

## The online collection of historic periodicals from the Archivio Storico Ricordi

– Gabriele Dotto

Among the many types of documents preserved in the Ricordi Historical Archive in Milan — along with the music scores, the theatrical set and costume designs, librettos, early publications, photographs and, of course, the voluminous business correspondence — one of the more fascinating but perhaps least-studied collections, is that of the periodicals that the great Italian music publisher produced on-and-off over a span of over 120 years.

The earliest of these — the *Gazzetta musicale di Milano*, launched in the early 1840s by the firm's founder Giovanni Ricordi—quickly became a point-of-reference for music reviews and news. Over time, and especially with the later *Musica e Musicisti* and *Ars et Labor*, recast as monthly publications, the scope of the content expanded considerably to embrace a broad range of topics, from photographic travelogues, to important news events, reports on the latest fashions from London and Paris, book reviews, biographies of popular performers, composers and librettists, and more still. From the beginning, the issues also contained specially commissioned chamber-music pieces (a testament to the considerable amount of skilled domestic music-making of those times) as well as serialized novels, published a chapter at a time in a formula that had proven to be highly successful in France and England. Nor were attractive merchandising and “collectible” items overlooked, and indeed the very covers of the monthly magazines — produced by the skilled artists of the renowned *Officine Grafiche Ricordi* — became highly prized decorative times in their own right. Of course, each issue, serving in its function as a “house organ”, carried announcements of new Ricordi publications (as well as the occasional stern warnings against editorial piracy — how very reminiscent this is, of the editorial problems of our own 21<sup>st</sup> century!).

One particular, often overlooked aspect of these publications is the evolution of the third-party advertisements they contain, as the “commodification” of culture became increasingly sophisticated into the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. And a further, important aspect of these periodicals, one which lent significant credibility to the enterprise and ensured its longevity, was established early on: the music reviews they contained were by and large commissioned from independent critics. Thus, it wasn't a collection of laudatory “puff” pieces: at times, even a new theatrical performance of a Ricordi work, if it was not a success, was duly reported as such.

A recurring and quite charming feature was penned by Giulio Ricordi himself: occasional pieces describing some “treasure” plucked from the vast, priceless holdings of the publisher's Archives: maybe an autograph musical score or a charming letter from a famous composer.

This reflects the enormous pride that the four generations of company directors, from father to son, took in their enterprise, which had grown from humble roots to become a giant among European music publishers. In order to maintain a level of entertainment that would engage a broad range of readers, the periodicals also included puzzles, satiric pieces, caricatures of actors, singers, and composers, and humorous commentary on the morays of the time.

We can get an idea of the lively approach the publishers were striving for from this quote from a letter that Giulio Ricordi wrote to Francesco Paolo Tosti, the famous composer of salon songs, when asking him to recommend a “London correspondent” for the *Gazzetta*:

“I would like to find a person with a smart and energetic writing style: brilliant writing that goes beyond theatrical news to give a general idea of artistic life in London. Therefore, news of high-society receptions and concerts, of the English and Italian theatres, an occasional article featuring some famous composer with a portrait; also illustrations of theatres or the homes of celebrities or of monuments as needed.”

These periodicals, whether they were issued as a weekly or as a monthly, were never money-making ventures. Indeed, letters in the Ricordi correspondence reveal that their occasional financial difficulty worried later directors of the company. But turning a profit on these publications, which were most dear to the heart of the founder but also of his grandson Giulio, was not a primary goal: they were aimed at satisfying the cultural aspirations of the ever-growing Italian middle class, from the mid Nineteenth century through Italy’s unification and independence, up to the commercial benefits of the *fin-de-siècle* “Progressive” era and beyond. Of course they served as publicity vehicles for the publisher’s products. But they also reflected that fact that, as the Italian industrial revolution (which gravitated principally around Milan) continued to improve the economic benefits for a widening range of people, the more well-to-do classes embraced the conviction that a broad appreciation of arts and culture — and in this case, especially, of musical arts — was fundamental to the shaping of modern citizens. And they also embraced the belief that these opportunities would ultimately benefit all economic classes.

The Archive is currently in the process of making these materials available online. The periodicals have been scanned in high definition and the texts converted via optical character recognition (OCR) to make them fully searchable. Initially, they will be placed on Wikisource (the digital library edited by the Wikimedia Foundation), where all readers can freely access both the digital images of the periodicals and their converted text versions, to carry out research. Users can also intervene directly on the texts, to signal any errors that may have been generated by the OCR scan as well as to recreate a layout closer to the original pages.

The first volume of the *Gazzetta Musicale di Milano* (1842) is already online; the other volumes will become available soon. Subsequently, the complete collections of *Musica e Musicisti*, *Ars et Labor*, *Rivista Minima* and the newsletter of the “Società del Quartetto”, *L’Italia Musicale*, *Musica d’oggi*, along with the available volumes of *Ricordiana*, will be posted, for a total of 148 volumes. In the future, several other non-Ricordi publications housed in the archive will be included as well. Among these are *Le Théâtre - Revue Mensuelle Illustrée* and *Le Costume au Théâtre et a la Ville*, as well as another eleven volumes including: *Primavera della vita*; *Biblioteca Bianca di Musica e Musicisti*; *Biblioteca Illustrata della Gazzetta Musicale*; *Quaderni di “Musica d’Oggi”*, *I Teatri di Pompei: Supplemento Gazzetta, 1884*; *Gazzetta Musicale di Milano: Supplemento Straordinario dedicato a Gioachino Rossini, 1892*.

Once this process of revision and correction is complete, this remarkable collection of historic publications will join the rest of the digital collection on the Archivio Storico Ricordi website.

Some specialized music historians are familiar with many of these publications. But there is so very much more to find in them than just the music news and reviews. We encourage you to explore these periodicals, in all their richness and variety. You will surely discover abundant and revealing new items and essays about now-forgotten facts and people; delightful contemporary insights; and sometimes, quite surprising information about the cultural life and context of those long-ago times.