

# **A ‘Service Provider’ for *Noi credevamo* by Mario Martone**

## **A Conversation with Vincenzo Borghetti**

Chiara Casarin

Università Ca’ Foscari Venezia, Italia

In 2010, Mario Martone’s *Noi credevamo* was released in cinemas and was described as a true “viaggio dentro la storia italiana dell’Ottocento” (journey through nineteenth-century Italian history) (Martone 2010, IX). Set between the 1820s and 1860s, the film offers a critical perspective on the Italian Risorgimento, narrated through the intertwined stories of three patriots from the southern sub-region of Cilento: Domenico, Angelo, and Salvatore. *Noi credevamo* offers a different perspective from the traditional historiography of the Risorgimento, which often emphasizes the epic deeds of national ‘heroes’, those who liberated Italy from foreign rule, primarily from the North. In contrast, Martone adopts a ‘bottom-up’ (and Southern) viewpoint, focusing on three young revolutionaries’ hopes, sacrifices, and delusions. Despite the film’s lengthy genesis (Senici 2010, 485; Martone 2010, XV-XXII), the soundtrack was selected only a few weeks before shooting began. As Martone explained, it was conceived as “una sorta di antologia per frammenti” (a sort of anthology of fragments) (Martone 2010, LII). The film’s music features many instrumental excerpts from the works of Giuseppe Verdi, Vincenzo Bellini, and Gioachino Rossini.<sup>1</sup>

This choice may seem almost obvious, considering Martone’s extensive career as an opera stage director. Since the late 1980s, he has regularly engaged with a diverse operatic repertoire – ranging from Claudio Monteverdi to Ivan Fedele – “firmando da lì in poi un numero rimarchevole di regie liriche, sia in Italia che in ambito internazionale” (thereafter directing a remarkable number of opera productions, both in Italy and internationally)

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<sup>1</sup> On the film’s soundtrack, see De Gaetano, Roberti 2013, XXVI-XXVIII; Martone 2010, LII-LIII; Senici 2010; Varon 2013; Verona 2016, 283-305.

(Verona 2016, 283).<sup>2</sup> However, two specific circumstances influenced the decision to include nineteenth-century Italian opera in the film. Martone has highlighted the first one on several occasions: his attendance at a performance of Verdi's *Otello* at the Opera di Roma in December 2008.<sup>3</sup> The second one, which has not been addressed in either scholarly or non-scholarly literature about the film, is Martone's meeting in early 2009 with musicologists Vincenzo Borghetti and Emanuele Senici. Therefore, I intend to explore this meeting through an interview with Borghetti, conducted on 26 November 2024, which will be presented in this chapter. Beyond its novelty, the interview provides a deeper look into the creative process behind *Noi credevamo*, revealing new insights into Martone's conception and use of music, especially opera, within the film. Finally, this interview attests to a peculiar and, in many respects, unique form of collaboration within musicology.<sup>4</sup>

### **What is your relationship with the film director Mario Martone?**

Emanuele and I became acquainted with Martone a couple of years before *Noi credevamo* was completed (2010). Knowing about our expertise as musicologists, Martone sought our bibliographic advice on some operas he was staging, and that marked the beginning of our relationship. In early 2009, we met in Rome and had dinner at his home, discussing the music for a film he was working on. At that time, we did not yet know it was to become *Noi credevamo*, but we would soon find out.

### **The involvement of two musicologists in the process of selecting the music for a film's soundtrack is an unusual occurrence. How did this collaboration come about, and how did you contribute to choosing the musical works featured in the movie?**

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<sup>2</sup> Senici (2010), in particular, explores how Martone's experience as an opera stage director influenced the development of *Noi credevamo*. For a list of Martone's opera productions from 1989 to 2015, see Verona 2016, 283-5.

