

First performed by order of Emperor Charles VI in Venice, in the garden of the Imperial Favorata, on August 28th, 1733, to celebrate the birthday of the Empress Elisabeth, Pietro Metastasio's *L'Olimpiade* popularized the name and fame of the Olympic Games throughout 18th century Europe. Over the next several decades, more than 50 different settings of Metastasio's libretto were produced throughout Europe.¹ Forty-seven composers² are known through contemporary scores, librettos and reports to have produced complete settings of Metastasio's text including some of the most prominent composers of the day—Vivaldi,³ Pergolesi,⁴ Scarlatti, Hasse and Leo.⁵ Multiple performances were held in all the leading cities of Europe, from London to Prague, from Moscow to Rome.⁶ A common fixture on the calendars of Europe's royalty, including Philip V, Catherine II, Queen Mariana Vittoria, Charles III, and the Emperor Joseph II, *L'Olimpiade* showcased the most prestigious virtuosi of the day, such as Luigi Marchesi, Faustina Hasse, Maria Marchetti, Teresa Colonna, and Belardi d'Ancona. Huge choirs, massive orchestras, emphatic ensembles, the brilliance of counterpoint, and ornate and grandiose stage settings characterized productions of *L'Olimpiade* and other Metastasian *opera seria*.

Despite the remarkable success of *opera seria*, Metastasio's dramas ultimately lost their sway over European audiences and by the late 18th century, *opera buffa*, and equivalent forms such as *opéra comique* and *comic singspiel*, gained ascendancy. Among the last settings of Metastasio's *L'Olimpiade* was one by Luigi Cherubini (ca. 1793), which was never produced, one by Johann Nepomuk Poissl, which was translated as *Der Wettkampf zu Olympia oder die Freunde* and performed at the Munich Court Opera, on April 21, 1815, and one by Gaetano Donizetti (Bologna, 1817), which remained unfinished.⁷ But while *Metastasio's* famed eleventh *dramma per musica* gradually disappeared from the operatic stages of Europe as the 18th century drew to a close, the opera lived on in music and music and literary history, to emerge again as a part of the modern Olympic Games in the late 20th century. The purpose of this paper is to briefly detail the legacy of *L'Olimpiade* in both music as well as music, literary, and Olympic Games history, and argue that in some inchoate way, *L'Olimpiade* contributed to an ongoing European *zeitgeist* that facilitated the success of Coubertin's distinctly Hellenized version of modern international sport.

Some of the most striking set pieces of *L'Olimpiade* maintained a life of their own through attention from composers such as Gluck, Johann Sebastian Bach, Mozart, and Beethoven.⁸ Gluck included a setting of *Fiamma ignota nell'alma mi scende* in his 1755 Vienna production of *L'Innocenza giustificata*, the *fiesta teatrale* whose dialogue by Durazzo integrates texts from a variety of Metastasio librettos. Bach set the aria *Non so donde viene* for his very successful *Alessandro nell'Indie* (Naples 1762) as well as contributing a revision with a new second



Pietro Metastasio (Segrave archives)

strophe to *Ezio* which was given in London on November 24, 1762. Also, in Bach's *Alessandro Nell' Indie*, Poro's short aria, *Se mai più sarò geloso*, featured several verses that were lifted from Act III, Scene 6 of *L'Olimpiade*.⁹ In fact, twice on later occasions, Bach lifted the aria to insert in pasticcis: *Ezio* (London, 1764) and *L'Olimpiade* (London, 1769). Familiar with Bach's settings and in the process of making the first of his two concert settings with orchestra, Mozart used the same poem for his soprano version for Aloysia Weber (Mannheim, 1778) and for his bass version for Ludwig Fischer in Mozart's first *Osmin* (Vienna, 1787).¹⁰ Beethoven made a setting of *O care selve* for unison choruses with pianoforte accompaniment (1795) and one of *Ne' giorni tuoi felici* for soprano and tenor with orchestra (1802-1803),¹¹ both of which were undertaken as exercises in Italian text setting which Beethoven studied under Antonio Salieri.¹²

