte at the Royal Irish Academy of Music since 1882 and became the Irish representative of the British Incorporated Society of Musicians in 1893 in "a decade that witnessed a remarkable revitalization of national cultural life": however,

unfortunately very little detailed research has been carried out on the influence of the Gaelic and literary revivals on musical activity [...], but it does appear that there was a growing sense that more should be done to encourage the emergence of a native school of composers.²⁵

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21. Edward Malins, *Yeats and Music*, The Dolmen Press Yeats Centenary Papers MCMLXV, edited by Liam Miller, with a preface by John Stallworthy, Dublin, The Dolmen Press; London, Oxford University Press; Chester Springs, Dufour Editions, 1965–1968, p. 496.
 22. Peter Davidson, *Music in Translation: Yeats; Pound; Rummel; Dulac*, in *Yeats and the Noh. A Comparative Study*, Gerrards Cross, Colin Smythe, 1990, p. 137.
 23. Pierre Longuenesse, "Dramaturgie musicale de Yeats: la question des partitions", *Études Irlandaises*, 33:1 (2008), p. 14.
 24. William Butler Yeats, *The Collected Letters of William Butler Yeats. Volume IV: 1905–1907*, edited by J. Kelly and R. Schuchard, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 2005, p. 261, note 1.
 25. Jeremy Dibble, *Michele Esposito*, Dublin, Field Day Publications, 2010, p. 61.

On the other hand, Franco Leoni, a Milanese composer who had kept asking Yeats for allowance to adapt *The Countess Cathleen* and some other plays into operas with unremitting insistence especially between 1910 and 1913²⁶, emblematically pops up in a letter exchange of May 1911 between Yeats and Edward Gordon Craig (1872–1966), the English theatrical designer of musical dramas²⁷, who imparts to his Irish addressee some emblematic suggestions that are highly relevant to our subject and that would deserve further musico-literary comments:²⁸

My dear Yeats, I have been thinking over the Leoni-Yeats-GC opera affair – & now your other letter comes saying 'Leoni has every reason to believe' etc. that Covent Garden will etc. You say you know nothing about music [...]. I beg of you for everything's sake to [...] get a really first-rate composer's opinion of Leoni's work before you agree to let him do anything with your name. Maybe he is a nice simple tune writer (Italians who have not come under the dread Wagner's influence can be nice & tuneful & therefore harmlessly pleasant) but he may be the reverse & be one of those profound frauds (as musician) with a lot of philosophy & fits & starts. He may even be an admirer of [Richard] Strauss & the God help you. [...] They are so restless, so rhythmless, these modern brainy composers ... and the Italians who at least had a sense of tune direct & straightforward are now beginning to drop all that and chatter in their music. [...] I have asked Russians here if they've ever heard of Leoni's music but they haven't. I've never heard it or

26. Roy Foster in *W.B. Yeats: A Life, Vol. 1. The Apprentice Mage*, Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press, 1998, pp. 424,440; John Kelly, *A W.B. Yeats Chronology*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2003, pp. 148, 149, 166.

27. Cf. Avril Flockton, "Edward Gordon Craig and 'The New Stagecraft'." *The Dalhousie Review*, 50:1 (1970), pp. 88–96.

28. Yeats included Gordon Craig's letter in another letter that he sent to Lady Gregory asking her for advice and informing her that "Mrs Anderson [i.e., Julia Quinn Anderson (1880–1934), sister of John Quinn (1870–1924)] says Leoni is very much of the modern school" (*Letter To Lady Gregory, 22 May 1911*, in W.B. Yeats, *The Collected Letters of William Butler Yeats*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, IntelLex Electronic Edition, 2002, Accession letter #1639).

of him till now. Why not ask Arthur Symonds [*sic*] about Leoni. I do think he'd know, though he alas likes Strauss.²⁹

Arthur Symons, poet and music critic (1865–1945), sticks out among Yeats's fellow writers interested and versed in Italian music: even though no explicit reference to the abovementioned operatic Italian gesture and the Italian method can be found in Yeats's writings, he may have heard about both precisely from Symons, whose definition of the former as “the vehemence of first thought and the excitement of the senses” (from a 1909 book listed among those in Yeats's library)³⁰ has already been quoted above, and who had evoked the latter in his 1904 essay on *Beethoven*, more specifically in a passage where he observed that “‘Fidelio’ is an opera which has not even the formal merits of the best operas produced on the Italian method.”³¹ Other reliable and favourable mediators for Yeats to Italian musical experience were or could surely have been the hyper-musical George Bernard Shaw (1856–1950), who admitted in a 1916 letter to Demetrius O’Bolger that “my deliberate rhetoric, and my reversion to the Shakespearean feature of long set solos for my characters, are pure Italian opera”,³² and J. M. Synge, who had tried to start “a professional career in music” on German training foundations before turning “to writing plays” and “knew the Esposito family best, and was frequently invited into their home in Ranelagh.”³³ On the contrary, Yeats was surely given an utterly unfavourable judgement on Italian art music

29. Gordon Craig is probably making reference to an essay on *The Problem of Richard Strauss* that Arthur Symons wrote in 1902, revised in 1905, and included in *Studies in Seven Arts*, London, Constable, 1906, pp. 301–328.

