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# VI Фирсовские чтения

ЯЗЫК  
КУЛЬТУРА  
КОММУНИКАЦИЯ

Сборник материалов международной  
научно-практической конференции

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# **ЯЗЫК. КУЛЬТУРА. КОММУНИКАЦИЯ**

**Материалы докладов и сообщений  
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# **Opera, nation, and stereotypes: deconstructing the role of lirica in shaping italian identity and culture**

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**Abstract.** Opera, once a regional and historically limited art form, has been transformed into a global stereotype that presents it as the essence of “Italian culture.” This paper reconstructs the cultural, political and commercial processes behind that transformation and shows how the operatic stereotype has generated romantic but reductive images of Italy, Italians and the Italian language, while overshadowing the country’s intellectual, scientific and industrial dimensions. Using cultural history, the sociology of stereotypes and critical discourse analysis, this study examines both how this image was built and how it still shapes contemporary representations of Italian identity.

**Keywords:** Opera, Italian identity, Cultural stereotypes, National representation, Media, Globalization.

## **Introduction**

The tight link between opera and “Italianity” is not natural, but the result of a long historical and media-driven process. Opera began as a regional courtly experiment in late-Renaissance Florence, developed into an “industry” and civic ritual in the nineteenth century, and was later globalized as an “Italian sound” through recording, broadcasting and mass culture. Across these phases, a specific art form was gradually turned into a metonym for the nation. Italians came to be seen as naturally melodic, passionate and theatrical, while other dimensions of Italian modernity – scientific, industrial, linguistic and philosophical – were pushed into the background. The paper aims [1] to reconstruct the

mechanisms that elevated opera from a local practice to a global emblem; [2] to show the cultural costs of this reduction, especially the marginalization of non-operatic achievements and the persistence of biased views of Italians and of the Italian language; and [3] to offer tools for diversifying how Italian culture is represented internationally, beyond the operatic myth.

### **Methodological and theoretical framework**

To analyse this process, the study has combined four perspectives: theories of stereotyping and representation, nationalism studies, semiotics, and critical discourse analysis (CDA). Stereotypes are treated as cognitive and cultural shortcuts that gloss over differences, reducing complex cultures to a few supposedly “natural” traits. Drawing on theories of the nation as an imagined community sustained by invented traditions, the paper reads opera’s rituals, star system, and venues as elements that were later retrofitted as national heritage. Semiotics is used to examine how images and metaphors – such as “Italianness” or the “singing language” – turn contingent signs into signs of essence. Methodologically, the research has reconstructed key historical turning points, analysed media discourses (travel writing, reviews, ads, recordings, films, diplomatic materials) and studied how these frames circulate in tourism and cultural diplomacy, crowding out alternative narratives of Italian modernity. In this way, the opera stereotype is treated not as a simple mistake, but as a historically produced, institutionally maintained and economically supported representation that can be critically measured and strategically challenged.

### **State of the art**

Existing culture on the link “Italy = opera” comes from several fields. Historical musicology has reconstructed the Italian origins of opera and its nineteenth-century institutionalisation as an “industry,” but has usually treated it as a global stereotype [1]. Other works connect opera to Italian political culture and nation-building, showing how the opera house became a civic ritual and a

medium for imagining the nation. Media and performance studies have highlighted the role of new technologies, recording and star singers (especially Caruso) in exporting an “Italian sound” worldwide. Cultural theory, tourism studies, and work on language attitudes explain how repeated images and discourses—such as the “singing” Italian language and Barthes’s “Italianicity” —turn contingent features into apparently natural traits of Italians [2].

Two main gaps remain. Few studies explicitly link the impresarial and technological infrastructures of opera to the creation of “Italian Opera” as a global national brand, and there is little sustained analysis of the adverse effects of this myth, especially its tendency to overshadow Italy’s scientific, industrial, philosophical and regional diversity. This study addresses both gaps.

### **Historical genesis of the opera stereotype**

The stereotype “Italy = opera” did not arise at the birth of the art form but developed in stages. First, in late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century Florence and Mantua, the Florentine Camerata and composers like Peri, Caccini and Monteverdi created early operas as courtly experiments and dynastic spectacles. These works were local, elite and not yet connected to any national image [3].

Second, a structural change occurred with the opening of public opera houses in Venice, notably Teatro San Cassiano (1637). By selling tickets to an urban audience, opera shifted from princely entertainment to a commercial and civic institution. Impresarios, municipal theaters and later publishers like Ricordi turned it into an organized “opera industry,” standardizing repertoires and making Italian opera a repeatable, portable product for national and international circulation.

Third, in the nineteenth century, this theatrical economy intersected with romantic nationalism. Within Italy, opera became a vehicle for political feeling and national aspiration (as in the reception of Verdi). Abroad, labels such as “Royal Italian Opera”

and “Italian Opera House” in London turned “Italian Opera” into a market category, regardless of the original language or context. Coupled with recording technology and the rise of star tenors, this process consolidated opera as an audible emblem of Italy.

Across these phases, a narrow court experiment became a civic commodity and then a branded national category. The slip from specific practice to national metonym is what ultimately underpins the modern stereotype of opera as Italy’s “natural” voice.