Numerous *pasticci* also kept the name of *L'Olimpiade* alive for European audiences.¹³ At the King's Theater, London, alone, nearly 40 *pasticci* featuring *L'Olimpiade* arias were performed between 1770 and 1780, including works by Piccini, Sarti, Traetta, Bertoni, Gluck and Paisiello.¹⁴ During the middle of the 18th century, Pergolesi's music monopolized *L'Olimpiade pasticcis*. At least four productions were based directly on his original setting: Perugia (Pavone, 1738), Cortona (Accademia, 1738), Siena (*Accademia Inconsiderati at the Teatro Grande*, 1741), and London (King's, 1742). The 1742 London *pasticcio*, entitled *Meraspe o L'Olimpiade*, was probably the first time Pergolesi's serious compositions

were publicly heard in London. So successful was Pergolesi's work that the first air, *Tremende oscuri atroci*, in Monticelli's part, was sung at concerts by Frasi for ten years, at least, after the run of the opera was over and the whole exquisite scene where *Se circa, se dice* occurs was rendered so interesting by the manner in which it was acted as well as sung by Angelo Maria Monticelli, that I have been assured by attentive hearers and good judges, that the union of poetry and Music, expression and gesture, seldom have had a more powerful effect on an English audience.¹⁵

L'Olimpiade was equally highly praised in both literary and musical circles throughout the 19th century. Speaking of Pergolesi's opera, English essayist Vernon Lee praised the aria, *Ne' giorni tuoi felici*, as "the exquisitely simple touching melody of Pergolesi's duet."¹⁶ Italian writers, in particular, placed *L'Olimpiade* at or near the zenith of Metastasio's *oeuvre*. The distinguished poet Giosuè Carducci wrote that, "All of the 18th century joined in acclaiming the divine *L'Olimpiade*, in which the lyricism and the Italian songfulness joined in an unequalled and unattainable perfection."¹⁷ The great 19th century Italian literary historian Francesco de Sanctis used the first four lines of the personal commentary of Metastasio's sonnet, *Nel comporre L'Olimpiade*, to symbolize and celebrate the general features of Metastasio's style and manner.¹⁸ Bruno Brunelli, the editor of the poet's complete works, wrote of *L'Olimpiade* that: "Many have considered it the most perfect of Metastasio's dramas both for the skillful handling of the story and for the nobility of its dramatic eloquence,"¹⁹ and George Hogarth argued that it was "not only beautiful as a whole" but that it contained "some of the purest gems of Metastasio's poetry."²⁰

L'Olimpiade also established a strong place for itself in Italian literary history. The two most important recent Metastasio scholars rate it very highly, indeed. Claudio Varese calls it "the most perfect, the most Metastasian of the operas"²¹ and Walter Binni considers *Demofonte* and *L'Olimpiade* the dual climax of Metastasio's career and the year 1733 as "*l'anno felice*."²² *L'Olimpiade* has attained an equally powerful presence in libretto history, among both American and European music historians and musicologists.²³ Even though he lauds *Attilio Regolo* as a greater achievement than *L'Olimpiade*, for example, Patrick Smith nonetheless concludes that *L'Olimpiade* is "a masterful example of libretto writing at its most accomplished."²⁴

But not all judgments about Metastasio have been positive; and, in fact, by the time the 19th century had come to a close, Metastasio's operas had generally fallen into a disrepute born of the assumption, propagated predominantly by German and English writers, that they were, to use Raymond Monelle's words, "trifling *gallanteries*, apparently tragic, but in truth merely ridiculous."²⁵ By the 19th century, according to Lee, everyday Italians mentioned his name "with a contemptuous smile and a contemptuous shrug, often with a rhetorical mixture of

pity and taunt, of stunted praise and restrained abuse."²⁶ Recently, however, Metastasio's reputation has undergone something of a rehabilitation. Monelle, for example, argues that Metastasio's "love poetry has all the lyrical tenderness of the *poesia popolare*, combined with the purity, ecstasy, delicacy, freshness, psychological precision of Petrarch's Rime,"²⁷ and Smith calls Metastasio "a giant," remarking that "the libretto has only rarely seen his like since his death."²⁸ After more than two centuries, Vivaldi's *Olimpiade* was revived on September 19, 1939, at the Vivaldi Festival in Siena and Pergolesi's setting was re-staged in 1937 at the *Teatro della Fortuna* in Fano, under the direction of Roberto Falk.²⁹