30. Arthur Symons, *Notes on Wagner at Bayreuth*, p. 313 (book listed in Edward O’Shea, *A Descriptive Catalog of W.B. Yeats’s Library*, New York, Garland Publishing, 1985, p. 275, n. 2060).

31. Arthur Symons, *Beethoven*, in *Studies in Seven Arts*, p. 205.

32. Cit. in Jonathan Lorne Wisenthal, “Please remember, this is Italian opera”: Shaw’s plays as music drama, in Christopher Innes (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to George Bernard Shaw*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. 286.

33. Ann Saddlemyer, *Behind the scenes: Irish theatre, Irish lives, and the Task of the Biographer*, in Sherill Grace-Jerry Wasserman (eds.), *Theatre and Autobiography. Writing and Performing Lives in Theory and Practice*, Vancouver, Talonbooks, 2006, p. 262.

by Frank O'Connor (pseudonym of Michael Francis O'Donovan, 1903–1966), who was a board member of the Abbey Theatre in Dublin in the mid-late 1930s – in the same years as William Starkie (1894–1976), who had studied violin in Dublin at the Royal Irish Academy of Music with “the celebrated Italian virtuoso and composer, Achille Simonetti, a master who had been taught by Camillo Sivori, the only pupil of Niccolò Paganini”³⁴ – and who made a paradigmatic and strategic distinction between “Italian [art] music” and “real music” in the following passage:³⁵

I was once telling him how my only visit to Italy had been poisoned by Italian music. The guide-books never warn you against it, but you can take my word for it that it is much worse than mosquitoes. One night I was sitting at dinner, listening to a baritone with a voice like Chaliapin and wishing I were dead when I heard *real* music coming up a dark lane from the canal. [...] A sailor lad with a friend and a couple of girls were sitting on the bank in the darkness, strumming a guitar and singing in the traditional style, much, I imagine like the gondoliers Wagner heard singing Tasso on the lagoons. ‘I wonder’, Yeats asked wistfully, ‘if it was like my singing.’

It is true, however, that direct and explicit references to Italian music rarely pop up in Yeats’s writings, perhaps as a side effect of influences like O’Connor’s, which echo the traditionally Irish late-nineteenth-century dialectic between “the purely Celtic musical style” and “the reminiscences of Verdi and of the *good old Italian method*”.³⁶ Such a dialectic is understandable only against an Irish background where “music offered a model a pan-European, shared culture”, since “certainly, in Dublin, there existed a shared appreciation among Unionists and Nationalists for recital and opera

34. William Starkie, *Scholars and Gypsies. An Autobiography*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1963, p. 90.

35. Frank O’Connor, *What made Yeats a Great Poet?* in David Pierce, *W.B. Yeats: Assessments 1889–1959*, Mountfield, Helm Information, 2000, p. 359 (italics mine).

36. Anon. “Italian Opera in Dublin”, *The Freeman’s Journal*, 3rd August 1909, p. 2.

which naturally looked to the continent for its staples.”³⁷ As a matter of fact, there are a few main and notable exceptions to such scantiness of references to Italian musical experience and culture in Yeats’s thought and work. Two of them deserve special mention: a very early one to Niccolò Paganini and a very late one to Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina.

Yeats mentioned Paganini in the three-page headnote on the Irish polymath and polyhedral artist Samuel Lover (1797–1868) – poet and novelist, composer and song-writer, painter and miniaturist, and “a sincere member of the Church of England”³⁸ – with which he prefaced two tales by Lover in the second series of his *Representative Irish Tales* (1891). In that headnote, he extensively recalled Lover’s early interest, “to his father’s disgust, in music”, his instrumental training and skills, and the social effectiveness of his “good songs” (like “*Rory O’More*, written at the suggestion of Lady Morgan”) in opening “all doors.” More relevantly to the subject of the present study, Yeats also recalled that, “in 1834, [Lover] took advantage of some renewed celebrity gained for him by a miniature of Paganini to move over to London.”³⁹ His decision of mentioning the connection between a celebrated representative of Italian music and Lover’s move to London is highly emblematic and its different components should be accurately interpreted.

