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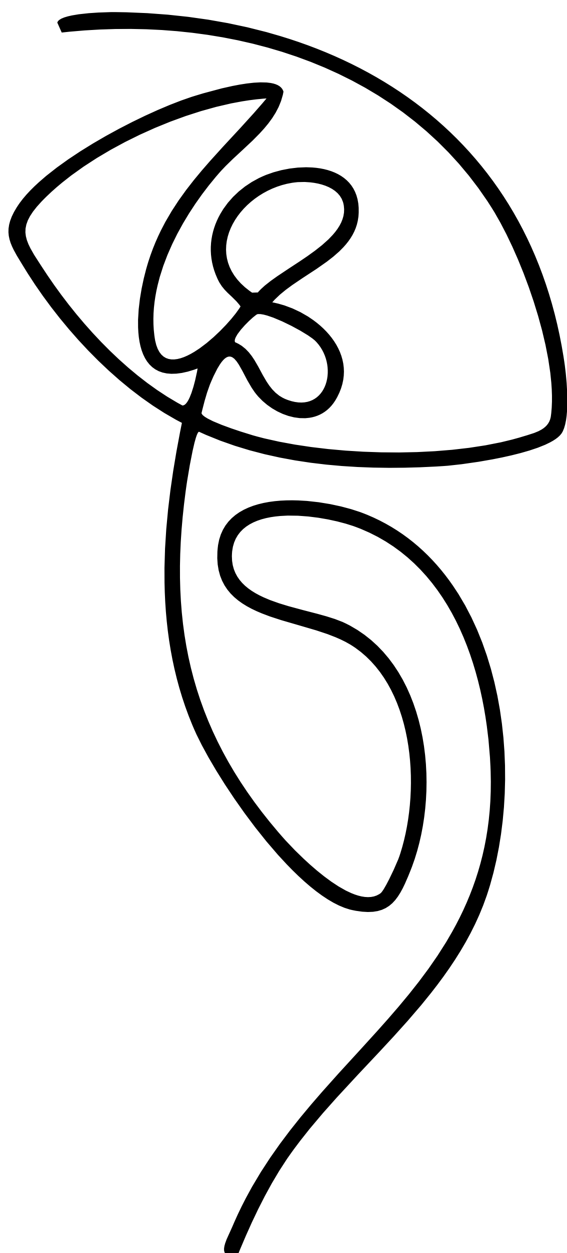

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Sommario

EDITORIALE
Alessandro Arcangeli e Paologiovanni Maione . . . . p. 9

STUDI STORICI
Dauberval: uno straniero al Regio di Torino (1771, 1775)
Flavia Pappacena . . . . p. 13

On reading two sonnets in commemoration of Charles Le Picq dancing the role of Orpheus (Milan, 1770)
Madison U. Sowell . . . . p. 27

De Paris a Roma. Antonia Mercè la Argentina, embajadora coreográfica
Ana Alberdi Alonso . . . . p. 41

Joan Turner Bunster Jara. Una donna inglese in Sud America
Elisa Guzzo Vaccarino . . . . p. 57

METODOLOGIE E DIDATTICHE
L'insegnamento di Viktor Gzovskij a Berlino (1926-1936) secondo la testimonianza di Lilian Karina
Francesca Falcone . . . . p. 75

Lo "Psicodocente" di Tecniche della danza: osservazioni sulla nuova figura dell'insegnante di danza all'interno della scuola secondaria di II grado per il Liceo Coreutico
Valerio De Vita . . . . p. 109

DISCORSI E RICERCHE ARTISTICHE
***Gocce* - Una *recherche-création* tra leggende e pratiche sociali**
Federica Loredan . . . . p. 125

***Why I dance.* Douglas Dunn si racconta: generazioni in ascolto**
Aline Nari . . . . p. 147

L'*infotainment* per divulgare la danza: le Maratone di Vittoria Ottolenghi e altre esperienze
Caterina Giangrasso Angrisani . . . . p. 155

***Project Tool*: Rehearsing the Revolution**
Maria Elena Ricci . . . . p. 167

Sguardi e soggettività in movimento: la danza come pratica di mediazione museale performativa e partecipativa
Claudia Verdat . . . . p. 177

***Passi Falsi*. Un pretesto per indagare il rapporto tra la danza e la drammaturgia**
Sofia Bordieri . . . . p. 197

Recensioni
***Il corpo intelligente e la danza Fine Movement Technique* di Betty Lo Sciuto**
Daniela Cecchini . . . . p. 213

***Five ballets from Paris and St. Petersburg. Giselle/Paquita/Le Corsaire/La Bayadère/Raymonda* edited by Doug Fullington and Marian Smith**
Roberta Albano . . . . p. 215

Call for papers . . . . p. 221

Norme redazionali . . . . p. 225

Studi Storici

AIRDanza journal
N. 1, 2024

MADISON U. SOWELL

On reading two sonnets in commemoration of Charles Le Picq dancing the role of Orpheus (Milan, 1770)

Abstract

This article analyzes two rare sonnets composed for a *primo ballerino* who in late eighteenth-century Parisian society was called the "Apollon de la danse" (Apollo of the dance): Charles Le Picq (1744-1806). Composed to commemorate Le Picq's performance of the role of Orpheus in a 1770 ballet in Milan, the poems first appeared anonymously on a broadside or "foglio volante". Such ephemeral broadsides are worthy of study because they represent a significant part of the material culture of their time. Widely distributed, they served to advance the careers of the artists and choreographers whom the poems praised; they also aided theater managers, administrators, choreographers, and impresarios who were attempting to recruit as many paying spectators as possible. In short, the study of these objects raises fascinating questions as to the reasons for their creation, diffusion, reception, and use.

