

An anonymous setting of *L'Ospedale* and the question of an “asylum opera” genre

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The present article is the first-ever detailed study of an anonymous setting of Antonio Abati's one-act musical drama, *L'Ospedale*. Its sole surviving score belongs to the Contarini Collection, now in the Marciana Library, Venice. This work is of particular significance not least because it seems to be the first operatic example which, in featuring an “asylum”, passes ironic comment on the real practices of such institutes of the early modern era. Such settings were first favoured by the late-sixteenth century dramatists and then inherited by opera; they then recurred frequently throughout the history of opera up to the mid-nineteenth century.

First, this study will investigate the context of its premiere by assessing the information given in its manuscript score, by establishing the manner of its acquisition by the Contarini, and by scrutinising the career of the librettist. A possible connection between the work and the Habsburg court will be proposed, which may, in turn, cast new light on *L'Ospedale* as an indicator of the early operatic taste of this ruling family who became major patrons of this art form in the following century.

The second part of the investigation will be concerned with the poetic and musical structures of the work; this will enable the technical practices so described to be located within the growing conventions of opera. Third, the social and cultural contexts that allowed theatrical portrayal of the insane to be enjoyed will be examined, and the pros and cons of seeing such ‘asylum’ works as representatives of a special genre – an asylum opera genre – will be discussed. Finally, by taking the cultural import of *L'Ospedale* as a test case, this paper will evaluate the celebrated cultural theories of “the mad” by the French philosopher, Michel Foucault.