On the one hand, it unmistakably evokes the year 1831⁴⁰ when “the autocrat of the fiddle”⁴¹ – as the Dublin press called Paganini – arrived in Dublin from England “at a very high fee”,⁴² “being engaged for the first Musical Festival held in that city” where he

37. Ben Levitas, *J.M. Synge: European Encounters*, in Patrick J. Mathews (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to J. M. Synge*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1009, p. 79.

38. William Bayle Bernard, *The life of Samuel Lover*, London, Henry S. King, 1874, p. 346.

39. *Samuel Lover 1797–1868*, in *Representative Irish Tales*, compiled with an Introduction and Notes by W.B. Yeats, Second Series, New York and London, G.P. Putnam’s Sons, The Knickerbocker Press, 1891, pp. 1 and 2. The two stories by Lover included in this volume are *Barny O’Reirdon, the Navigator* (pp. 7–72) and *Paddy the Piper* (pp. 75–90).

40. Michael Murphy, *The Musical Press in Nineteenth-Century Ireland*, in Michael Murphy and Jan Smaczny (eds.), *Music in Nineteenth-Century Ireland*, p. 257.

41. Anon, [“Notizen”], *Allgemeiner Musikalischer Anzeiger*, 3:41 (1831), p. 163.

42. Anon, “Paganini in Dublin”, *The Irish Times*, 19th January 1931.

played "his fiddle" under the English conductor Sir George Thomas Smart (1776–1867) and before "the Lord Lieutenant and his Suite attend[ing] in State and all the *élite* of Dublin [...] in the dress tier."⁴³ Such an English-dominated *parterre de rois*, however, did not automatically determine negative socio-political effects on the Irish reception of the Italian virtuoso, even though the inescapable political bias of coeval cultural-musical sources (which alternatively praised "the urbanity of the Dublin public"⁴⁴ or disparaged "the mercurial temperament of the [Irish] occupants"⁴⁵ on ideological bases) should be more carefully weighed⁴⁶ : from this point of view, it may be emblematic to emphasize the 1831 dissonance between the enthusiastic "parallels between [the] art [of the 'modern Orpheus'] and Irish folk music" drawn by *The Freeman's Journal*⁴⁷ and Thomas Moore's perplexed remarks that read as follows: "Paganini abuses his powers – he *could* play divinely and does sometimes, for a minute or two – but then come his tricks & surprises – his bow in convulsions & his enharmonics like the mewlings of an expiring cat."⁴⁸

43. Stephen S. Stratton *Nicolò Paganini: his Life and Work*, London, J. Leng & Co., 1907, pp. 60, 63, 62.

44. John William Calcraft, "Leaves from the portfolio of a manager – No. III [...] Anecdotes of Paganini [...]", *Dublin University Magazine*, CCXIX (1851), p. 380.

45. Stratton, *Nicolò Paganini: his life and work*, p. 62.

46. Cfr. also, for instance, the American-born London-based William Bayle Bernard (1807–1875), who wrote in his 1874 biography of Samuel Lover that "to the melody-loving Irish [Paganini] was peculiarly welcome and his attraction was not lessened to their impressionable natures by a personal appearance that was almost as singular as his genius [...] – no Irish crowd could gaze on without a superstitious shiver" (*The Life of Samuel Lover*, pp. 130 and 131); and the English music critic Henry Fothergill Chorley (1808–1872), who noticed that "so greatly was popular curiosity excited on [Paganini's] account, that the very gossoons and girleens of that merry city – the *lazzaroni* of the North – ran after his carriage, and crowded round the door of his lodgings, eager to get one peep of him" ("Paganini", *The Athenaeum*, 411 (1835), p. 700).

47. See Murphy, *The Musical Press in nineteenth-century Ireland*, p. 259.

48. Thomas Moore, *The Journal of Thomas Moore. Volume 4: 1831–1835*, edited by Wilfred S. Dowden, Cranbury, Associated University Presses, 1987, p. 1417 (entry for 23rd June 1831).

On the other hand, it should not be overlooked that, in his three-page headnote on Samuel Lover, Yeats established a consequential connection between (at least) three different socio-cultural factors:

1. the above-mentioned controversial cultural implications of the presence of the “Italian fiddler”⁴⁹ in Ireland;
2. Lover’s potentially debatable choice of a non-Irish subject for “his finest work of art [...] which exhibits him in the perfection of his latter and higher style”;⁵⁰
3. Lover’s abandonment of the “miniature-loving family” of “the Irish people”,⁵¹ following his decision to show his masterpiece at the Royal Academy Exhibition in London in 1833 (thus achieving “the double end of confirming its painter’s fame in Ireland and establishing it in England”⁵²) and to move over there in 1834.

