CLASSICAL CROSSOVER: THE ITALIAN REINVENTION OF OPERA FOR THE MODERN AGE, AND WHY IT MATTERS

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Italy is by no means a military or political power, but one can say that it has a ‘soft power’ that stems from its contributions to culture, lifestyle and the arts. One of Italy’s greatest contributions to the modern world is its music, especially its invention of the opera genre. This paper will prove that classical crossover is the force responsible for the modern rejuvenation of the opera genre, that classical crossover is one of the most important Italian contributions to the twentieth-century world of arts, and that the significance of classical crossover has become one of Italy’s largest sources of ‘soft power.’ These points are illustrated by the efforts of four Italian singers: Enrico Caruso and Mario Lanza, precursors paving the way for the classical crossover movement, Luciano Pavarotti, founder of this movement, and Andrea Bocelli, the biggest star of classical crossover.

Classical crossover is a musical style that was created by classical music performers, like opera stars, who branched out into popular music, musical theater, Neapolitan songs, and folk music repertoire. The first seeds of this new genre were sown in Italy and the Italian-American immigrant community at the turn of the twentieth century, when opera singers embraced a wider repertoire, especially the traditional and popular music of Naples. Although he himself was not a ‘crossover artist,’ the grandfather of this classical crossover movement was a famous tenor, Enrico Caruso - considered by many, even today, to be one of the best operatic tenors of all time.

Enrico Caruso was born in the south of Italy, in Naples, a city brimming with vibrant culture and beautiful, heart-wrenching music. While the south of Italy has often struggled economically, it is a region that has never lacked for lifestyle, culture or art, and it is a region of enchanting natural beauty. In fact, it was the struggles of these proud people that inspired their haunting, poignant melodies; many Neapolitan songs intimately describe the emotionally-charged odyssey of immigrants leaving their beloved homeland for opportunity in a strange new country, America.

Two examples of songs with this theme are *Torna a Surriento* (*Return to Sorrento*) and *A Canzone e Napule* (*To the Song and to Naples*). *Torna a Surriento* is a song lamenting the loss of a lover, a lover who has left the beautiful coast of Sorrento, near Naples, for another country (probably the United States, to find work). The words are: “You say: I am leaving, goodbye! You’re walking away from this heart, from this land of love: do you have the heart not to return?... But don’t leave me, don’t give me this torment... Come back to Sorrento: make me live![[1]](#footnote-1)” *A Canzone e Napule* is a song about a young man who must leave Naples for a new life in America. The words are: “I do not want to go to America, but to stay longer here. I don’t want to leave and say goodbye to your beautiful eyes. I want to stay in the sun, with all the songs of the sea; I want to stay in Naples, I want to stay with my mother, I want to stay with you.[[2]](#footnote-2)” This is the kind of music which was popularized by Caruso, and later, Mario Lanza and Pavarotti, becoming famous around the world. It was also the direct precursor to the classical crossover movement, because once the opera singers had branched out into Neapolitan music, they then branched out into other musical genres as well.

Enrico Caruso started his career with these Neapolitan songs, not opera. “Born in Naples in 1873, the tenor had an unconventional musical education. As a young boy, he was a male contralto in church. Lacking adequate preparation, he began a career as a singer of popular Neapolitan songs and then turned to opera singing after a period of intense study.[[3]](#footnote-3)” Caruso became a famous singer because of three factors: his unusually communicative and expressive singing style, his performances of Neapolitan songs (which were very popular with the Italian-American community), and his legendary gramophone recordings. He was one of the first major music stars with a successful studio recording career, becoming the symbol of the Victor Talking Machine gramophone company.

Caruso’s performances of Neapolitan songs not only cemented him as an international star, but they also improved Italy-US relations. The lack of economic opportunity in Naples at the beginning of the twentieth century led many people to emigrate to the United States, and when these immigrants arrived, they faced severe racial discrimination from mainstream American society. Americans viewed them as violent, backwards, and unskilled; however, watching and listening to charming performances of great Italian art eventually persuaded them otherwise. “The man who played a fundamental role in defining the positive prototype of the Italian immigrant as one who achieved social status and was self-determined – within the dimensions that define the model of an immigrant ‘self-made man’ – was Enrico Caruso.[[4]](#footnote-4)” Caruso had started his formal operatic career in Europe, earning great acclaim throughout the continent, but, ironically, he had been scorned by the Neapolitan press for his emotional style. Thus, he moved to New York City and worked for the Metropolitan Opera. His success with both Italian-Americans and mainstream American society also led to new Neapolitan-style songs produced in collaboration between American and Italian composers and lyricists.