<sup>3</sup> Martone (2010, LII-LIII) and De Gaetano, Roberti (2013, XXVII) state that the performance of *Otello* at the Opera di Roma took place in 2009. However, they were likely referring to the five performances of the opera held in December 2008 ([https://archiviostorico.operaroma.it/edizione\\_opera/otello-2008/](https://archiviostorico.operaroma.it/edizione_opera/otello-2008/)). In any case, this production played a significant role in Martone's decision to draw from the repertoire of nineteenth-century Italian opera for the film's music: "Sono andato in seguito a vedere l'*Otello* che Muti dirigeva a Roma. In teatro il suono è spazializzato, e così, quando nel terzo atto è arrivata l'aria *Dio mi potevi scagliar*, mi sono concentrato solo sull'orchestra, attratto com'ero da una musica che mi sembrava corrispondesse al senso profondo del film che volevo fare. C'era qualcosa di ripetitivo e ossessivo, che scavava dentro. Da quel momento in poi ho capito che si potevano cercare, nel repertorio operistico, dei brani orchestrali che sviluppassero questa intuizione di partenza" (I later went to see *Otello*, conducted by Muti in Rome. In the theatre, the sound is spatialized, and so, when the aria *Dio mi potevi scagliar* arrived in the third act, I focused solely on the orchestra, drawn to a music that seemed to resonate with the deep essence of the film I wanted to create. There was something repetitive and obsessive, something that dug deep. From that moment on, I realized I could search the operatic repertoire for orchestral pieces that would develop this initial intuition" (Martone 2010, LII).

<sup>4</sup> Vincenzo Borghetti, whom I thank for his availability, is Associate Professor of Musicology and Music History at the University of Verona. His research interests are various and encompass Renaissance music, especially issues of culture, ideology, intertextuality and historiography, the presence of Renaissance music in present-day media, opera and musical theatre of early twentieth century and philology of music.

Our involvement in selecting the music for the film's soundtrack can be traced primarily to two reasons. On the one hand, our friendship with Martone undoubtedly facilitated opportunities for contact and dialogue before the film's shooting began. On the other hand, Martone relied on us professionally, as we are both experts of the operatic repertoire. Specifically, Emanuele who is an opera scholar, while I, at the time, was completing the critical edition of Rossini's *Elisabetta regina d'Inghilterra* for the Fondazione Gioachino Rossini in Pesaro. Moreover, a few years before our meeting in Rome, Mario had staged his first productions for the Rossini Opera Festival, *Matilde di Shabran* (2004) and *Torvaldo e Dorliska* (2006). Therefore, these occasions have already led Martone to work with the critical editions of Rossini's operas published by the Fondazione and to attend the Pesaro Festival, not only as a spectator. By this, I mean that Martone was already a professional accustomed to engaging with musicology (and, thus, with the material forms of research: editions, essays, monographs, etc.) and with the opera audience, including its most dedicated segment, so to speak. We served as a sort of filter for knowledge, a living bibliography, as we frequently discussed musicological literature with him.

Regarding the extent of our contribution, we were almost 'service providers', in the sense that we aimed to respond to Martone's specific requests, as he already had a clear idea of the type of music he wanted for the soundtrack. In particular, he sought pieces from nineteenth-century Italian operas, roughly contemporaneous with the historical period depicted, but without vocal parts. The only exception was the piece "Dio! Mi potevi scagliar" (Act III, Scene 3) from Verdi's *Otello*, which Martone had independently decided to include in the film's soundtrack, removing the vocal part. He asked us to suggest instrumental music, such as introductions to vocal pieces, preludes, and overtures, which he might not have considered alone. Specifically, he described the type of scene or action in the film he had in mind and asked which music might best fit that situation. For each request, Emanuele and I brainstormed between courses at dinner. All our proposals were ultimately accepted, though I only discovered it in September 2010, during the movie's premiere at the 67th Venice International Film Festival.

**The soundtrack primarily features instrumental pieces or excerpts from works by Verdi, Rossini, and Bellini. What were the guiding principles behind these choices?**

Three key considerations guided our approach to selecting the operatic excerpts. First, we aimed to establish an analogy between Martone's descriptions and the musical and dramaturgical characteristics of the operatic excerpts we suggested. For instance, for what would then become the prison scene in Montefusco in the film's third part, Emanuele proposed "Eccomi prigioniero!" (Act III, Scene 5) from Verdi's *Il Corsaro*. Similarly, to accompany a scene involving a frantic escape, I suggested the instrumental prelude to "Che intesi!... Oh annunzio!" (Act II, Scene 2) from *Elisabetta regina d'Inghilterra* by Rossini.