In sum, what happened to Lover around the year “1832” – which, according to the American-born London-based biographer of Lover, was “to be considered a sort of era in his life, since one of its events led to the transference of his home and after career to London”⁵³ – less than two decades later, to the young Anglo-Irish “apprentice mage” W.B. Yeats, seemed instead perfectly coherent with the class-biased and identity-disruptive “accent of the gentry” and “voice of those who lived lightly and gaily”⁵⁴ that he attributed to Lover’s life and stories in 1891. And, perhaps, this seemed all the more problematic to Yeats since, in a short essay on *Clarence Mangan’s Love Affair* written in the same year, he defined Lover as “the most important” member of The Comet Club, “a gathering of [young Irish] journalists and writers”⁵⁵ of “differing religious background”

49. Willbur Fisk, *Travels On The Continent Of Europe; Viz., In England, Ireland, Scotland, France, Italy, Switzerland, Germany, And The Netherlands*, New York, Harper & Brothers, 1838, p. 140.

50. Bernard, *The life of Samuel Lover*, p. 131.

51. *Ibid.*, p. 57.

52. *Ibid.*, p. 131.

53. *Ibid.*, p. 130.

54. *Introduction*, in *Representative Irish Tales*, p. 2.

55. *The Collected Works. Volume IX. Early Articles and Reviews*, edited by J.P. Frayne and M. Marchaterre, New York, Scribner, 2004, p. 136.

founded in the spring of 1831 as “a publishing consortium in Dublin”, in order “to provide rudimentary instruction on political topics, conveyed in familiar language” on the basis of “an O’Connellite agenda that included reform of the Irish municipalities, repeal of the union, and the abolition of tithes.”⁵⁶

Besides this very early mention of Paganini, there is another reference to Italian art music in Yeats’s work that deserves attention because it is just as culturally and socio-politically oriented as the first one above, though in a different way. It is his musico-literary elaboration of Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina (1525–1594), which is mentioned in *Dramatis Personae*, his autobiographical text dealing with the Yeatsian years 1896–1902⁵⁷, where the Anglo-Irish poet recalls his experience with his friend and financial supporter Edward Martyn. Martyn’s mediating cultural stance usually alienate critical ideologies: his “politics made him an eccentric among the Irish landowning class to which he belonged”⁵⁸, since he was “a Nationalist of strong convictions”,⁵⁹ a member of a Catholic landed gentry family “founded in the twelfth century” and “an unhappy, childless, laborious, unfinished man, typical of an Ireland that is passing away.” In his *Dramatis Personae*, Yeats writes that, during his visits at Tulira Castle (Co. Galway) – a “house, part fourteenth century, part that pretentious modern Gothic once dear to Irish Catholic families”⁶⁰ –

Edward Martyn brought [Arthur Symons and I] up the wide stairs of his Gothic hall [...] We both knew that those pillars, that stair and varnished roof with their mechanical ornament, were among the

56. Robin J. Kavanagh, *Religion and Illustrated Periodicals in the 1830s*, in James H. Murphy (ed.), *The Oxford History of the Irish Book, Volume IV: The Irish Book in English 1800–1891*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011, p. 345.

57. *Dramatis Personae* was originally published by Cuala Press in 1935 and then posthumously included in *Autobiography* in 1953 and in *Autobiographies* in 1955.

58. Denis Gwynn, “Edward Martyn”, *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review*, 19:74 (1930), p. 237.

59. Ernest A. Boyd, *The Contemporary Drama of Ireland*, Boston, Little, Brown and Co., 1917, p. 12.

60. *The Bounty of Sweden: a Meditation, and a Lecture delivered before the Royal Swedish Academy and Certain Notes*, Dublin, The Cuala Press, 1925, pp. 52 and 51, note 2.

worst inventions of the Gothic revival, but upon several evenings we asked Edward Martyn to extinguish all light except that of a little Roman lamp, sat there in the shadows, as though upon a stage set for *Parsifal*. Edward Martyn sat at his *harmonium*, so placed among the pillars that it seemed some ancient instrument, and played *Palestrina*.⁶¹

Martyn's musico-cultural predilection for Palestrina's vocal music was no marginal feature of his politico-cultural identity and contribution to the "Irish cultural nationalism", since "he set the calls for the reform of church music firmly in the Irish-Ireland context of a growing quest for an Irish national identity."⁶² His "munificent gift of £10,000 [in November 1902] to endow a choir in Marlborough Street Pro-Cathedral to sing, for the first time in Ireland, church music *a capella*"⁶³ was celebrated with strong denominational implications by the Irish Catholic musicologist and composer William H. Grattan Flood (1857–1928), who dedicated his *History of Irish Music* to him as "the Founder of the Palestrina Choir and the Munificent Patron of *True Church Music* in Ireland."⁶⁴ As Rebecca Troeger has perceptively written, Martyn "melded" his personal elaboration of the "conservative ideals" of the Cecilian model of Palestrina's music "with a cultural nationalist approach to Irish politics, making church music an issue of Irish national importance."⁶⁵ The relevance and the impact of Martyn's commitment to such a musico-political (re)birth of Ireland can be adequately gauged – as Thomas MacGreevy (1893–1967; Irish

61. *Dramatis Personae*, in *The Collected Works of William Butler Yeats. Volume III: Autobiographies*, edited by W. O'Donnell and D.N. Archibald, New York, Scribner, 1999, p. 289.