New Neapolitan-style songs might have been written by Italian composers and later given English words by American lyricists – or vice versa. This helped promote greater cooperation and understanding between the two nations, even though it was through art rather than politics. That shows the international relevance and ‘soft power’ of Italian arts and culture, because nowadays, we in the U.S. associate Italian and Italian-American society with the arts, legendary performers like Pavarotti or Frank Sinatra, and many important cultural and scientific contributions to the modern Western world. Of course, the musical collaboration between America and Italy was not limited to new Italian repertoire.

Many Italian-Americans, like Louis Prima and Frank Sinatra, pioneered and contributed to new styles in American music. The jazz genre in particular has benefited from Italian-American contributions, like the famous 1936 Big Band song *Sing Sing Sing* written by Louis Prima, and the iconic version of *Fly Me to the Moon* performed in the 1960s by Frank Sinatra. That is proof of the significant Italian contribution to American music.

Returning to classical crossover and opera, Caruso was the grandfather - the predecessor who laid the groundwork for the classical crossover movement. Continuing in his tradition was the great Mario Lanza, an Italian-American tenor, who began his operatic career in the thirties and forties. By the 1950s, however, he began singing material outside of the operatic canon to great acclaim, particularly Neapolitan songs and musical theater.

Mario Lanza also was never formally referred to as a classical crossover artist, but he was the first opera singer to branch out from operatic literature and Neapolitan songs to other repertoire. His forays into musical theater and popular American music of the time were very lucrative, helping him gain a large following. He became a star not only on the operatic stage, but also on the big screen, for his roles in famous movies, and on Broadway for his musical theater performances. Lanza starred in the 1950 movie *The Toast of New Orleans*, and sang the song *Be My Love*, which became his first hit song to sell a million copies. He went on to star in *The Great Caruso* a year later, playing the role of the legendary Enrico Caruso. That movie became the year’s top-grossing film, and it gave him his second million-selling hit song, *The Loveliest Night of the Year[[5]](#footnote-5).* This success is another demonstration of the ‘soft power’ which Italian arts and culture wield on an international scale, because of Lanza’s clearly significant contributions to both Italian and American music and cinema.

Lanza’s work in the 1950s paved the way for Pavarotti’s classical crossover movement. The classical crossover movement was created because Pavarotti felt that there was a need to widen opera’s appeal and attract more young singers to the profession. He created an international vocal competition, performed with well-known pop singers, and started the ‘Three Tenors’ with the two other most famous tenors of the time to have concerts performing opera’s most beloved arias.

Pavarotti wrote with William Wallace in his autobiography, *Pavarotti: My World,* that when his career was just taking off in the 1960s, he was afraid that there might not be much of an audience for opera anymore. “When I started my career, people in Italy had already been saying for twenty years that opera was dying. The opera houses, even La Scala, had empty seats. The audience that did go to the performances seemed to be made up of the same people over and over.[[6]](#footnote-6)” As a result, Pavarotti developed ‘outreach’ and ‘recruitment’ programs, in an attempt to get youths interested, and therefore ensure a better future for the art. He also worked to increase the audiences at opera houses with his Three Tenors concerts, his ‘Pavarotti and Friends’ performances blending pop music and opera, and his plethora of recordings.

Reflecting on this aspect of his career, Pavarotti wrote that “much of what I do outside of the opera house has… the motive of drawing more people to opera. When I perform with pop singers or go on a talk show… I am hoping to convince people that I am not a museum piece left over from the nineteenth century, a historical relic, or an artist high in a tower. I want non-opera people to see that I am a human being just like them… Maybe what I hope to get across is the idea that it is not necessary to be old-fashioned, eccentric, or weird to love opera.[[7]](#footnote-7)” In the end, he became the most famous, best-selling classical artist of all time, and a pioneer of the genre’s future.