This piece evoked me, with its string patterns and the melodic line of the cellos, the highly agitated rhythm and the minor key, a sense of movement associated with dark and ominous emotions, which we felt was a perfect fit for the scene's atmosphere. It was not the most straightforward choice, considering the opera dates back to 1815, before the film's events. However,

since I was working on the critical edition at the time, it seemed to me that this piece, which introduces one of the most complex scenes in the entire opera, was perfect for that kind of cinematic action. Ultimately, he used the Rossini piece to accompany Angelo's nocturnal flight through the streets of the Cilento's village at the end of the film's second part.<sup>5</sup>

Second, our suggestions considered the availability and quality of the musical recordings that were accessible at the time. In this context, Verdi, Rossini, Bellini, and Donizetti emerges as predictable yet compelling choices, as their works allowed us to propose refined yet feasible options. By this, I mean that these 'repertoire' composers boast an abundance of high-quality recordings, suitable and usable for the film. In contrast, suggesting present days lesser-known composers like, for example, Giuseppe Saverio Mercadante would have introduced considerable challenges, such as more distress to secure and deliver the orchestral scores for the chosen pieces to the Orchestra della RAI for the recording sessions. Recommending overly niche pieces would have made securing the required sheet music a more difficult task.

The third reason relates to the deep cultural entrenchment of these composers in the collective listening habits of the audience. Even if viewers couldn't identify a specific piece, they might still recognize its composer. In other words, these musical works inherently point for the audience to the historical context, political circumstances, and associated ideas tied to specific composers and operas. This music captures what Martone – and we – aimed to convey as it evokes the mid-nineteenth century and the spirit of the Italian unification movements, even on a subconscious level. Even if this music hasn't been consciously heard before, like all 'classics', it resonates as something familiar. It is deeply embedded in our culture, forming a crucial part of our collective memory.

**On several occasions, Martone has stated that *Noi credevamo* underwent a rather lengthy genesis, mentioning that five years (2003-08) passed from the initial ideas to the beginning of shooting (Senici 2010, 485; Martone 2010, XV-XXII). When did your involvement occur in the making of the film, and what did you know about it?**

We became involved during the final phases of the film's development, likely just before the start of shooting, when Martone already had an evident general vision of the whole film. Nevertheless, during the meeting in Rome, neither Emanuele nor I saw any material related to the film; we knew only few things about its plot and the main characters. We truly had no precise idea what story Martone wanted to tell or what would happen in the film. He would describe specific scenes to us, but in very general terms, solely to identify a musical piece suitable for that part of the narrative.

**In 2010, Martone had already gained extensive experience as opera stage director, having engaged extensively with this repertoire. In the conversations you had, what was his initial idea regarding the use of opera in the film?**

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<sup>5</sup> The same piece by Rossini also underscores the rite of affiliation to Giovine Italia, which involves the three main characters, Domenico, Angelo, and Salvatore.

Yes, Martone was (and still is) a stage director deeply familiar with opera. From the late 1990s onward, he became increasingly in demand as a director by both Italian and international opera houses. His operatic productions are truly opera-centric, where music occupies a central position and is not treated as an element to be 'tolerated'. Martone possesses the ability to engage with the operatic form of theatre genuinely. Nevertheless, in his collaboration with us, he was always very flexible. His only request was that the instrumental pieces should be drawn from the Italian operatic repertoire of the first half of the nineteenth century, as he did not want the film's soundtrack to deviate too far, in a modern sense, from the 'sound' of that historical period.

Emanuele and I tried to give him suggestions that were not overly predictable, and thus we embraced our role as 'musicologists'. In other words, we sought to propose pieces that had the merit, so to speak, of being relatively unknown, adding a particular interest to a scene. At least, that was how I interpreted and responded to Martone's requests. During a film, I enjoy hearing music that, especially in key narrative moments, has an emotional impact, surprises me, and, at the same time, is hard to identify. From my perspective, music should also stimulate questions in the audience, such as, 'What piece is this?' or 'Where did they find this music?'. Therefore, in my work with Martone, I tried to offer a bit of myself as both a musicologist and a spectator.