62. J.C.M. Nolan, "Edward Martyn and the Founding of Dublin's Palestrina Choir", *New Hibernia Review*, 4 (2000), pp. 98 and 89.

63. Anon, "Music in Dublin (from Our Own Correspondent)", *The Musical Times*, 1st March 1903, p. 190.

64. Dublin, Brown and Nolan Limited, 1906, no page number (italics mine). Flood also wrote a short essay on the connections between Palestrina and Bishop Thomas Goldwell, "the last survivor of the old hierarchy in England" ("Palestrina and Bishop Goldwell. A link with England", *The Tablet*, 17th April 1926, p. 7).

65. Rebecca Troeger, *The formation of musical communities in Twentieth-Century Irish Literature*, PhD Dissertation, Boston College, 2014, p. 142.

Catholic modernist poet, and Director of the National Gallery of Ireland from 1950 to 1963) did – by placing Palestrina among the “saints of music” and promoting “the music of the Liturgy” as “the source from which the Irish music-school of the future, like the modern Russian and French schools, should draw sustenance.”⁶⁶ This was exactly:

the paradox of Martyn’s cultural position[:] while he drew great intellectual conviction and spiritual strength from his own encounters with European Catholicism, he passionately struggled to share the fruits of his privileged experience with his fellow countrymen, clerical and lay, who failed to understand his national dream.⁶⁷

Emblematically enough, in this brief though dense quotation from *Dramatis Personae*, while acting as a personal and cultural mediator between Martyn – a “nineteenth-century [Irish] idealist” and Catholic high-class “eccentric”⁶⁸ – and the “impressionist view of art and life”⁶⁹ of the English Methodist-reared middle-class Symons, the Anglo-Irish middle-class Yeats – who was born in a family historically involved in the Church of Ireland – places Palestrina alongside with the English pioneer of the Gothic revival Augustus Welby Northmore Pugin (1812–1852) and the German composer Richard Wagner (1813–1883). Thus, while pondering back on his stay at Tulira Castle and radically disapproving of the characteristics of its Gothic hall that recalled “the worst inventions of the Gothic Revival” imported in Ireland by the Catholic convert Pugin, Yeats – nonetheless – also recalls how Martyn’s Puginesque “pillars”, “stair”, and “varnished roof” repeatedly turned into “a stage set for *Parsifal*” thanks to the feeble Rosicrucian⁷⁰ light of “a

66. Thomas MacGreevy, “For Vincent O’Brien”, *The Capuchin Annual*, 1945–1946, p. 238.

67. Nolan, “Edward Martyn and the Founding of Dublin’s Palestrina Choir”, p. 102.

68. Thomas MacGreevy, “Edward Martyn. An Irish Catholic Eccentric”, *The Father Mathew Record*, April 1943, p. 2.

69. Yeats, *The Collected Works of William Butler Yeats. Volume III: Autobiographies*, p. 247.

70. On the Rosicrucian implications of this “little Roman lamp” cf. the American folklorist Charles Godfrey Leland (1824–1903) in *Etruscan Roman Remains in Popular Tradition*, London, T. Fisher Unwin, 1892, p. 325, and the Irish writer Scan O’Faolain (1900–1991) in the essay *Æ and W.B.* (1939), in *Selected Essays*, edited by Brad Kent, Montreal and Kingston, McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2016, p. 108.