Pavarotti, unlike some northern Italians, loved Naples, and recognized the huge gifts which the city had given to opera and Italian music in general. “Not only are Neapolitans extremely proud to have given the world Caruso. They are proud, too, to have given the world so much of the music he sang, especially the traditional Neapolitan songs.[[8]](#footnote-8)” Pavarotti also became famous for his interpretations of beautiful Neapolitan classics, especially his favorite Neapolitan songs *Santa Lucia* and *Santa Lucia Lontana,* which are about the Santa Lucia harbor, just outside of Naples*.* This repertory increased his overall fame and helped him sell more records, but more importantly, it became a launching pad for his classical crossover efforts.

“When Placido Domingo, Jose Carreras, and I did the first Three Tenors concert at the Baths of Caracalla in Rome in 1990, none of us had any idea how popular it would be.[[9]](#footnote-9)” Carreras had originally proposed the idea of getting the three together for concerts. Domingo and Pavarotti liked this idea, but could not manage to find a time or occasion. After Carreras, who was very young at the time, was diagnosed with leukemia, the other two tenors thought more about his proposal, and when he recovered from his illness, they decided that a Three Tenors concert would be an excellent celebration. The concert, held during the World Cup for soccer, became a huge success. This encouraged them to have more performances.

While The Three Tenors performances are great examples of Pavarotti’s outreach and marketing for opera, the international vocal competition which he founded is an excellent example of the other side of his work – the recruitment of promising young singers. “By the end of the 1970s I had achieved more than I ever thought I would as an opera singer… I could tell myself that I had really achieved something, but what to do with that something? …I also wanted to try to do something that might help young singers.[[10]](#footnote-10)” This, of course, was a very important part of his overall plan, because opera, like other art, needs fresh talent to sustain itself in the future.

Pavarotti remembered how everything had changed for him when he won a vocal competition in Reggio Emilia in 1961, because that was what helped him start his career. He wanted to repay the favor, so he created a vocal competition of his own in Philadelphia, a city he liked because it reminded him of his city Modena in northern Italy. The event would be under the umbrella of the Opera Company of Philadelphia. In this competition, young singers were invited from around the world to perform for Pavarotti and other judges. The winners would then have the opportunity to sing with Pavarotti in an opera production. This competition started in 1980, continuing through 1981, and many of its winners went on to very successful careers in opera.

The story of classical crossover does not end there, however. After Pavarotti had become a well-established artist, and classical crossover had finally become an official genre, the impact started to show. Opera’s trajectory had been changed for the better, from a fate of dwindling, old audiences, to an era of growth – one could finally see youthful, new faces at the opera, and the number of people in attendance was growing steadily. However, it would not be Pavarotti, classical crossover’s lauded founder, and one of opera’s brightest shining stars, who would catapult the new category to its greatest heights.

Andrea Bocelli, a young blind tenor from Lajatico, in Tuscany near Pisa, would be the man to take classical crossover to its greatest heights. While he was not the titan of opera that Pavarotti had been, he quickly became the ‘rock star’ of crossover, achieving levels of mainstream fame and appeal that were previously unimaginable. Bocelli had not even started a career in operatic performance. He had been a piano player, who also enjoyed singing on the side, and his big break came with his entrance in a pop music competition.

In 1992, the Italian rock star Zucchero held auditions for tenors to make a demo tape of his song, *Miserere,* and these demo tapes would be sent to Pavarotti, so he and Zucchero could evaluate them. Bocelli sent in a tape, and Pavarotti was so impressed that he urged Zucchero to have Bocelli sing the song instead of him. Andrea Bocelli sang with Zucchero and Pavarotti on a European tour in 1993, and he performed solo sets, with classical songs like *Nessun Dorma,* in addition to *Miserere[[11]](#footnote-11).*

This stroke of luck was only the beginning for Andrea Bocelli, as he went on to achieve more and more popularity and acclaim. His first album, *Il Mare Calmo della Sera,* went platinum within weeks and entered the Italian Top Ten. Bocelli then went on to become the best-selling Italian artist of all time, in any genre, with his *Romanza* album. Luciano Pavarotti had passed the torch to Andrea Bocelli to increase the worldwide appeal of classical music, and this strategy worked, as there were now more people getting interested in classical music and attending classical music concerts than ever before.