Questo articolo analizza due rari sonetti composti per un primo ballerino che nella società parigina di fine Settecento veniva chiamato l'"Apollon de la danse" (Apollo della danza): Charles Le Picq (1744-1806). Composte per commemorare l'interpretazione di Le Picq del ruolo di Orfeo in un balletto del 1770 a Milano, le poesie apparvero per la prima volta in forma anonima su una locandina o "foglio volante". Tali fogli effimeri sono degni di studio perché rappresentano una parte significativa della cultura materiale del loro tempo. Ampiamente distribuiti, essi servirono a far avanzare le carriere degli artisti e dei coreografi lodati dalle poesie; aiutarono anche direttori di teatro, amministratori, coreografi e impresari che cercavano di reclutare quanti più spettatori paganti possibile. Lo studio di questi oggetti, insomma, solleva domande affascinanti sulle ragioni della loro creazione, diffusione, ricezione e utilizzo.

Madison U. Sowell[1]

On reading two sonnets in commemoration of Charles Le Picq dancing the role of Orpheus (Milan, 1770)

> Si definisce «foglio volante» una pubblicazione a stampa, generalmente composta da un solo foglio, destinata all'affissione (in tal caso spesso si può definire più propriamente «manifesto») o alla circolazione pubblica, sia per fini normativi che informativi di vario genere. Si tratta di una tipologia di produzione fortemente legata all'attualità e alle esigenze del momento e quindi destinata a un consumo veloce, la cui conservazione non era sentita come essenziale, nonostante la grandissima diffusione.[2]

In addition to books, libretti, prints, costume plates, music covers, carte-de-visite photographs, figurines, and various ephemera, the Sowell Dance Collection includes over one hundred ballet-related poems in Italian, ranging in date from 1753 (an unsigned sonnet dedicated to Teresa Colonna, «leggiadrissima danzatrice nel Regio Ducal Teatro di Milano») to 1875 (a sonnet written by librettist Pietro Cominazzi for Carlo Blasis upon the choreographer's retirement to a villa in Cernobbio). The shortest dance poems, such as a single distich or an isolated *terzina*, usually were printed below a lithographed image of a dancer; the longest often were published as a brochure or pamphlet or, in the case of more established poets, in their collected works. Nonetheless most of the poems in our collection originally appeared on broadsides: single sheets of paper printed only on one side and referred to variously in Italian as *fogli volanti* (literally, "flying [i.e., unbound] sheets"), *manifesti* (manifestoes), or *locandine* (posters).[3] In eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe, such sheets, when published by a theater manager or impresario, could function in more than one way. Affixed to an opera house façade or a bulletin board, they might serve as an announcement or tout an upcoming performance of a specific work. Handed out to passersby, they might publicize or provide commentary on a named performer's arrival or upcoming departure. Sometimes distributed a day or so before a performance, a sheet containing a laudatory poem might be wrapped around a flower or included with a bouquet that an enthusiastic audience member could fling onto the stage

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1. Madison U, Sowell, Ph.D. in Romance Languages and Literatures at Harvard University, taught at Brigham Young University from 1979 to 2009, where he was Karl G. Maeser General Education Professor, Scheuber and Veinz Professor of Humanities and Languages, Director of the Honors Program and Associate Dean of Undergraduate Education.

2. Sara Mori, *I fogli volanti nella Raccolta Chiappelli della Biblioteca Forteguerriana di Pistoia*, «*La Fabbrica del Libro*» 12 (2006), n. 2, p. 28.

3. See, for example, Madison U. Sowell, *Poetry and Lithography: Lyrical and Visual Images of the Romantic Ballet in Italy*, in *L'Italia e la danza: Storie e rappresentazioni, stili e tecniche tra teatro, tradizioni popolari e società. Atti del Convegno Internazionale di Studi, Roma, 13-15 ottobre 2006*, a cura di Giannandrea Poesio e Alessandro Pontremoli, Roma, Aracne, 2008, pp. 129-143; Madison U. Sowell, *The Viganò Family in the Sowell Collection: Passports and Libretti, Poems and Images*, in *Ritorno a Viganò*, a cura di José Sasportes e Patrizia Veroli, Ariccia, Aracne, 2017, pp. 77-102: and Madison U. Sowell, *Girolamo Zappi's Panegyric Ode to Teresa Coralli (Bologna, 1813)*, in *Giovanni Coralli, l'autore di "Giselle"*, a cura di José Sasportes e Patrizia Veroli, Canterano, Aracne, 2018, pp. 233-244.

at the end of a well-executed *pas* or during a curtain call. In such cases, the *foglio* truly became *volante* as it took flight while fastened by a ribbon or string to a floral offering. The authors of such poems rarely signed their names. Instead, the common practice was either to leave the poem unsigned or to list *Un amico* (a friend), *L'Amministrazione* (the [theater] management), or *Alcuni ammiratori* (some admirers) as the author(s).

Almost always printed on thin paper, which was often colored to attract attention, these broadsides were fated to be ephemeral. Most were intended for rapid public consumption and endured only for a brief time before being discarded. Not surprisingly, relatively few of the thousands of copies that were printed have survived. Some are extant only because they were pasted into a ballerina's or fan's keepsake album that was passed down; many of these poems are now known only in a single copy. As with many traditions, the Italian practice of creating encomiastic *poesie di occasione* (occasional poetry) waxed and waned. For ballet dancers it peaked in the 1830s and 1840s during the zenith of the Romantic ballet. In fact, notwithstanding the lengthy time span of almost 125 years represented by poems in our collection, over one-third date from just those two decades. Italian quatrains, octaves, sonnets, sestinas, and odes abound for international stars like Fanny Cerrito, Fanny Elssler, Flora Fabbri, Amalia Ferraris, Natalia Fitz-James, and Augusta Maywood; consequently, they are among the better known in an admittedly little-explored field of study.[4]

Why should scholars devote themselves to the study of such ephemeral broadsides? Although none of these poems (at least to my knowledge) has found its way into the Italian literary canon of the twenty-first century, they collectively represent a significant part of the material culture of their time. Widely distributed, these *fogli volanti* were meant to be seen, held, touched, handled, and read. They served to advance the careers of the artists and choreographers whom the poems praised, and they aided theater managers, administrators, choreographers, and impresarios who were attempting to recruit as many paying spectators as possible. In short, the study of these objects raises fascinating questions as to the reasons for their creation, diffusion, reception, and use. As Sara Mori of the University of Pisa has insightfully argued,