little Roman lamp” and the twilight-like play of shadows it produced, thus allowing the then Wagnerian-oriented Yeats and Symons to parallel Martyn’s “cult of liturgical aestheticism [...]” that find its “grandest expression”⁷¹ in *Parsifal*, though not from the point of view of Roman Catholicism or, more widely speaking, of one of the different denominations of Christianity available in Ireland at that time. At Tulira Castle, this miraculous Wagnerian intertwining⁷² was perhaps conjured up also through Martyn’s solely organ (i.e. instrumental) performance of “the superhuman perfection of Palestrina”,⁷³ which excluded verbal factionalism and conflictual denominationalism with all its cultural, social and institutional consequences. Though apparently discordant with the coeval Catholic Church’s typical frowning upon it “as an elaborate solo instrument in liturgical contexts”,⁷⁴ the polyphonically and dialogically symbolic protagonism of the *Palestrinian* organ⁷⁵ at Tulira Castle, “so placed among the pillars that it seemed some ancient instrument”, could even make the miracle of becoming *vocal* in one musico-literary passage of Arthur Symons’s “causerie” of his listening experience:

in the evening my host plays [...] Palestrina on the organ, in the half darkness of the hall, and I wander between the pillars of black marble, *hearing the many voices* rising into the dome: [...] Palestrina, an exultation and a triumph, in which *the many voices* of white souls go up ardently into heaven.⁷⁶

71. Edward Martyn, “Wagner’s Parsifal, or the Cult of Liturgical Aestheticism”, *The Irish Review*, 3:34 (1913), p. 535.

72. On Yeats and Wagner see Enrico Reggiani, “An Irish literary Bayreuth. Yeats, Joyce and the Revivalist Wagner”, *Joyce Studies in Italy 4 (o.s. 17): Joyce, Yeats, and the Revival*, edited by John McCourt, Roma, Edizioni Q, 2015, pp. 197–212.

73. Martyn, “Wagner’s Parsifal, or the Cult of Liturgical Aestheticism”, p. 540.

74. Hermann J. Busch and Martin Herchenroeder, *The German-speaking Lands*, in Christopher S. Anderson (ed.), *Twentieth-Century Organ Music*, New York and London, Routledge, 2012, p. 50

75. What Martyn played was not a “harmonium”, but an “organ”, as Yeats himself wrote in 1925 (*Bounty of Sweden*, p. 51, note 2), while Una Jeffers (1884–1962) called it “a great pipe-organ” (*Visits to Ireland: travel-diaries*, Los Angeles, The Ward Richie Press, 1954, p. 22)

76. Arthur Symons, “A Causerie from a Castle in Ireland”, *The Savoy*, 6 (October, 1896), p. 93 (italics mine).

Samuel Lover and Niccolò Paganini; Edward Martyn and Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina: as seen above, Yeats did not entirely approve of these two different relationships between cultural-musical protagonists of both Irish culture and Italian music (with their overall nature and implications: the purely instrumental, self-referential, individualistically virtuosic ones of the former; the purely vocal, other-directed, communitarianly choral ones of the latter). Perhaps surprisingly and apparently in contrast with his alleged unmusicality, Yeats went a different musico-literary way from Lover and Martyn during the whole of his lifetime and creative life, since his lifelong interest and engagement in theatrical culture and experience were paralleled by interest and engagement in Italian opera, though of a very specific genre and circumscribed historical period.

While opera *lato sensu* (unidentified and perhaps unidentifiable "old English operas", seventeenth-century Purcell operas, mid-nineteenth-century French grand opéra, Richard Wagner's wort-ton-drama, late nineteenth-century Gilbert-and-Sullivan "operas") figures sporadically in Yeats's pages, eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century Italian opera seems to be almost totally absent from his works: no references to the so-called eighteenth-century Italian schools (Neapolitan, Roman, and Venetian), and none to Rossini, Bellini, Donizetti, Verdi, *et al.* – except perhaps for the bizarre indirect mention in the 1900 version of the short novel *The Speckled Bird* of an "opera singer at Naples who had her nature and she drowned herself because a man [whom] she had married because he had won a billiard match had beaten her."⁷⁷ Instead, this is not the case with some of the protagonists of the birth of Italian opera in the transition between the sixteenth and the seventeenth century, their early seventeenth-century inheritors, and the recitative, which was their fundamental cultural and compositional resource. As a matter of fact, given the dominance (though slowly waning) of both the abovementioned Italian method and gesture in Ireland in the second half of the nineteenth century, it may be surprising to discover that,

77. *The Speckled Bird. An Autobiographical Novel with Variant Versions*, ed. by William H. O'Donnell, Houndmills, Palgrave Macmillan, 2003, p. 136.

in the important essay *The Symbolism of Poetry* (1900), after Wagner's ideas, the allegedly unmusical Yeats competently mentions the fact that "opera, and with it modern music, arose from certain talks at the house of one Giovanni Bardi of Florence"⁷⁸ – which is predictably in tune with what the English artistic polymath Florence Farr (1860–1917) wrote on "the *Italian method* of singing exemplified by"⁷⁹ composers like Giulio Caccini (1550–1618), Claudio Monteverdi (1567–1643), Giacomo Carissimi (1605–1674) in her 1907 *Note*⁸⁰ to Yeats's short explanatory prose on *Music for Lyrics*. His perhaps unexpected interest in "one Giovanni Bardi of Florence" and, as a direct correlation, his competence in the music theory and practice of the Florentine Camerata is even linguistically confirmed by the textual occurrence of some specialized musico-literary syntagms (e.g. "heightened speech" and "regulated declamation") that he employed in his explanatory essay on *The Music for use in the Performance of these Plays*⁸¹ (1908) and that are frequently used in coeval musicological sources.⁸²

