



**ORESTE AND ALBERTO BIMBONI, FLORENTINE MUSICIANS IN AMERICA:
THEIR INTERNATIONAL CAREER
AND HOW THEY INFLUENCED THE AMERICAN MUSICAL SCENE ***

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While Oreste and Alberto Bimboni have long been neglected in musicological scholarship, their contribution to opera and operatic education in the United States should not be discounted. The two Bimbonis were part of a long legacy of Florentine musicians. The previous generations included Giovanni Sr., Giovanni Jr., and Gioacchino. Giovanni Sr. was a luthier born in the late eighteenth century; his children, Giovanni Jr. and his brother Gioacchino, occasionally toured abroad, but

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remained in Tuscany for most of their lives. Gioacchino obtained international recognition as a trombone virtuoso and as the inventor of a music instrument that he named the *bimbonifono*.¹



Bimbonifono (<http://www.horniman.ac.uk/collections/browse-our-collections/object/12673>)

Giovanni Sr. became a clarinet virtuoso and professor at the Royal Music Institute (*Regio Istituto Musicale*) of Florence, which later became the Conservatory of Florence.² By contrast, Giovanni Jr.'s son, Oreste, and Oreste's nephew Alberto spent a substantial amount of time abroad and particularly in the United States. In the early 1900s, Oreste became a professor at the New England Conservatory where he taught for three years. In 1911 Alberto, possibly encouraged by Oreste's experience, moved to North America and remained there until his death in 1960. Oreste was born in Florence in 1846 and received a comprehensive music education at the local Royal Music Institute. Beginning in the late 1860s, he embarked upon a very successful international career as a

¹ Jarro (pen name of Giulio Piccini), *Attori, cantanti, concertisti, acrobati. Ritratti, macchiette, aneddoti. Memorie umoristiche* (Florence: Bemporad, 1897), 59-80. See also Raoul Meloncelli, “Bimboni, Gioacchino” in *Dizionario biografico degli italiani*, vol. 10 (1968), http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/gioacchino-bimboni_%28Dizionario-Biografico%29. For images of the *bimbonifono*, see <http://www.horniman.ac.uk/collections/browse-our-collections/object/12673>.

² For more details about the history of today's *Conservatorio di Musica* of Florence, see <http://www.conservatorio.firenze.it/it/conservatorio/storia-dell-istituto>.

conductor. One of the highlights of his career was the very popular concert series that he organized in Hamburg in 1895, which he named the *Bimboni Konzerte*. The same year Oreste conducted his most successful opera, the verismo-influenced *Santuzza*, at the opera house of Palermo.³ He also worked with some of the most important singers of his time, including Adelina Patti and Emma Calvé.

Oreste's first documented arrival in the United States through Ellis Island dates to 1896.⁴ The likely purpose for his visit was to discuss the publication of an *Ave Maria* with representatives of the Oliver Ditson Company, a major music publishing company at the time,⁵ and to conduct the New York-based Imperial Opera Company.⁶ In the spring of 1898, Oreste moved to California where he conducted several opera performances, which included the famous soprano Nellie Melba.⁷ He was well regarded by both audiences and critics alike as a conductor. In October 1898, a journalist for *The New York Times* wrote that Bimboni's "admirable conducting of opera in this country is still fresh in the memory of most of us."⁸ After the performances in California, he returned to Florence.⁹ Oreste's excellent reputation was likely one of the reasons that helped him to win a position at the New England Conservatory (henceforth NEC). In his entry in the *Dizionario biografico degli italiani*, musicologist Raoul Meloncelli states:

In 1902 [Oreste] Bimboni moved to the United States, where he became a voice professor at NEC, and where he taught until 1903. When he returned, he was appointed as director of the vocal performance department at the Conservatory of Florence. He died there on August 4, 1905.¹⁰

³ See Meloncelli, "Bimboni, Oreste" in *Dizionario biografico degli italiani*, vol. 10 (1968), [http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/oreste-bimboni_\(Dizionario-Biografico\)](http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/oreste-bimboni_(Dizionario-Biografico)).

⁴ Search "Bimboni" in <http://www.libertyellisfoundation.org/passenger-result>.

⁵ "Musical Notes," *The Washington Post*, March 28, 1897.