> La lettura di molti di questi fogli genera domande e problemi sulla diffusione e sulla ricezione di questo materiale. Ne emergono, dunque, nuovi percorsi da esplorare che coinvolgono le varie forme e i vari luoghi della *sociabilité*, e inseriscono lo studio dei fogli volanti in un ben più ampio discorso sui processi di politicizzazione e civilizzazione avvenuti nell'Italia della prima metà dell'800.[5]

Because most of these dance poems treat *female* performers of the second quarter of the nineteenth century, I have chosen in this article to focus instead on two much rarer sonnets composed for a *male* ballet dancer from the prior century. These two poems treat a *primo ballerino* who in late eighteenth-century Parisian society was called the "Apollon de la danse" (Apollo of the dance): Charles Le Picq (1744-1806), known in Italy as Carlo LePich. His life story is detailed in various places, and I do not intend to repeat here what

4. Because scholars of literature, not to mention dance historians, have paid relatively little attention to the study of non-canonical Italian dance poetry, I hope to produce at a future date a separate monograph contextualizing and analyzing the richest examples of ballet-related poems that my wife and I have collected or located in libraries in the United States and Italy.

5. Mori, *I fogli volanti*, p. 30.

has been documented elsewhere, except to provide a brief overview of his remarkable career.[6] Remembered first as a faithful pupil, then *figurant*, and finally *danseur sérieux* (1761-1764) of ballet-master Jean-Georges Noverre in Stuttgart, Le Picq and his first wife, Anna Binetti, later staged his teacher's ballets across Europe, including in Vienna and Warsaw.[7] From 1769 to 1772 he was *primo ballerino* and choreographer at the Teatro San Giovanni Grisostomo in Venice. With Anna he was contracted to dance at the Teatro San Carlo in Naples (1773-1776), where his *terre à terre* French-style dancing, in contrast to the then-prevailing Italian grotesque style, brought about a revolution in public taste.[8] He debuted to clamorous success at the Paris Opéra in September 1776. He returned to Venice at the Teatro San Benedetto for Carnival 1777 but was back at the Opéra the following year. In 1781 he danced again in Naples. In 1782 he rejoined Noverre in London, where he served as ballet master at the King's Theatre in 1783 and 1785. Le Picq spent the last two decades of his career (1786-1806) with his second wife, Gertruda Rossi,[9] in St. Petersburg, where he oversaw the publication of a new edition of Noverre's *Lettres sur la danse, sur les ballets et les arts* (1803-1804).

For Carnival 1770 (December 1769-January 1770), during the period Le Picq was dancing and choreographing in Venice while on loan from his service to the king of Poland, he traveled with his first wife to Milan to perform at the Teatro Regio Ducale, the heart of public musical life in the Lombard capital.[10] There the married couple performed, in conjunction with an opera and two other ballets, the title roles for Le Picq's Noverre-inspired *Orfeo ed Euridice*, a retelling in pantomimed dancing of the popular Greek myth of the tragic love of the talented musician Orpheus of Thrace for the gracious Eurydice. The Greek myth recounts that after Orpheus married Eurydice, she wanders in a forest, is bitten by a snake, and dies. A grieving Orpheus pours out his grief while playing his lyre and singing – a performance that moves nature itself to animate. He descends to the underworld to recover his

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6. For the history of Charles Le Picq's illustrious career as *primo ballerino* and choreographer, see Marie-Françoise Christout, "Le Picq, Charles (anche Lepic, Pick et Lepij)," in *Enciclopedia dello spettacolo*, fondata da Silvio Amico, Roma, Le Maschere, 1959, 6:1410; Marian Hannah Winter, *The Pre-Romantic Ballet*, London, Pitman Publishing, 1974, pp. 98, 115,118, 120-23, 135, 140, 142, 150, 153, 162, 163, 170, 174, 175, 200, and 258; Jeannine Dorvane, "Le Picq, Charles" in *International Encyclopedia of Dance*, ed. Selma Jeanne Cohen, New York, Oxford University Press, 1998, 4:149-50; and Salvatore Bongiovanni, *Magri in Naples: Defending the Italian Dance Tradition*, in *The Grotesque Dancer on the Eighteenth-Century Stage: Gennaro Magri and His World*, ed. Rebecca Harris-Warrick and Bruce Alan Brown, Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 2005, pp. 98-103.

7. Jeannine Dorvane, "Noverre, Jean-Georges," in *International Encyclopedia of Dance*, ed. Selma Jeanne Cohen, New York, Oxford University Press, 1998, 4:695, observed that Noverre "later complained that, when the Stuttgart company dispersed in 1767, 'thirty dancers all at once became as many *maîtres de ballet*; … they spread out into Italy, Germany, England, Spain and Portugal … and rendered only very imperfectly the products of my imagination.' (Letter XII, vol. 2)."

8. *Archivio storico per le province napoletane*, a cura della Società di Storia Patria, Anno 16, Fascicolo 2, Napoli, Tipografia Francesco Giannini & Figli, 1891, pp. 289-290: «Il Le Picq e la Binetti introdussero a Napoli la danza francese. Le danze italiane erano balletti e pantomimi slegati, come: scene pastorali, danze di marinai, di cinesi, ecc. I ballerini e le ballerine vi mettevano il maggior movimento e forza che potevano, fino a cadere estenuati…. Il Le Picq, con la danza *terre terre* dei Vestris e dei Noverre, portava una rivoluzione.» As the more reserved French style increased in favor in Naples, the so-called grotesque style of Gennaro Magri decreased.

9. For a concise history of the career of Charles Le Picq's second wife, see *Rossi, Mme, Geltruda? Or Margherita?, later Mme Charles Le Picq the second*, in Philip H. Highfill, R., Kalman A Burnim, and Edward A. Langhans, «A Biographical Dictionary of Actors, Actresses, Musicians, Dancers, Managers & Other Stage Personnel in London, 1660-1800», Carbondale, Southern Illinois University Press, 1991, 13:111-112.