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78. *The Symbolism of Poetry*, in *The Collected Works of William Butler Yeats. Volume IV: Early Essays*, R.J. Finneran–G. Bornstein (ed.), New York, Scribner, 2007, p. 113. On the connection between Wagner and the Florentine Camerata (with Greek tragedy as the shared "point of departure") cf. e.g. Alan Roy Anbari, *Richard Wagner's Concepts of History*, Ph.D. Dissertation, The University of Texas at Austin, 2007, p. 141.
79. Ruth Katz, *Divining the Powers of Music: Aesthetic Theory and the Invention of Opera*, New Brunswick and London, Transaction Publishers, 1994², p. 107 (italics mine).
80. *The Countess Cathleen. The Land of Heart's Desire. The Unicorn from the Stars. Being the Third Volume of The Collected Works in Verse and Prose of William Butler Yeats*, Stratford-on-Avon, The Shakespeare Head Press, 1908, p. 236.
81. *The Collected Works of William Butler Yeats. Volume II. The Plays*, D.R. Clark and R.E. Clark (eds.), New York, Scribner, 2001, pp. 757 and 758.
82. Cf., e.g., the syntagm "heightened speech" in César Saerchinger (ed.), *The Art of Music: Volume Nine. The Opera*, New York, The National Society of Music, 1916, p. 13; and the syntagm "regulated declamation" in George Alexander Macfarren (1813–1887), *Music. History*, in *The Encyclopedia Britannica in Thirty Volumes*, New York, The Werner Company, 1902, vol. xvii, p. 101. Emblematically enough, the latter figures also in two foundational eighteenth-century musico-literary works by John Brown (1715–1766): *Dissertation on the Rise, Union and Power, the Progressions, Separations, and Corruptions, of Poetry and Music*, London, Davis and Reymers, 1763, p. 116, and *The History of the Rise and Progress of Poetry*, Newcastle, White and Saint, 1764, p. 130. The presence of the two abovementioned syntagms could also be interpreted as one of the effects of Yeats's interaction with Arnold Dolmetsch (1858–1940), one of the most influential figures in the early twentieth-century revival

Yeats's 1900 reference to "one Giovanni Bardi of Florence" follows, at a distance of only three years, a mention in his 1897 story *The Tables of the Law* of another protagonist of Florentine musical life in the transition from the fifteenth to the sixteenth century: Giovanni Cellini⁸³ (1451–1527), "the [Florentine] lute-player who was father to Benvenuto Cellini"⁸⁴ (1500–1571). Yeats could have read about his excellent musical competence in *The Life of Benvenuto Cellini Written by Himself*,⁸⁵ whose English translation by the poet and cultural historian John Addington Symonds (1840–1893) was in his library.⁸⁶ This Florentine connection between Giovanni Cellini and Giovanni Bardi is all the more significant because it sheds light on three different aspects of Yeats's knowledge of Italian music and composers.

Firstly, it is consonant with cultural-musical research in the 1890s, which, for example, held that "the revolution which took place at the end of the sixteenth century did not do more than adapt and develop forces which had been in existence for nearly a hundred years", thus countering the apocalyptic view that "the little knot of men who assembled in Count Bardi's palace to discuss the Nuova Musica have been accepted by posterity as the Dantons and Robespierres of a bloodless revolution, as the arch conspirators of a

of early music, who concluded the *Introduction of his Interpretation of the music of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries revealed by contemporary evidence* (1915) as follows: "It is advisable, however, before beginning this study, to clear our mind of prejudice and preconceived ideas, and *put aside intolerant modernity*; or else we may, as others have done, corrupt and twist about the meaning of even the clearest statement. We should take warning from the eighteenth-century connoisseurs, who declared Gothic architecture barbarous, or the early nineteenth-century art critics, who could see no beauty in pre-Raphaelite art" (London, Novello, 1915, p. viii).

83. On Giovanni Cellini cf. Timothy J. McGee, "Giovanni Cellini, piffero di Firenze", *Rivista italiana di musicologia*, 32 (1997): 201–221; reprinted as "Giovanni Cellini, Piffero of Florence", *Historical Brass Society Journal*, 12 (2000), pp. 210–225.

