Nobile Teatro di San Giacomo di Corfù: an overview of its significance for the Greek ottocento

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For more than 150 years (1733-1893), the "Nobile Teatro di San Giacomo" of Corfu, despite its rather provincial character, played a central role in the musical life of both the Ionian Islands and modern Greece, providing the focus for the development of the Greek ottocento. The article examines this development from the end of Venetian rule in 1797 until the absorption of the Ionian Islands into the Kingdom of Greece in 1864. It is is a shortened version of a paper given at the XI Convegno Annuale di Società Italiana di Musicologia, Lecce, 22-24 October 2004. The full version together with photographs and references can be found at
www.donizettisociety.com/articles/sangiacomocorfu.htm

The theatre was built as a loggia for the island's Venetian nobility in 1693 but then converted into a theatre, the first in modern Greece, in 1720. Initially, it staged only theatrical performances, but from 1733 opera was also performed, the theatre eventually being converted into the Town Hall in the 1890s. In the late eighteenth century, San Giacomo focused mainly on opera buffa, which was not only more popular but also cheaper than opera seria. Until the mid-nineteenth century, the impresarios were Italian, sometimes connected with the opera world and sometimes not and the increasing significance of the theatre also attracted instrumentalists and singers from Italy. This, in turn, resulted in an increasing interest in music and the gradual emergence of indigenous players, the first professional musicians of modern Greece, so that, by the mid-1840's, the impresario had an adequate number of local musicians at his disposal and only had to hire the principal instrumentalists, as well as the singers, from Italy.

The earliest known music teachers of the island were either Italian or second generation Italian immigrants and all involved with the San Giacomo theatre, often as maestro al cembalo. They included the brothers Stefano and Girolamo Pojago, who were both born in Corfu, Stefano being the composer of the opera *Gli amanti confusi ossia Il bruto fortunato,* which was presented in San Giacomo in 1791, Stefano Moretti, who made his first appearance as a singer in Corfu in 1784, Giuseppe Castignace, Giuseppe Persiani, the composer of *Ines de Castro,* who visited Corfu briefly in 1824, Marco Battagel, who also founded the first Zakynthos's Philharmonic Society (1816), Giulio Cesare Ferrarini and Rafaelle Parisini, who eventually moved to initiate musical education and activity in Athens. Most of San Giacomo's singers, usually second or third rank Italians, visited Corfu occasionally as part of the Italian professional circuit of the time. However, some of them appeared fairly frequently in Corfu. For instance, the

Neapolitan soprano Anna de Paolis Pelizia, the tenor Raffaele Recupito and the baritone Andrea Bartoluzi sung at San Giacomo almost every year from 1814 until 1821 and Ezzebina Ercolani took leading soprano roles from 1840 until 1843. Occasionally, famous virtuosi and singers, such as Carolina Ungher, performed, although not as a part of an operatic troupe, something that, nonetheless, indicates Corfu's increasing importance for the region's cultural activities.Things are more complicated in the case of indigenous singers, particularly female, whose appearance on the Ionian stage was initially considered scandalous. The female roles in amateur theatrical performances in Corfu were performed either by local male dilettanti or by professional female opera singers. This attitude can be largely attributed to religious conservatism, especially that of the Orthodox Church, which considered anything "western" as heretical. However, there are isolated cases of successful local singers, such as the mezzo-soprano Elena d'Angri (1824-1886), who made a notable career both in Europe and in the Americas and the Zantiote soprano Isavella Yatrà (~1832-1916), who became an important figure in Greek melodramatic history. Moreover, several singers of obvious Greek origin appeared at San Giacomo, including Spiridon Patricchios (1840), Demetrios Mexas (1846,1848) and Luigia Milonopoulou (1854).

The increasing interest in advanced music theory and composition was first exploited by Nikolaos Halikiopoulos Mantzaros. Mantzaros was a student of both Pojago brothers (1806, 1808), Moretti (1808) and from 1810-1813 of a certain 'Cavaliere Barbatti' (possibly a Neapolitan). However, it was not until 1815 that Mantzaros completed several concert arias and an 'azione comica in un' atto solo' *Don Crepuscolo*, for performance at the theatre. Thus began a series of similar works between 1815 and 1827 that were usually performed during singers' benefit nights (some of these works are performed on a recent Hellenic Music Research Lab CD, see *http://www.ionio.gr/~GreekMus/eng/pubeng/cds.htm*). These works are the first creations of their kind in Greek musical history and, in the case of*Don Crepuscolo*, the first operatic work by a Greek composer (It is planned to revive this opera in Athens in 2007).