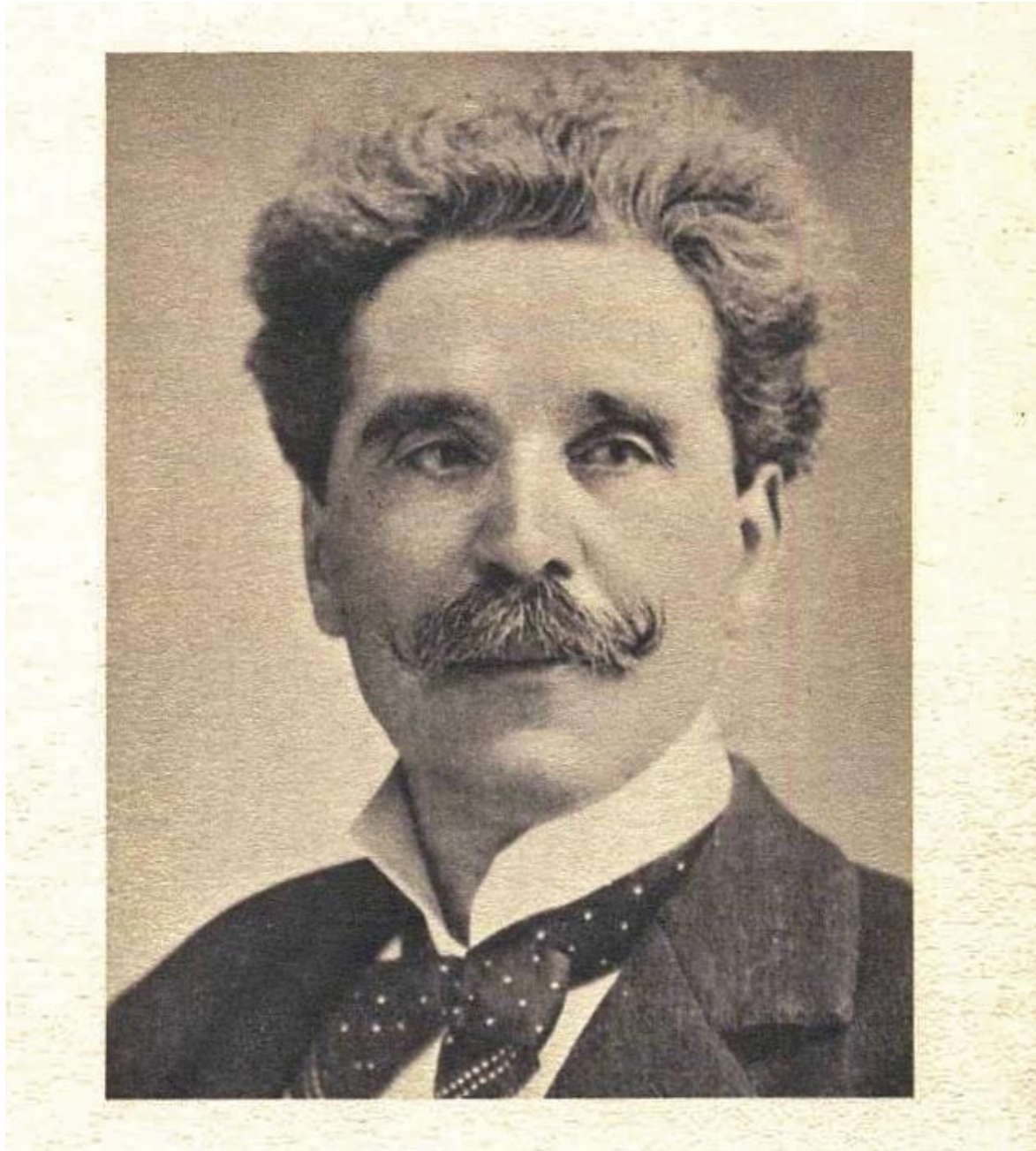
⁶ Armand Fortin, "A Tribute," *The Neume* (1906), 73.

⁷ "Queen of Song and Master of Music," *San Francisco Call*, April 11, 1898.

⁸ "In the World of Music," *New York Times*, October 30, 1898.

⁹ Fortin, "A Tribute," 73.