That said, the soundtrack ultimately included other pieces beyond those suggested by Emanuele and me. For example, Ludwig van Beethoven's *Sonata per pianoforte* Op. 90, a fragment of Domenico Scarlatti's *Sonata K 101*, and compositions by the German sound designer Hubert Westkemper, which could be described as sound installations. Martone also discussed some of the music featured in the film with Roberto Abbado, who additionally conducted the Orchestra Sinfonica della Rai di Torino in recording the soundtrack.

**The soundtrack reveals a strong predominance of Verdi's operas. Why do you think this almost exclusive choice was made?**

It's primarily because both Emanuele and I suggested mostly Verdi's pieces. At that time, and for that historical context of the film, this solution seemed us the most natural. Like others human beings, musicologists are shaped also by the present and operate within a specific historical and cultural framework. Thus, in 2009, when discussing the Risorgimento, the first Italian composer who came us to mind – rightly or wrongly – was Verdi, despite all the ambiguities and challenges in considering him a Risorgimento composer.

Moreover, Verdi is perhaps one of the most generous authors of instrumental music in his operas, and of music that reflects the atmosphere of the scenes Martone wanted to comment with music. Indeed, Verdi's operas abound in preludes and instrumental interludes with these characteristics. Conversely, Rossini's music would have been less suitable for the kind of narrative being depicted on screen. There are, of course, exceptions, as shown by the excerpt from *Elisabetta*.

The soundtrack, characterized by the minimal presence of vocal elements, feels remarkably cohesive. Even when the music isn't composed by Verdi, it doesn't come across as 'other' compared to the established norm of the

soundtrack. What 'tone' do the selected fragments, both individually and collectively, lend to the movie?

The music amplifies the dark tone and underlying note of bitterness conveyed by the images and narrative as a whole. In this sense, one specific scene remains deeply etched in my memory. It occurs at the beginning of the final part when the now-adult Countess of Belgiojoso (played by Anna Bonaiuto) states "L'albero è stato piantato, con delle radici malate, ma è stato piantato" (The tree has been planted, with sick roots, but it has been planted). These words express a profound sense of dissatisfaction with the outcomes of that era, a recognition that unity was achieved but in a way that diverged significantly from the original expectations. The concept of a 'deviated' project is, after all, inherent in the title *Noi credevamo*. This pervasive sense of general disappointment runs throughout the film, serving as a leitmotif that brings coherence to the narrative. In our musical suggestions, Emanuele and I were guided toward this tone by the sparse remarks Martone made about the film, as well as by the descriptions of specific scenes for which he sought our advice.

**After watching the film, did you have the opportunity to speak with Martone as a sort of epilogue to this collaboration?**

Only I had the chance to watch the film's full version at the Venice Festival in 2010. It's challenging for me to completely detach myself from *Noi credevamo* and evaluate it impartially, as it's the only film in which I have had a role, even if a small one, and I feel a strong connection to it.

I enjoyed so much the film in its full version, experiencing it with deep emotional involvement, since I knew almost nothing about the storyline beforehand. At the end of the screening in Venice, I briefly spoke with Martone and congratulated him on the final result, which I was pleased with. I was particularly impressed by how he skilfully integrated music into the narrative, a result not at all a foregone conclusion.

In my view, even in engaging films with beautiful music, the soundtrack can sometimes feel unnecessary or overwhelming after just a few minutes. However, one of the most fascinating aspects of *Noi credevamo* is how music is used to further the narrative. This approach is akin to what happens in opera, where a grand aria occurs 'at the right moment', meaning when it is most dramatically justified.

The same principle applies in Martone's film: music doesn't simply appear in pathetic or dramatic moments; instead, there are intense moments accompanied solely by silence and gazes, while music emerges in other instances. These are the moments when the audience's desire is fully satisfied, as the music ignites a powerful emotional response without overwhelming the viewer for too long. The music then disappears, only to resurface with renewed passion and intensity, maintaining the audience's engagement. In essence, Martone carefully measured the presence of music, akin to using a dropper. His extensive theatre experience and exceptional flexibility enabled him to create a soundtrack that felt nuanced and original.

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