On the title pages, the composer characterized himself as '*dilettante*', to emphasise that his involvement with musical composition was for personal pleasure rather than financial gain, as befitting his noble descent. Mantzaros never considered himself a professional composer, despite his heavy involvement with music, his contact with the musical life of Naples through Niccolò Zingarelli and the composition of the Greek National Anthem and, as a consequence, resisted composing any large scale operatic work. Instead, he furthered musical life by delivering free music lessons, becoming the founder of what is known as the Ionian School of Music. In 1841, he became the lifelong artistic director of the newly established Philharmonic Society of Corfu, which had its most fruitful period under him and which was the first Greek musical academy based on European prototypes. The lack of operatic compositions by Mantzaros was compensated for by works by others, often his former students and almost all being performed in San Giacomo. Of special importance are the activities of the Liberali brothers, Antonio and Giuseppe. Antonio looked back to the idealized past of Greece,

and particularly of Corfu, by composing incidental music for the performance of Tommaso Sauli Sajani's tragedy 'Ulisse, re di Itaca' in Corcira in 1834, as well as composing a cantata entitled *L' orfano di Suli* in 1837, a work drawing on the 1821 revolution against the Ottoman rule. Antonio died young in January 1842 but his brother, Giuseppe, continued and developed further his ideas. Apart from being an excellent pianist, during the 1840's and 1850's he composed operas such as *Rigas Feraios* and *Marcos Botsaris*, the scena e duetto *Alis and Tzavellas*, and a piano fantasia based on popular themes entitled *Le réveil du Klépht*, considered the earliest existing work of national Greek music. Starting in 1855, Spiridon Xindas composed operas on Italian librettos for San Giacomo:- *Anna Winter* (1855), based on Dumas' The Three Musketeers and *Conte Giuliano* (1856), based on an Italian libretto by Gerasimos Markoras, one of the most important figures of Ionian nineteenth-century literature. The same libretto was used by Felice Lambelet for his *Il castello maledetto* (1857). Domenico Padovani (Domenikos Padovas) left at least two operatic works:- the one-act comic opera *Il ciarlatano presso per principe* (before 1847) and the tragic opera *Dirce, figlia di Aristodemo* (1857), both based on librettos by the Italian political refugee Saveriano Fogacci. The fact that *Il ciarlatano* was scored exclusively for male voices (both singers and choir) was probably the response to the shortage of amateur female voices. *Dirce*, based on Vincenzo Monti's work, was once again connected to the idealized, and deceptive, European notion of modern Greece as the immediate heir of the ancient world. The lack of Greek-speaking singers was a critical factor in the late appearance of arias, songs and, above all, operas in the Greek language and it is symptomatic that the lyrics of Mantzaros's *"Aria Greca"* (1827), an aria concertante, the first work of its kind that set the modern Greek language to music, were written in latin characters, so as to be comprehensible by Elizabetta Pinotti, the Neapolitan singer who performed it. Spiridon Xindas also composed arias in Greek from the 1840's but again these were performed by Italian singers, a practice that he followed as late as 1868. In 1867, Spiridon Xindas's *O Ypopsifios* [The Parliamentary Candidate] became the first opera to use a Greek libretto. It was performed in San Giacomo by local amateurs and despite having several common characteristics with Italian opera its casting was rather peculiar, including five male and one female voice which again reflected the problems caused by the absence of a local opera school and thus being reliant on what voices were available, including those of both the composer and the librettist.

From the above, it is clear that San Giacomo played a central role in the formation of the Greek ottocento, both in terms of performance and of education so that by the mid-nineteenth century, in contrast to Athens, there was a vibrant musical life in Corfu whose influence even reached Italy through composers such as Pavlos Karrer (in the 1850s, whose opera, *Marathon Salamis*, was discussed in Newsletter 92); Dionisios Rodotheatos (in the 1870s); and Spiros Samaras (in the 1890s-1900s, a recording of whose *Rhea* was reviewed in Newsletter 98).