

3. Tales of Morality and Immorality: Eighteenth-Century Society as Depicted in the Italian Comic Libretto

Tragedy and comedy stand at opposite ends of the dramatic spectrum. Tragedy accepts human flaws and proceeds to find 'nobility in the inexorable march of the actual situation.'¹ Comedy functions as an escape from the imperfections of the world by finding a logical order through laughter.² A related sentiment pertaining to a definition of tragedy and comedy in music was expressed by the eighteenth-century theorist Ernest Gerber who equated tragedy and serious opera to the 'high' style manifesting 'great, exalted, dreadful feelings and violent passions.'³ He equated comedy in music to the 'low' style with its popular, trifling, and merry features, often depicting characters through caricature.

The 'low' style in music first developed as a result of a partnership between text and music in which the meaning of the words and repetition of syllables were expressed in the accompanying musical line whose punctuations and articulations were shaped by the inflections of the underlying words. A special musical vocabulary defining a comic style was first developed in eighteenth-century texted music, particularly in intermezzi and comic operas. As the century progressed, the comic vocabulary was adopted in instrumental music as well. Although sporadic attempts at humour in music were made prior to the eighteenth century (as encountered, for example, in Orazio Vecchi's *L'Amfiparnasso* of 1597, the Turkish scene in Lully and Molière's comédie-ballet *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme* of 1670, and the drunken poet scene from Purcell's *Fairy Queen* of 1691), the humour was confined to the text, with the music merely assuming a light-hearted, dance-like nature. A definitive comic idiom resulting from a musical characterization of the text first materialized in the eighteenth century when the *buffo* idiom became the prevalent musical language.

Two major Italian vocal genres served as vehicles for the propagation of the new *vis comica* — the intermezzo and the comic opera, historically coexistent, yet independent musical and literary entities. The intermezzo, performed between the acts of an *opera seria*, employed two