10. The Royal Ducal Theater was Milan's principal opera house from 26 December 1717 until 25 February 1776, when it burned down following a carnival gala. It was replaced by the Teatro alla Scala and the Teatro alla Canobbiana.

wife and there plays his music for the infernal region's deities, Hades and Persephone. They take pity on him. He is told that he can take Eurydice back with him on two conditions: she must walk behind him, and he must not look back to see her. The couple depart with Eurydice following as her husband leads the way. Just as Orpheus is about to emerge from the underworld, he becomes concerned that he cannot hear his wife's footsteps. When he thoughtlessly turns to confirm she is there, his careless act sends her back to Hades forever.[11]

Noverre debuted his *Orpheus und Eurydice* on 11 February 1763 during his stint of service in Stuttgart, which stretched from 1760 to 1767. There Le Picq learned the ballet's choreography directly from his *maître*.[12] Interestingly, for the 1770 Milan production of Le Picq's *Orfeo ed Euridice*, a separate libretto of the usual format preferred by Noverre (consisting of several bound pages) was not created.[13] This was because, as was standard practice in Italy at the time, Le Picq's work was not performed as a stand-alone ballet. It was actually the first of three *balli* performed in conjunction with a three-act opera. The libretto for that opera, dealing with Caesar's campaign in Egypt, treats a totally different topic from Le Picq's ballet and is extant. What is more important, it contains valuable information relative to Le Picq and the ballet he (re)produced based on the above-mentioned Greek myth. The opera was entitled *Cesare in Egitto: Dramma per musica da rappresentarsi nel Regio-Ducal Teatro di Milano nel Carnovale dell'Anno 1770*,[14] and its libretto

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11. The story of Orpheus and Eurydice is found in Book 4 of Virgil's *Georgics* and Book 10 of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Prior to Le Picq's 1770 debut as Orfeo, the tale was set to music by various opera composers. Examples include *Euridice* by Jacopo Peri and Giulio Caccini, with libretto by Ottavio Rinuccini (1600); Claudio Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo* (1607); Luigi Rossi's *Orfeo* (1647); Georg Telemann's *Orpheus* (1726); as well as Gluck's above-mentioned *Orfeo ed Euridice* (first performed at the Burgtheater in Vienna in 1762, with choreography by Gasparo Angiolini). Three years after Le Picq's performances in Milan and Venice, Louis-Aimé d'Auvigny's ballet *Orfeo e Euridice* debuted at the King's Theatre in London on 30 November 1773. Like Le Picq, d'Auvigny was a protégé of Noverre and collaborated with him in Stuttgart, starting in 1760 and continuing until 1767 when Noverre left Stuttgart.

12. All scholars I have consulted confirm that in the case of *Orfeo ed Euridice* Le Picq made direct use of Noverre's *Orpheus*, first choreographed in 1763 when Le Picq was dancing in Stuttgart, and that the music was likely the same in both ballets. See, for example, Kathleen Kuzmick Hansell, *Il ballo teatrale e l'opera italiana*, in *Storia dell'opera italiana*, Volume 5 (*La spettacolarità*), a cura di Lorenzo Bianconi e Giorgio Pestelli, Torino, EDT, 1988, p. 218: «Il ballo d'*Orfeo* con Le Picq nel ruolo eponimo suscitò un'impressione sconvolgente in Pietro Verri, che ne parla in parecchie sue lettere, l'ultima delle quali (7 marzo 1770) lunga pagine e pagine. Verri riteneva che la musica fosse di Gluck, ma Mozart, che assistette agli spettacoli e se n'intendeva probabilmente di più, afferma ch'era di Deller o Starzer, sottintendendo che Le Picq si basasse sulla partitura originale fornita sette anni prima da Florian Deller a Noverre.»

13. A libretto does exist for the ballet *Orfeo ed Euridice* performed at Venice's Teatro San Benedetto during the 1770 Fiera dell'Ascensione, which took place in May 1770, several weeks following the Milanese production. The Venetian libretto does not directly attribute the ballet to Le Picq or anyone else, but one assumes, as he was a resident choreographer, it is once again his version of Noverre's choreography. A copy of that libretto, entitled *Orfeo ed Euridice: Ballo eroico*, is located in the Biblioteca Casa di Goldoni in Venice. The catalogue of Italy's Servizio Bibliotecario Nazionale (OPAC SBN) lists the choreographer for the Venetian production in square brackets: "di Mons. Charles Le Picq," meaning that in the absence of any attribution he is credited with composing the ballet.

The libretto for Noverre's French production, *La descente d'Orphée aux Enfers: Ballet héroï-pantomime*, is found in the St. Petersburg edition of Noverre's *Lettres* (vol. 3, 1804, pp. 215-224). It featured the following characters: Orphée, Euridice, L'Amour, Pluton, Proserpine, Bacchus, Juges des Enfers, Les Euménides, Démons et spectres, Caron, Femmes de la Thrace, Bergers et Bergères, Bacchantes, and Faunes, Styres et Silvains. While it remains unclear to what extent the choreography for the 1770 performances was based on Noverre's, a libretto exists in which Le Picq receives full credit for a later production of a ballet on the same theme. It is for *Orfeo, ed Euridice: Ballo eroico pantomimo* "composto e diretto dal sig. D. Carlo Le Picq," a 30 May 1781 production at the Teatro San Carlo in Naples. That Le Picq continued to be enamored of the Greek myth is found in the libretto of Christoph Gluck's opera *Orpheus and Eurydice* (London: J. Jarvis, 1785) for a production at the King's Theatre in London, which attests to "Dances composed by Mons. Charles Le Picq," with himself and his second wife, Madame Rossi, as principal dancers.