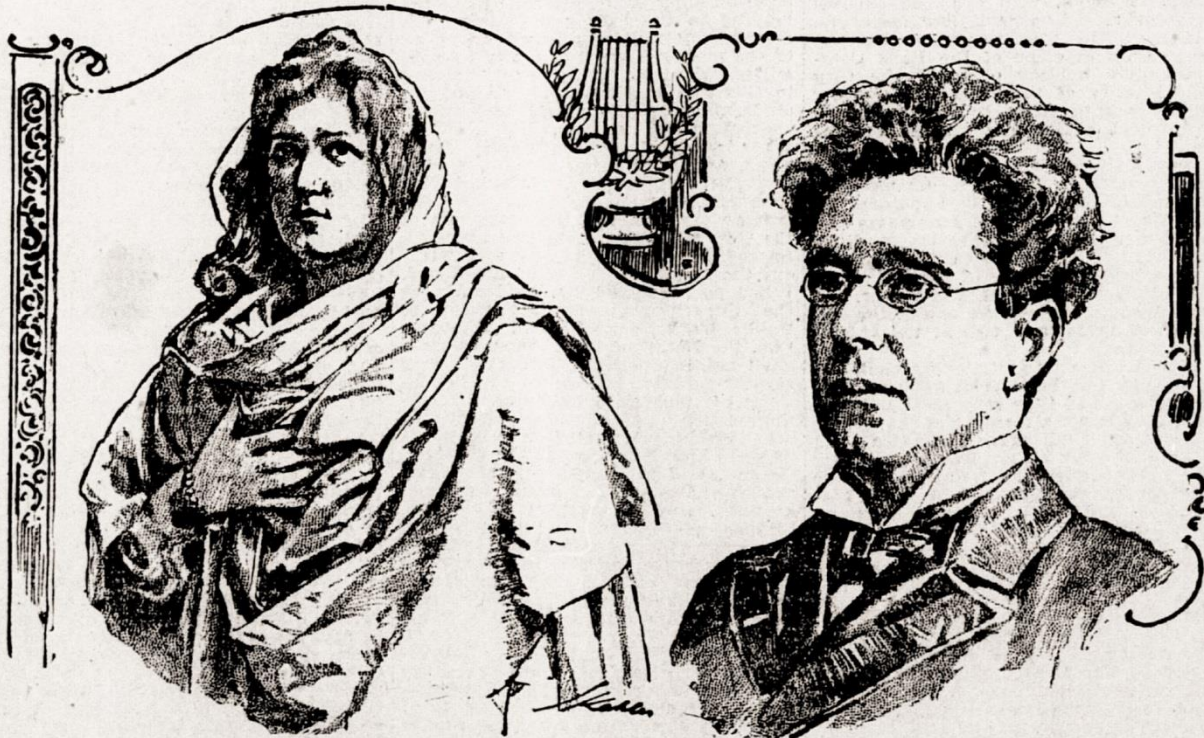
¹⁰ Meloncelli, "Bimboni, Oreste," [http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/oreste-bimboni_\(Dizionario-Biografico\)](http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/oreste-bimboni_(Dizionario-Biografico)). "Nel 1902 il B. si recò negli Stati Uniti e divenne professore di canto al New England Conservatory of Music di Boston, ove insegnò fino al 1903. Al ritorno in patria, gli venne affidata la direzione del Centro lirico del conservatorio di Firenze. Morì a Firenze il 4 agosto 1905."



Oreste Bimboni as a teacher at the New England Conservatory. In Bruce McPherson and James Klein (eds.), *Measure by Measure: A History of New England Conservatory from 1867* (Boston: NEC, 1995), 60.

QUEEN OF SONG AND MASTER OF MUSIC.

Two World-Famous Artists Who for Three Nights Will Make the California Ring With Sweetest Melody.



MELBA AND SIGNOR BIMBONI.

From a Photograph by Falk.

Oreste Bimboni, who will direct the performances of Mme. Melba, has had a career this is rich in achievement, both in composition and in the direction of grand opera.

He was born at Florence, Italy, September 11, 1847, of a family of musicians. His father was a bandmaster, a trumpet virtuoso, and the inventor of the "Bimbonifonia." Every attention was given to the education of Oreste. He studied the piano under Dechamps, and harmony and counterpoint under Professor Mabellini, at the Conservatory of Florence. When he was 18 he enlisted as a soldier under the banner of Garibaldi. After his return from the campaign he finished his studies at Berlin under Taubert.

His career as a conductor began at Bastia, Corsica. He then went to Milan,

where he was engaged for the Victoria Theater at Berlin, by the impresario Pollini, who is now in Hamburg. He then served in like capacity at the Imperial opera of Moscow. Few are the European cities in which he has not shown his power. Thus, he was conductor at the Vienna Imperial Opera House in 1883 and 1884; he has led in the opera houses of Barcelona, Lisbon, Bucharest, Venice, Naples, London, with companies of the highest grade, with such singers at Patti, Gerster, Calve, etc.

In connection with the announcement of the grand operatic performance in this city by Melba, Signor Giuseppe Campanari will sustain the role of Figaro, the mischief-making intermediary between Rosina and her lover, the Duke Almaviva, in the performance of the "Barber of

Seville."