### **Mechanisms of international diffusion and myth-making**

Opera spread internationally through a combination of markets, travel practices and media technologies[4]. The Grand Tour taught Northern European elites to expect Italy as a visual and sonic spectacle—ruins, art, but also church music, theatre and street song—fixing the cliché of Italy as “the land of song.” Afterwards, media and diplomacy scaled this image. Early recordings and star tenors such as Caruso, radio broadcasts of opera, and later cultural institutes, world fairs and official programs made the operatic code a central soft-power resource [5]. Together, commodification, tourism, media, and diplomacy converted a regional practice into a portable global sign in which a plural Italy appears as a single singing voice.

### **Stereotypical images and their cultural effects**

Today, opera functions as shorthand for Italian passion, melodrama and emotional excess. In film, advertising and tourism, the operatic code—strong emotions, vocal display, dramatic endings—provides a ready-made template for reading Italian people and products. That is what Barthes called “Italianicity”; that is to say, a cluster of signs (voice, colour, gesture) that sell Italy effectively but also flatten regional diversity and encourage typecasting in international media [6].

A related cliché presents Italian as a “singing” language. Historically linked to music vocabulary and opera prestige, this idea overlooks the complex landscape of standard Italian and diverse dialects. Media discourses repeatedly describe Italians as

musical, vague, or romantic, shaping expectations about how Italians speak and influencing attitudes in classrooms and workplaces.

When opera and heritage dominate Italy's image, other strengths are pushed aside. Reputation indices show that Italy is strongly associated with culture and tourism, far less with science, technology or investment, despite being a significant manufacturing and design power [7]. The operatic myth thus has practical consequences because it can distort how Italy is perceived as a research, innovation, and policy partner. A more balanced international representation would keep opera in its place, as a central but not exclusive element of a wider scientific, philosophical and industrial legacy [8].

### **The stereotype in the contemporary imagination**

In contemporary culture, opera works as an easy code for “Italian passion” and “high culture.” Films, advertisements and tourism repeatedly use arias, maestros and opera houses as shortcuts to signal romance, intensity and Italian lifestyle, turning a very diverse country into a single emotional mood. This strategy sells products and destinations, but it also recycles clichés and can provoke criticism when official campaigns rely too heavily on the same iconic images [9].

The same pattern is visible in cultural diplomacy and branding. Italy's foreign policy strongly promotes culture abroad, and opera and vocal music often occupy a central place in the programs of cultural institutes and events. Reputation indices show that the country's image remains anchored above all in culture and tourism, while other dimensions—science, technology, innovation—are less visible. Long-running media routines, such as the Metropolitan Opera broadcasts featuring a strong Italian repertoire, further normalize the association “Italy = opera” in everyday listening.

At the same time, counter-narratives are emerging. Events like the Three Tenors concert, new cultural-diplomacy initiatives

that highlight design, contemporary art, film, architecture, and food sciences, and more sophisticated city- and region-level branding all aim to present Italy as a complex, modern country rather than a mere heritage museum. Critical debates around campaigns such as “Open to Meraviglia” have also increased awareness of the risks of overusing stereotypes [10]. A more plural image becomes credible when opera is kept in the picture alongside non-operatic fields—science, industry, contemporary creativity—so that Italy is perceived not as a single singing voice but as a polyphony.

### **Conclusion**

Stereotypes will never disappear, but they can be weakened and balanced. When people understand that cultural images are *constructed*—selected, simplified, repeated and institutionalized—they become more careful in using them and more able to look beyond the label to the person. Opera will probably always be a symbol of Italy, just as ballet will recall Russia, but these forms of art need not define entire nations. Intercultural education should not destroy cultural pride; it should turn admiration into understanding, teaching us to enjoy beauty while remaining aware of diversity and of the many “voices” that every culture contains.

This study has shown that the “Italy = opera” equation is not timeless, but the result of a sequence: courtly experiments in Renaissance Florence, the commercialization of opera in seventeenth-century Venice, its nationalization in the nineteenth century and its global branding through twentieth-century media. Reassessing opera’s place means restoring proportion: it is an important strand in Italian cultural history, but only one among many others—philosophy, science, industry, regional cultures, design, cinema, contemporary arts and technologies.

Moving beyond the operatic myth requires both critique and construction. Critically, we must distinguish simple “typing” from stereotyping and remain attentive to how the operatic code (passion, melodrama, virtuosity) can be used to portray Italians as emotionally excessive or merely artistic. Constructively, we should

build polyphonic representations capable of pairing opera with scientific and industrial narratives, telling more place-based stories rather than generic “Italianicity,” promoting new associations (Italy as a space of research, innovation, and sustainable industry), and including diasporic, minority, and youth voices in national self-representation.

The goal is not to silence opera, but to change its role: from a single voice that claims to speak for Italy to one timbre in a larger ensemble, when opera sounds together with Italy’s other registers—scientific, philosophical, industrial, linguistic and vernacular—the country no longer appears as a single aria, but as a complex score written for many parts.

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