14. Published in Milano, Stamperia di Giovanni Montani, 1770, 43 pp.

records “Sig. Carlo le Pich, all’attuale servizio di S. M. il Re di Polonia,” as one of the two “Compositori e Direttori de’ balli,” specifically of the first and the third *ballo*, while Girolamo Marana is given as the choreographer of the second *ballo*. The opera’s libretto further records that the first ballet recounts the fable of Orpheus and Eurydice “as is described at length *in a separate sheet*”: «Nel Primo Ballo si rappresenta la Favola di Orfeo, e di Euridice, come diffusamente si descrive *in foglio a parte*» (my emphasis). One cannot help but wonder how often a separate, loose sheet was prepared to explain ballets that are listed only by title in opera libretti.[15]

To understand the format of the Milanese performance, the opera libretto for *Cesare in Egitto* helpfully lists the four scenes for the first ballet (“Scene per il Primo Ballo”): “Bosco con Tempio Pastorale” (Forest with Pastoral Temple), “Campi Elisi” (Elysian Fields), “Grotta Infernale” (Infernal [Hades’] Cave), and “Reg[g]ia d’Amore” (Kingdom of Love). It is useful to know the setting of the first scene because of the engraved image on the broadside that we shall examine. In addition, a letter of the contemporary writer and philosopher Pietro Verri to his brother Alessandro, dated 21 February 1770, details and comments on the action of the ballet, which Pietro labels “in the style of Noverre” (“sul gusto di Novaire [sic]”); he judged the music to be superb, the action and matching costumes very decent, and the principal dancers like two divinities (“Superba musica, decentissima la azione, abiti corrrispondenti, e una coppia di ballerini: il Pic e la Binetti, che sono due vere divinità”). He goes on to complain, however, that “very rude sonnets were thrown [onto the stage] at a mere *figurante*, and nothing for the two models of the noble dance” (“si sono gettati de’ villanissimi sonetti per una figurante, e niente per i due modelli del ballo nobile!”).[16] Obviously, for reasons we shall explain, the two sonnets we are about to analyze were composed many days or weeks after the production and were never intended to be sent flying through the air onto the stage.

Le Picq’s successful production of the ballet and his performance as Orpheus and his wife’s as Eurydice in Milan resulted in an expensive and unusually large and finely printed broadside on thicker laid paper that made it suitable for keeping and framing.[17] Measuring 22.5 by 16.75 inches (57 by 43 cm., height by width), the words and accompanying images on the sheet are not printed with typeset; instead, they are elegantly engraved. (See Figure 1.) The title translates thus: «Applause for Signor Carlo Le Pich who, dancing at the Royal Ducal Theater in Milan during Carnival of the year 1770, represents with singular mastery and artistic finesse the character of Orpheus: Sonnets.» There follow two sonnets in which Le Picq is praised for being “il vero Orfeo” (the true Orpheus). Given that since antiquity Orpheus had symbolized the power of poetry and music to charm nature – including taming wild beasts, moving trees and rocks to dance, and halting or changing the course of rivers – the citing of Le Picq as “the true Orpheus” was indeed a lofty

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15. A copy of a synopsis of the 1770 Milan production of *Orfeo ed Euridice* has survived and is found in Paris at the Bibliothèque-Musée de l’Opéra, Livret 3529/2. Since I have not yet examined this artifact, I assume but cannot say definitively whether it is the “foglio a parte” referred to in the opera libretto relative to Le Picq’s ballet.

16. See *Carteggio di Pietro e di Alessandro Verri dal 1766 al 1797*, Volume 3 (Agosto 1769-Settembre 1770), a cura di Francesco Novati e d’Emanuele Greppi, Milano, Casa Editrice L. F. Cogliati, 1911, pp. 191-192.

17. Contrary to usual practice, this elegant and highly artistic broadside was never intended to be thrown onto the stage or to be read rapidly and discarded.

compliment. After all, the ancient Greeks considered Orpheus the greatest poet and musician of their era.

Let us examine first the broadside as artwork (see Fig. 1) and then the texts of the two sonnets to consider what they reveal about Le Picq and his performance in the role of Orpheus.