L'Olimpiade was first held in conjunction with the Olympic Games as part of the 1976 Montreal festivities. Walter Kunstler's historically inspired exhibit of graphic material and photographs, *Music and the Olympic Games*, was further illustrated by a series of three concerts by the McGill Chamber Orchestra that included Antonio Sacchini's complete opera, *Olimpiade, sinfonia Olimpiade* from Vivaldi, Pergolesi, and Leo, and excerpts from two works entitled *L'Olimpiade* by Johann Christian Bach and Pergolesi. Most recently, under the aegis of the Athens Cultural Olympiad, *Olimpiade* has enjoyed a particularly remarkable renaissance. On November 12, 2003, excerpts chosen from several different versions of Metastasio's *L'Olimpiade*, including those by Vivaldi, Pergolesi, Paisiello, Jommelli, Traetta, Hasse, Mysliveček, and Caldara, were performed at the Athens Concert Hall by the *Virtuosi di Praga* under the baton of Nikos Tsouchlos. Interpreting the works were soprano Isabelle Poulenard, mezzo-soprano Claire Brua, tenor Jean Delescluse, and bass Gerome Correas. Soloist Markellos Chrysikopoulos played the harpsicord. The program drew encomia. The idea behind the performance at the Dimitris Mitropoulos Hall belonged to Maria Gyparaki. Gyparaki's reconstructions were actually presented for the first time in Rhodes in 2002, followed by a dress rehearsal in Prague where the work was recorded. In 2001, the Cultural Olympiad presented Vivaldi's particular version of *L'Olimpiade* at the Volos Center of Musical Theater.³⁰ Ironically, no performance of Metastasio's *Olimpiade* was staged in conjunction with the 2006 Winter Games in Turin.

It is hard enough to assess the impact of Metastasio's *L'Olimpiade* on Olympic Games history, most especially on the environment and thinking that nurtured Coubertin's particular formulation;³¹ it is even harder to assess the impact of *pasticcis*, individual arias, and references in music and literary history on the success of the Olympic Games idea. The problem is most obviously exacerbated by the fact that Coubertin made no reference to Metastasio or to his libretto, *L'Olimpiade*, or to any of the operas than dignified the European stage for the better part of a century. But whatever the case, there is no doubt that Metastasio's libretto and its legacy in music and music and literary history provided a fitting analogue to Coubertin's

own ideological initiative. Metastasio's work heightened public familiarity with the Olympic Games and in some hard to define way contributed to the rationalization of the dignified, romantic, and distinctly Hellenized conception of sport that not only fueled Coubertin's dream and framed the initial iteration of the games but that also infused the entire Olympic Movement throughout the course of the 20th and 21st centuries. ■

Notes:

- 1 For a full list of the premiere productions of Metastasio's *L'Olimpiade* see Donald J. Neville, "Pietro Metastasio," in Stanley Sadie (ed), *The new Grove dictionary of opera*, New York: Macmillan Press, 1992, p. 356.
- 2 Scores by only 23 composers are known to survive in manuscript or printed form. See J. Kenneth Wilson, *L'Olimpiade: Selected Eighteenth-Century Settings of Metastasio's Libretto*, Ph.D. Dissertation, Harvard University, 1982, pp. 21-22. For prefaces to facsimile editions of *L'Olimpiade* scores, see Howard Meyer Brown (Ed), *Italian opera librettos, 1640-1770* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1978), Vols XXXII (Caldadr), XXXIV (Pergolesi), XXXVI (Leo), XLI (Galuppi) and XLVI (Jommelli).
- 3 For a CD recording of Vivaldi's *L'Olimpiade*, see *L'Olimpiade*, by Antonio Vivaldi, Concerto Italiano, Director Rinaldo Alessandrini, 3 CDs, Opus 111, 2000 Regione Piemonte.
- 4 For a CD recording of Pergolesi's symphony, *Olimpiade*, see *Pergolesi Symphonies*, Orchestra da Camera di Santa Cecilia, Conductor Alesion Vlad, 1996 Arts Music, Track 1.
- 5 Leo's *Olimpiade* is in Ludwig Landshoff (ed), *Alter meister des Bel Canto*, 5 Vols (Frankfurt, NY: C. F. Peters, 1912-1927).
- 6 *L'Olimpiade* was also performed in Venice, Milan, Naples, Turin, Lisbon, Copenhagen, Parma, Dresden, Vienna, Stuttgart, Munich, Salzburg, Berlin, Warsaw, and Paris.
- 7 Wilson, p. 28.
- 8 As Donald J. Neville writes: "Over 400 composers set Metastasian texts, and in many cases the settings were simply of arias drawn from the various texts to serve as independent concert arias" (Personal Correspondence, 2005).
- 9 Edwin Olin Davenport Downes, The operas of Johan Christian Bach as a reflection of the dominant trends in *opera seria*, 1750-1780 (Ph. D. Dissertation, Harvard University, 1958), p. 201.
- 10 Respectively K. 294 and K. 512. It is also possible that Mozart may have contemplated a full setting of *L'Olimpiade*, probably for Warsaw in 1789 (Donald J. Neville, *Mozart's and La clemenza di Tito* and the Metastasian *opera seria*. Ph. D. Dissertation, University of Cambridge, 1986, pp. 66-68).
- 11 For a CD recording of *Ne' giorni tuoi felici* see Beethoven's *Mass in C Major*, soloists Croydon Singers and the Croydon orchestra (Mathew Best, conductor, and Josef Frohlich, leader), Hyperion Records, London, CDA668930, 1996.
- 12 Salieri himself published his own version of *O care selve* among his 28 *divertimenti vocali* (Vienna, 1803). See Wilson, p. 7.
- 13 A *pasticcio*, as its name implies, mixed arias from a number of operas, usually from a diverse group of composers, and adapted them to a particular libretto that invariably had no previous relationship to those arias and were often strung together regardless of rhyme or reason. See Herbert Lindenberger, *Opera in history: From Monteverdi to Cage* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 57, and R. A. Streatfield, *The opera: A sketch of the development of opera with full descriptions of all works in the modern repertory* (London: George Routledge n.d., ca. 1907), p. 17. According to Lindenberger: "If *opera seria* in general undermines any dogmas about the necessary relationship of words and music, the *pasticcio* through its indiscriminate mélange of tunes drawn from a multitude of sources, foregrounds the very arbitrariness characteristic of operatic form through a long period" (p. 59).
- 14 Frederick C. Petty, *Italian opera in London, 1760-1800* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1980), pp. 105-250.