The benefits of classical crossover for opera are apparent – bigger audiences, younger audience members, and more youth excited to study and become a part of the now-thriving musical genre. One thing that is important to remember, however, is that all of this started with Italy and Italian-Americans. From Caruso to Bocelli, all of the trailblazers of opera and classical crossover in the twentieth century were Italians.

The relevance of Italian opera and classical crossover continues to this day. The late Pavarotti’s records still sell, and he is still considered by many the best operatic tenor. Bocelli is alive and well, with a career that is still going strong, and there have been newcomers to the genre in recent years. One example of a newer and younger Italian classical crossover group is Il Volo, an excellent trio of classically-trained singers – two tenors and one baritone. They started in 2009, when they were all still under 18. Piero Barone, Ignazio Boschetti, and Gianluca Ginoble were discovered through a televised Italian singing competition, on which they all competed as solo acts. After they were heard by music industry insiders, the three singers were put together as a trio with a style similar to The Three Tenors.[[12]](#footnote-12) Il Volo is now a major act in classical crossover, and it is popular around the world.

This proves that the Italian contribution to classical crossover continues to be the single largest force responsible for rejuvenating modern opera. As society heads farther into the high-tech, globalized future of the twenty-first century, it has become apparent that Italy has a significant role to play in this new world order. Italy has never had a strong military or efficient and fair politics. Its economy, although large, has deep issues, relying heavily on certain industries. Despite all of this, Italy is still one of the best-known countries in the world, and it continues to influence other nations with its culture and art.

Italy invented opera. It then perfected opera with the works of Puccini and Verdi. As Pavarotti wrote, “opera is the blood of Italians…[[13]](#footnote-13)” Finally, Italy rejuvenated and changed opera in recent times, modernizing and bringing it into the twenty-first century, ready for the future. Opera has played a major role in the evolution of Western music, and it has always been a fascinating blend of many art forms – not just vocal music, but also acting, visual art for the sets and costumes, and great instrumental music. Classical crossover is even more of a melting pot, because it takes the operatic form and adds influences from popular music. The fusion of forms encompassed by opera and classical crossover reflects the nature of Italy, a colorful country which combines everything – good and bad – from lifestyle to culture, food and drink to language, and music to visual art, among other features.

Italy is a country of international importance, and much of that has always stemmed from its art and culture. More important, however, is that Italy is a country beloved by many. There are multitudes of Italophiles in the world; it has always been an appealing place to go, an intriguing subject to study, and a nation with many enticing exports. Italy, despite all of the criticism for its faults, has won the respect and admiration of countless people around the globe, which goes a long way towards fostering mutual understanding and cooperation. In this way, Italy should be a model for others.

Italy wields very little direct power in world affairs; however, its culture and art wield a great deal of ‘soft power’ with which to influence the world order, and to make an impact, at a more personal level, on the cultures and populations of many nations. That is a power that can last through the changing tides of political and economic hegemony, outlive wars, and maintain a space reserved for it in history. One of Italy’s greatest contributions to the world in the periods following the Renaissance is opera, and one of its greatest contributions to the twentieth century, particularly after the Second World War, is classical crossover.

The impact of operatic and crossover music on people everywhere has been immeasurable, and Pavarotti wrote about it, in the context of his voice competition: “I know that to people outside of the world of opera, this sort of classical singing seems a small, very special world that interests only a few people. But when you sit there day after day, as I did, and listen to hundreds of young singers from all over the world who have sacrificed so much to come here to face maybe discouragement or embarrassment, you get a different idea…you begin to think that opera and singing are not such small matters. You get a strong feeling that this sort of music goes very deep in the human and will be with us for a long time.[[14]](#footnote-14)” There is proof of the impact, proof of the positive influence opera and crossover have around the world – opera and crossover are two of the greatest gifts that the world has received from Italy. As this paper has made clear, classical crossover, thanks to Caruso, Lanza, Pavarotti, Bocelli, and others, has become one of the most crucial Italian contributions to the twentieth century world of arts and a significant source of Italy’s ‘soft power,’ in addition to being the single largest force responsible for rejuvenating opera.

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