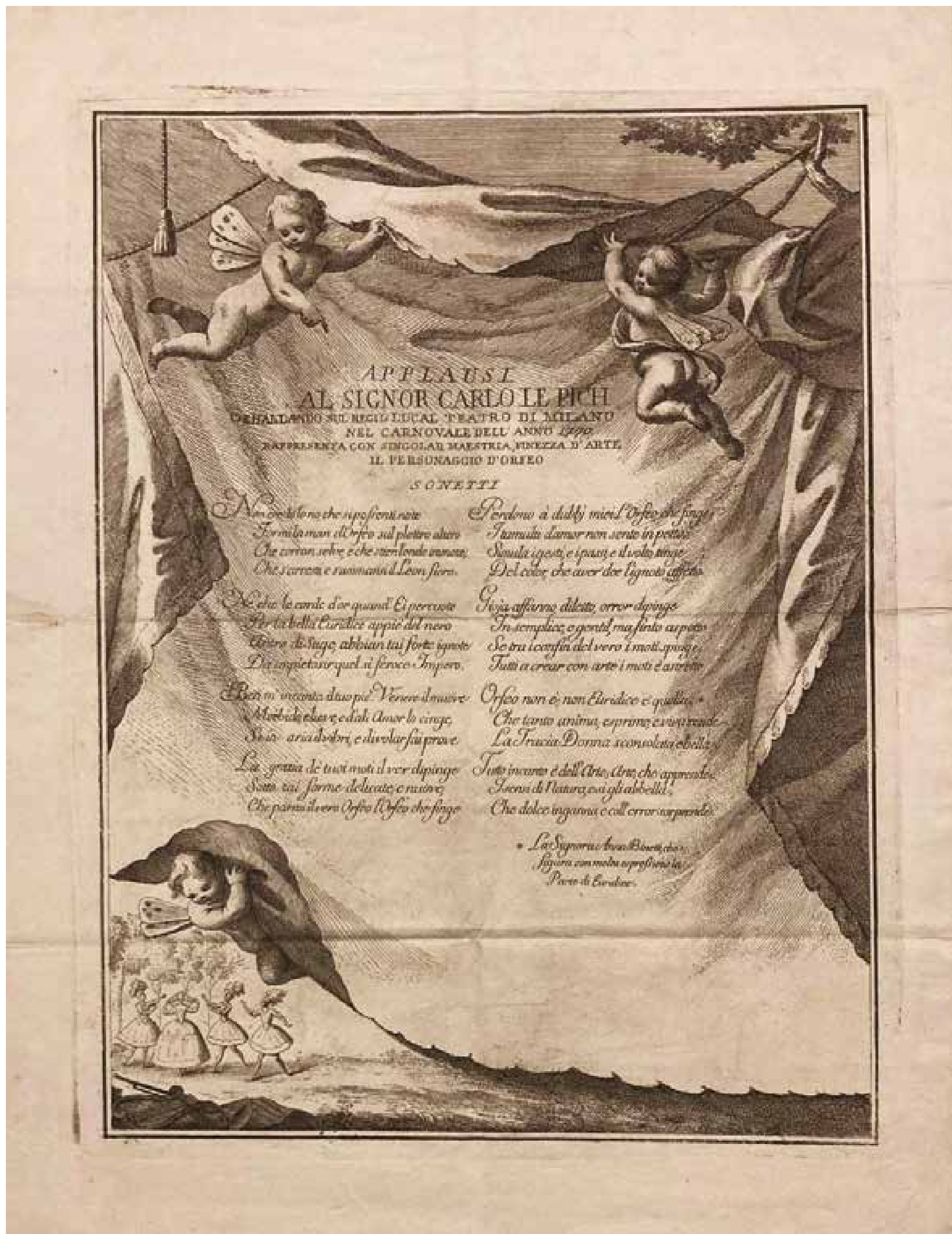

Fig. 1. Broadside with engraved printing and image for Carlo Le Pich's performance as Orfeo at the Regio Ducal Teatro in Milan for Carnival 1770. No author is listed, and no publisher or place of publication is given.

The scene depicted in Fig. 1 resembles a theater *al fresco*. Two small, winged cupids at the top of the engraving assist in holding up a voluminous sheet of heavy fabric that has been attached with a braided and tasseled rope to hang from tree branches, only one of which is seen. This scrim, which functions as a theater curtain about to be lifted to reveal an outdoor scene, has engraved in capital letters a heading, which serves to introduce the sonnets, which I have translated into English in an appendix to this article. The sonnets themselves are arranged in two parallel columns with an asterisked footnote below the second sonnet. A third cupid is seen at the bottom of the engraving lifting the curtain to reveal four dancing figures off to the left side in a forest glade: a veiled woman stands modestly in a long dress among three male figures in shorter skirts that reveal their legs from the knees down. The woman undoubtedly represents Eurydice, with the veil over her face symbolizing death; the trees suggest that it is the first scene in the ballet, which is set in a forest.

Because of the visual backdrop to the sonnets, which are emblazoned on a stage curtain, the viewer or reader may expect an announcement of the performance about to take place. The first word in the heading, however, is in capital letters on a line by itself and reads simply *APPLAUSI* (lit., "applauses"). The word seems to invite the audience to engage in applauding or clapping for a performance that is about to begin. After all the curtain is starting to be lifted. One may surmise from two phrases that then introduce the sonnets and describe Le Picq's talent – *singolar maestria* and *finezza d'arte* (his singular mastery and artistic finesse) – that what is about to unfold is an unapologetic paean to a dancing pantomime's art. What the sonnets record, however, may strike the reader as less of an invitation to praise Le Picq's artistic mastery of noble dancing and more of an invitation to reflect on what is involved in a calculated and practiced display of emotions – feelings that are realistic but feigned. Is Le Picq displaying "reality" or is it only the "appearance of reality" on display?

Here follows a transcription of the Italian sonnets engraved on the broadside. There is neither attribution of authorship nor mention of the name of the engraver or publisher on the print itself. Who commissioned it is not given, and the quality of the paper and fineness of the engraving suggest that the sheet was neither intended to be pasted on the wall of a theater for public consumption nor distributed as a handout to the public at large. For years, before I discovered who the author was, I speculated that the writer was an educated male who came from an elite class, one who had training in or at least solid familiarity with the classics. I also believed that he lived in or worked near Milan. The eloquence of the Italian employed in the sonnets led me to conclude that he was a native Italian, not a foreigner who was visiting Milan and happened to see Le Picq perform. It took me many years to discover who composed the sonnets, and I shall reveal the sonneteer's name and background at the end of this article, as I wish for the initial focus to be on the words of the sonnet rather than on their author.

APPLAUSI
AL SIGNOR CARLO LE PICH
CHE BALLANDO SUL REGIO DUCAL TEATRO DI MILANO
NEL CARNOVALE DELL'ANNO 1770,
RAPPRESENTA CON SINGOLAR MAESTRIA, FINEZZA D'ARTE
IL PERSONAGGIO D'ORFEO

SONETTI

Non credo io no, che sì possenti note
Formi la man d'Orfeo sul plettro altero
Che corran selve, e che stien l'onde immote,
Che s'arresti, e s'ammansi il Leon fiero.

Nè che le corde d'or quand' Ei percuote
Per la bella Euridice appiè del nero
Antro di Stige, abbian tai forze ignote
Da impietosir quel sì feroce Impero.

Ben m'incanta il tuo piè. Venere il muove
Morbido, e lieve, e d'ali Amor lo cinge,
Se in aria il vibri, e di volar fai prove

La grazia de' tuoi moti il ver dipinge
Sotto tai forme delicate, e nuove,
Che parmi il vero Orfeo l'Orfeo che finge.

Perdono à dubbj miei[18] L'Orfeo, che finge,
I tumulti d'amor non sente in petto,
Simula i gesti, e i passi, e il volto tinge
Del color, che aver dee l'ignoto affetto.

Gioja affanno, diletto, orror dipinge
In semplice, e gentil, ma finto aspetto
Se tra i confin del vero i moti spinge,
Tutti a crear con arte i moti è astretto.