- 15 Charles Burney, *A general history of music: From the earliest ages to the present period, 1789*. (New York: Dover Publishers, 1957), Vol. 2, p. 840. Another *pasticcio Olimpiade*, chiefly by Galuppi, was heard in London, on December 9, 1755. According to Burney: "Of the favorite songs of this *Olympiade*, the first is an agreeable air by Galuppi. The second, by Minati, despicable! The third a pretty minuet by Galuppi. Then follows *Superbo di me stesso*, a pleasing air by the same composer. *Grandi e ver*, by Pergolesi, but not his best manner, but without Stoicisms. And, lastly, an agreeable air in a comic style was sung by Frasi" (Ibid, Vol. 2, p. 834). Also of interest, according to Downes, the symmetrical scenes from *L'Olimpiade* (Act III, Scene 1) in which on the one hand Megacles is held back by Amyntas from committing suicide because he believes his beloved Aristeia is dead, and on the other hand Aristeia is held back by Argene from suicide because she thinks Megacles has committed suicide, influenced DaPonte and Mozart when they arranged the mock double suicide in *Così fan tutte* (Downes, pp. 61-62).
- 16 Vernon Lee, *Studies in eighteenth century in Italy* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1978), p. 197-198. Originally printed in London by T. Fisher Unwin in 1887.
- 17 Giosue Carducci, "Pietro Metastasio," in *Prose di Giosue Carducci MDCCCLIX-MCMIII*, 3rd edition (Bologna: Nicola Zanichelli, 1907), pp. 903-904.
- 18 Francesco de Sanctis, *History of Italian literature*. Trans. Joan Redfern (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1931), pp. 850-852.
- 19 Bruno Brunelli, *I teatri di Padova dalla origini alla fine del secolo XIX* (Milano: Fratelli Treves, 1921), p. 112.
- 20 George Hogarth, *Memoires of the musical drama* (London: Richard Bentley, 2 Vols., 1838), p. 340.
- 21 Claudio Varese, *Saggio sul Metastasio* (Florence: Sansoni, 1950), p. 79.
- 22 Walter Binni, *L'Arcadia e il Metastasio* (Florence: Sansoni, 1963), p. 350. Lee, incidentally, calls the same year, 1733, the beginning of Metastasio's "period of perfection" (Lee, p. 190).
- 23 See, for example, Lorenzo Bianconi, "Die pastorale Szene in Metastasio's *L'Olimpiade*," *Bericht über den internationalen musikwissenschaftlichen Kongress, Bonn 1970* (Kassel: Farnhndorf, 1971), pp. 185-191; Nathaniel Burt, "Plus ça change: or, the progress of reform in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century opera as illustrated in the books of three operas," in Harold Powers (ed), *Studies in music history: Essays for Oliver Strunck* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), pp. 325-339; Nathaniel Burt, "Opera in Arcadia," *Musical Quarterly*, XVI, 1955, pp. 145-170; Daniel Hertz, "Hasse, Galuppi, and Metastasio," in M. T. Murano (ed), *Venezia e il melodrama nel settecento* (Florence: Sansoni, 1978), pp. 309-339; Daniel Hertz, "Mozart and his Italian contemporaries: 'La Clemenza di Tito,'" *Mozart-Jahrbuch 1978/79* (Kassel: Farnhndorf, 1979), pp. 275-293; Berenice Pennacchietti, "Studi metastasiani: Sulle fonti dell' '*Olimpiade*' e di altri melodrammi di P. Metastasio," *Studi di letteratura italiana*, XI, 1915, pp. 155-202; Reinhard Strohm, *Die italienische Oper im 18. Jahrhundert* (Wilhelmshaven: Noetzel, 1979);
- 24 Patrick J. Smith, *The tenth Muse: A historical study of the opera libretto* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1970), p. 89.
- 25 Raymond Monelle, "The rehabilitation of Metastasio." *Music & Letters*, July 1976, Vol. 57, No. 3, p. 268.
- 26 Lee, p. 143.
- 27 Monelle, p. 276.

- 28 Smith, p. 100.
- 29 Alfred Loewenberg, *Annals of opera: 1597-1940* (New York: Rowan and Littlefield, 1970), pp. 179-183.
- 30 See Vassilis Angelikopoulos, "A patchwork of Metastasio's Olympiad." *Kathimerini* (November 7, 2003), p. 1.
- 31 Jeffrey O. Segrave, "Pietro Metastasio's *L'Olimpiade* and the survival of the Olympic idea in 18th century Europe." *Olympika: The International Journal of Olympic Studies*, 2005, Vol. XIV, pp. 1-28; Jeffrey O. Segrave, "Pietro Metastasio's *L'Olimpiade*: A textual exegesis and an analysis of the role of *L'Olimpiade* in Olympic Games history," *Journal of Olympic History*, 2007, Vol. 15, pp. 6-18..