84. *The Tables of the Law*, in *Mythologies*, London and Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1959, p. 297

85. "Giovanni [Cellini] began to turn his mind to music, and together with the theory learned to play most excellently on the viol and the flute" (*The Life of Benvenuto Cellini Written by Himself*, translated by J.A. Symonds, London, Nimmo, 1889,³ Book First, p. 5).

86. Edward O'Shea, *A Descriptive Catalog of W.B. Yeats's Library*, p. 54, n. 358.

revolt against choral polyphony, and the inventors of the melodic style and its natural successor, the instrumental.”⁸⁷

Secondly, the connection Cellini-Bardi also shows that Yeats was strongly interested in Florentine Renaissance music already in the 1890s, that is, some years before the first decade of the twentieth century during which, according to William Carpenter, he developed and manifested his predilection for Italian Renaissance as “the historical realization of Unity of Being”, often expressed by the metaphor of the unison, rooted in the “Renaissance tradition of universal order and harmony, symbolized by the images of cosmic order, *musical harmony*, and universal health.”⁸⁸

Thirdly and lastly, through the connection Cellini-Bardi, Yeats also emphasized two features of Florentine (musical) Renaissance whose potential influence on Irish culture of his age he valued greatly: on the one hand, the stress on the spiritual foundations of art, exemplified in *The Tables of the Law* (1897) by the transmission of “a secret book of [Joachim of Flora] called the *Liber inducens in Evangelium aeternum*” which passed “from generation to generation until it came to the lute-player who was father to Benvenuto Cellini”;⁸⁹ on the other hand, the emphasis on the need for “a philosophy of poetry in the doctrine of symbolism” that Yeats epitomized in Giovanni Bardi, since – as he wrote in *The Symbolism of Poetry* (1900) –

all writers, *all artists of any kind*, in so far as they have had any philosophical or critical power, perhaps just in so far as they have been deliberate artists at all, have had some philosophy, some criticism of their art; and it has often been this philosophy, or this criticism, that has evoked their most startling inspiration, calling into outer life some portion of the divine life, or of the buried reality, which could alone extinguish in the emotions what their philosophy or their criticism would extinguish in the intellect.⁹⁰

87. Anon., “Giovanni and Benvenuto Cellini”, *The Musical Times and Singing Class Circular*, 33:596 (1st October 1892), pp. 593 and 592.

88. William M. Carpenter, “The ‘Green Helmet’ Poems and Yeats’s Myth of the Renaissance”, *Modern Philology*, 67:1 (1969), pp. 54, 56.

89. *The Tables of the Law*, p. 296.

90. *The Symbolism of Poetry*, p. 114 (italics mine).

One can move easily from what has been said above to conclude that the "Italian method" and the "Italian gesture" of the Florentine musical Renaissance had great impact on Yeats's musico-literary experience and culture⁹¹ and represented for him what Italian Belcanto and nineteenth-century Italian melodrama represented for Joyce.⁹² However, unlike Joyce's, Yeats's approach to that portion of music history and its correlated cultural-musical language was always sustained by his anthropological awareness that "no vowel must ever be prolonged *unnaturally*, no word of mine must ever change into a mere musical note, *no singer of my words must ever cease to be a man and become an instrument.*"⁹³ Such lifelong awareness kept emerging strongly in his work and thought (at least) until two years before his death in 1939 (more specifically, in a letter he wrote to Dorothy Wellesley in 1937) in the form of both the creative-compositional formula "music, the *natural* words in the *natural* order" and the Irish musico-literary project to "sing" about a new Ireland by going

back to the people. Music will keep out temporary ideas, for music is the nations clothing of what is ancient & deathless. I do not mean of course what musicians call the music of words – that is all corpse factory, humanity melted down & poured out in a bottle.⁹⁴

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91. For example, as regards his pioneering enterprise of the Abbey Theatre, he dealt with the typical musico-literary issue of the theatrical "intonation of passionate speech" (*The Music for Use in the Performance of these Plays*, p. 757) by applying what looks like a nineteenth-century Irish elaboration of the Italian method and gesture of Claudio Monteverdi's *seconda prattica*.

92. On this aspect of the Yeats-Joyce relationships cf. my "A singer born": tracce musico(-) letterarie in Joyce and Yeats. Una ricognizione comparativa, in Enrico Reggiani, *Il do maggiore di questa vita. Cinque saggi sulla cultura musico(-)letteraria di lingua inglese*, Milano, Vita e Pensiero, 2016, pp. 77–98.

93. *The Music for use in the performance of these plays*, p. 757 (italics mine)

94. Letter To Dorothy Wellesley, 8 February [1937] (*The Collected Letters of William Butler Yeats*, Oxford University Press (InteLex Electronic Edition), Oxford 2002, Accession letter #6804 (italics mine).