Orfeo non è; non Euridice è quella,*
Che tanto anima, esprime, e viva rende
La Tracia Donna sconsolata, e bella.

Tutto incanto è dell'Arte; Arte, che apprende
I sensi di Natura, e sì gli abbella,
Che dolce inganna, e coll'error sorprende.

*La Signora Anna Binetti, che figura con molta espressione la Parte di Euridice.

Both poems follow the traditional metrical scheme for an Italian sonnet: fourteen hendecasyllabic lines with tonic accents either on the sixth and tenth syllables or on the fourth, seventh or eighth, and tenth syllables. The rhyme scheme is also a traditional one, that of *rime alternate* divided into two quatrains followed by two tercets: ABAB ABAB CDC DCD. Notably the last rhyme word of the first sonnet (*finge*) becomes the first rhyme word of the second sonnet, an indication that the poems are to be read together and in sequence and that the topic implied by the verb *fingere* (to feign or pretend) plays a central role in the message of the two lyrics. The name of Orfeo (Orpheus) appears three times in the first sonnet and twice in the second, while Euridice (Eurydice) is mentioned once in each sonnet. Even a cursory reading tells us that the poems have to do with a ballet performance related to the popular tale of Orpheus and Eurydice.

What makes these poems stand out as different, in addition to their dramatic visual backdrop (a curtain hanging from tree limbs with the assistance of little cupids), is their

18. In the collected works of the sonnet's author, the first part of this line is rewritten thus: "Non più dubbi, non più." (No more doubts, no more.)

enlightened philosophical bent, somewhat unusual for poems appearing on broadsides in praise of dancers. The two sonnets address a fundamental question that Noverre, *les philosophes*, and other intellectuals of the eighteenth-century were raising: what is the nature of and relationship between appearance and reality?[19] The initial sonnet begins boldly in first person, not with a credo (an affirmative statement of belief) but with a «non credo»: «Non credo io no» (I don't believe, no), with a tonic accent falling emphatically on the «no.» The poem's persona denies that the "historical" Orpheus (of Greek legend) had the power through plucking his lyre to make trees move, rivers stop, and lions become tame. Nor did that Thracian musician have the power to move the gods of the underworld to take pity on Orpheus. If that is the reality vis-à-vis the original Orpheus's presumed power of enchantment, who or what has the power to enchant or inspire the sonnet's author or his literary persona?

The answer is straightforward: Le Picq's *foot* charms the writer. The author pens, «Ben m'incanta il tuo piè» (well does your foot enchant me), where the foot functions as a synecdoche for the body of Le Picq (*pars pro toto*). Continuing in a neoclassical vein, the poet argues that Venus, the goddess of love, makes the dancer's foot move softly and lightly; Love, son of the goddess, attaches wings to the dancing mime's foot (à la Hermes) so that his movements and actions paint the true picture. The unnamed author concludes, somewhat ironically, «Che parmi il vero Orfeo l'Orfeo che finge» (That the real Orpheus seems to me the pretend Orpheus [the dancer Le Picq]). In other words, the "fake" Orpheus is the true enchanter. The artist who demonstrates mastery of his craft, in highly realistic miming and noble dancing, is the one who truly charms the viewer into suspending disbelief and taking delight in the stage performance.[20]

The second sonnet continues the idea that Le Picq as a performer appears so refined in his artistry that his imitation of feelings, although pretended, almost erases the boundary between truth and fiction, between nature and art that imitates nature, or between reality and the appearance or simulation of reality. The dancer's «moti» (movements), a word repeated in two consecutive lines, are created «con arte» (with art); nevertheless, the thoughtful audience member would do well to remember «Orfeo non è; non Euridice è quella» (Orpheus he is not; she [Anna Binetti] is not Eurydice). And yet these two dancers, who at the time were a married couple, appear to be, because of their polish and art, the loving husband and wife of Greek antiquity. The author concludes that «Tutto incanto è dell'Arte» (all enchantment belongs to Art). In this case, that art is achieved through mimed dancing that «abbella» (beautifies [nature]) and «Che dolce inganna, e coll'error sorprende» (that sweetly tricks, and surprises through dissembling).

Two sonnets ostensibly intended, as per the broadside's heading, to solicit *applausi* (applause) for Le Picq, turn out instead to be encomiums with a not-so-subtle

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19. *Les philosophes*, the French philosophers of the Enlightenment, included Voltaire, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Montesquieu, and Denis Diderot. Other intellectuals who participated in the philosophical movement that emphasized the role of reason and science in decision-making were David Hume, Adam Smith, Jeremy Bentham, Immanuel Kant, and Thomas Jefferson. In Italy leading figures included Giambattista Vico, Cesare Beccaria, and Pietro Verri.

20. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, in his 1817 work *Biographia Literaria*, coined the phrase "willing suspension of disbelief." It refers to the avoidance of critical thinking, logic, or scientific reasoning in temporarily accepting something that is neither real nor possible. This suspension of critical thought allows a reader or audience member to enjoy a fictional narrative or, in the case of a stage production, to have a cathartic experience.

reminder that appearance and reality remain two different things. Their message seems to be that audience spectators and readers of the sonnets should keep in mind that what mimed dancers seem to be (*parmi*), no matter how masterful their artistry, is not what (or who) they truly are: performers who enchant and charm, who feign to be someone else, who act as if the feelings of love or hate, passion or disdain, they mime on stage are truly felt.

These poems suggest that Le Picq achieves as Orpheus what his master Noverre hoped for in a successful pantomime ballet: with well-defined movements the artist paints the truth ("il ver dipinge"); his gestures, steps, and face color the feelings even though he does not truly feel them ("Simula i gesti, e i passi, e il volto tinge / Del color, che aver dee l'ignoto affetto"). In parallel terms, Le Picq's teacher stated in the preface to one of his own ballets, performed in Vienna in 1771, what a pantomime dancer should achieve:

> in a ballet you need a lot of spectacle and action to replace the words, a lot of passion and feelings to take the place of the speech, it is also necessary that these passions be vividly expressed, to produce great effects: it is always on the grand scale that the pantomime must paint, he must use the strongest colors and the boldest strokes, because all the half-tones only shed an obscure and indecisive vagueness on the character of this or that passion, and on the action of the pantomime.[21]

The irony, according to the enlightened sonneteer, is that those feigned or "painted" feelings enchant only because they appear to be real. The successful artist is one who knows how to make the audience engage in a "suspension of disbelief" – the willing circumvention of critical thinking that leads one to accept something unreal or impossible as real and possible. I believe that the author is saying, "applaud Le Picq and enjoy the show, but remember that the principal dancers really aren't Orpheus and Eurydice; they are only pretending to be who they are not and never will be." Yet viewers willingly suspend disbelief in order to be amused, entertained, or distracted. As long as perceptive persons reflect on what they are engaging in and remain aware intellectually of the difference between the illusionary and the real, appearance and reality – what the Germans call *Schein und Sein* – they are justified in enjoying the spectacle. And by the poet's placement of the sonnets on a scrim-like surface that separates the audience/reader from the implied stage, he sets himself up not only as a teacher but also as a mediator between performance and audience, defining how the production should be constructed – as a work of illusionary theatrical artistry.

Who is the poet who created such philosophical poems for an elegant *foglio volante*? Many years after acquiring the broadside, I discovered through detective work, assisted by google search, that Angelo Teodoro Villa (1720-1794), an Italian Jesuit priest and highly respected scholar of the classics, composed the two sonnets, not to mention

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21. Jean-Georges Noverre, *Agamemnon vengé: Balet tragique en cinq actes*, Vienna, De Ghelen, 1771, p. 5: «il faut dans un Balet beaucoup de spectacle et d'Action pour suppléer à la parole, beaucoup de passion et de sentimens pour tenir lieu du discours, encore faut-il que ces passions soient vivement exprimées, pour produire de grands effets: c'est toujours en grand que la pantomime doit peindre, elle doit employer les couleurs les plus fortes et les traits les plus hardis, parceque toutes les demi-teintes ne répandent qu'un vague obscur et indécis sur le caractère de telle ou telle passion, et sur l'action du pantomime.»

scores of other lyrics, translations of ancient Greek texts, and a book on eloquence for school children.[22] The two poems from 1770 were made available to the public at large, however, only in 1785 when they were published in the first volume of his collected works.[23] In the introduction to that collection, the editor relates that most of Villa's poems were first printed as broadsides: «stampate per la maggior parte in foglj volanti.» He also reveals that Villa was a member of the prestigious Accademia de' Trasformati, (re)founded in 1746 in Milan with a focus on cultivating Italian language and poetry. Consequently, the elegance of the publication as an engraved and illustrated *foglio volante* and the philosophical bent of the sonnets themselves have led me to conclude that these two poems originally were intended for fellow members of the academy, who included key figures in the philosophical movement known as *Illuminismo* (the Italian Enlightenment).[24] For this reason they were engraved on quality paper with a visual backdrop of theatrical flourish. In this rare and unusual case, these sonnets had nothing to do either with theater managers or an impresario anxious to attract a larger audience. They had everything to do with the Enlightened cultural and intellectual milieu in which a highly educated Jesuit found himself. Furthermore, by situating the sonnets on a scrim-like surface that separates the reader/audience from the implied stage, whose performers we see in the lower-left corner, the scholar-poet Villa set himself up a mediator between performance and audience, asserting how a ballet production, no matter how realistic the emotions are depicted, should ultimately be viewed and understood in a philosophical vein.[25]

22. See Angelo Teodoro Villa, *Lezioni d'eloquenza*, Pavia, 1780. For a biography of Villa, see Giuseppe Chiappa, *Biografia di Angelo Teodoro Villa*, Pavia, Tipografia Bizzoni, 1844.

23. See *Poesie di Angelo Teodoro Villa*, Tomo 1, Pavia, Pietro Galeazzi, 1785, pp. 100-101.

24. For example, the literary critic, translator, poet, journalist, dramaturg, and lexicographer Giuseppe Baretti (1719-1789) was a member of the Accademia de' Trasformati, as was the earlier cited philosopher, economist, and historian Count Pietro Verri (1728-1797), who is credited with founding the school of Milanese Enlightenment.

25. As always, I am grateful to my dance historian wife, Debra Hickenlooper Sowell, for reading an early draft of my article and offering several insightful suggestions. I also thank the anonymous reviewer and editors for their advice and assistance.

APPENDIX

My translation into English of the two sonnets for Carlo Le Pich reads as follows:

Sonnet 1

I don’t believe, no, that the hand of Orpheus plays
Such powerful notes on the haughty plectrum
That the woods flee and the waves stand motionless,
So that he may halt and tame the proud Lion.

Nor that the golden strings, when He plucks
For the beautiful Eurydice at the foot of the black
Cave of Styx, have such unknown powers
To move that ferocious Empire [Hades] to pity.

Well does your foot enchant me. Venus moves it
Softly and lightly, and Love encircles it with wings,
So if you vibrate it in the air, and try to fly

The grace of your movements paints the truth
Under such delicate, and new, forms,
That the real Orpheus seems to me the pretend
Orpheus.

Sonnet 2

Pardon my doubts. The Orpheus who pretends
Doesn’t feel the tumults of love in his chest,
He feigns the gestures and the steps and dyes his face
With the color that the unknown emotion must have.

Joy, anxiety, delight, horror he paints
In simple, and gentle, but simulated appearance.
If he pushes movements between truth’s bounds,
He still must create all the movements with art.

Orpheus he is not; she is not Eurydice,*
Who animates, expresses and makes alive
The Thracian Woman disconsolate, and beautiful.

All enchantment belongs to Art; Art, which masters
The senses of Nature, and beautifies them so,
That sweetly it tricks, and surprises through
dissembling.

*Signora Anna Binetti, who dances with great expression the part of Eurydice.

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