Signor Giuseppe Campanari is one of the foremost barytones upon the Italian stage of to-day. Born in Veneto he showed a disposition toward music at an early age. The cello was his favorite instrument, and he was for some time a member of the orchestra of La Scala, Milan. There he discovered that he had a voice, and after earnest study he appeared in opera houses of Italy and Spain.

Melba will open at the California Theater on Tuesday night, April 19, and will give only three performances, at which the following prices will prevail: Boxes, \$40; single seats, down stairs, \$7 and \$8; balcony, first three rows, \$5; next four rows, \$4, and last seven rows, \$3; reserved seats in the gallery will be \$2, and \$1 will be the price asked for admission.

Article on Oreste ("Oresto") Bimboni, *The San Francisco Call*, Monday, April 11, 1898, 20.



Oreste Bimboni, Photographic portrait by William McKenzie Morrison, Chicago, c. 1902. Harvard Theatre Collection- Bimboni TCS 1.2500. Harvard University. The Bimboni here portrayed has been mistakenly identified as Alberto in *Wikipedia*.

Newly-discovered evidence, however, seems to suggest a slightly different picture. Bimboni began his appointment in October 1901 at NEC, where his main duties consisted of conducting operatic performances rather than teaching voice.¹¹ It was George W. Chadwick, then director of NEC, who offered Oreste this position. Chadwick, who became director in 1897, modeled NEC after European conservatories. He initiated a series of courses and activities including a student repertory orchestra and opera workshops; Bimboni was asked to focus on the latter.¹² Even though he never conducted an entire opera, Bimboni organized concerts of operatic numbers, which were still very useful in training singers. On May 23, 1902, for example, he directed a series of performances at the Opera School of NEC at the Boston Theatre. The program consisted of a series of duets, trios, and ensembles from a variety of operas, including Verdi’s *Aida* and *Traviata*, Gounod’s *Faust*, Donizetti’s *La Favorite*, and Wagner’s *Lohengrin*.¹³ Other public recitals followed in March and June of 1903. The *New England Conservatory Magazine* conveyed that the March performance was a “distinct advance[ment]” compared to the one of the previous May.¹⁴ Other newspapers credited Oreste Bimboni as the one who was responsible for such an improvement. A reviewer for the *Boston Transcript*, for example, writes that “Mr. Bimboni can heartily congratulate himself on his success in fitting young people to appear on the stage.” A reviewer for the *Boston Journal* goes even further, claiming that:

These performances give students the opportunity to show of what stuff they are made of ... They will educate audiences as well as aspirants especially when Mr. Bimboni leads. They may be the forerunner of an established opera with an ample repertory and at reasonable price.¹⁵

Praise continued after the June performance. The press claimed that soon Bimboni’s opera *La modella* would have been performed in its entirety by NEC students, but that performance never materialized.¹⁶ A last performance took place on March 10, 1904.¹⁷ In addition to his activities at NEC, Oreste Bimboni participated on a regular basis at gatherings of the *Sinfonia of America Society*.¹⁸

Records of Ellis Island indicate that he only entered the United States in 1896 and in 1904, but it is possible that Bimboni went back and forth more than once through the Boston seaport. He died in summer 1905 in Florence as a result of complications from a cancer-related operation.¹⁹ Even though the Boston press spoke favorably of Oreste Bimboni, the Opera School that he established did not survive after his death.²⁰

Oreste’s work at NEC likely inspired Alberto to visit the United States. His entry records at Ellis Island show that the conductor, a twenty-nine-year old single resident of Florence, disembarked on June 30, 1911 from the *Mauretania*.²¹ In the United States, Bimboni conducted the Savage Opera Company (1911-12) and the Century Opera Company (1913-14) among others. After having taught at both the Curtis Institute and Julliard School in the 1930s and early 1940s, Alberto moved to

¹¹ Bruce McPherson and James Klein (eds.), *Measure by Measure: A History of New England Conservatory from 1867* (Boston: NEC, 1995), 60.

¹² See: <http://necmusic.edu/archives/george-w-chadwick>.

¹³ “The First Public Operatic Performance,” *New England Conservatory Magazine*, 5/VIII (July 1902), 114.

¹⁴ “The Public Opera Performance,” *New England Conservatory Magazine*, 4/IX (May 1903), 160-161.

¹⁵ Quoted in *ibid*.

¹⁶ “The Third Public Opera Recital,” *New England Conservatory Magazine*, 5/IX (July 1903), 209-210.

¹⁷ “The Fourth Public Opera Performance,” *New England Conservatory Magazine*, 4/X (May 1904), 178-180.

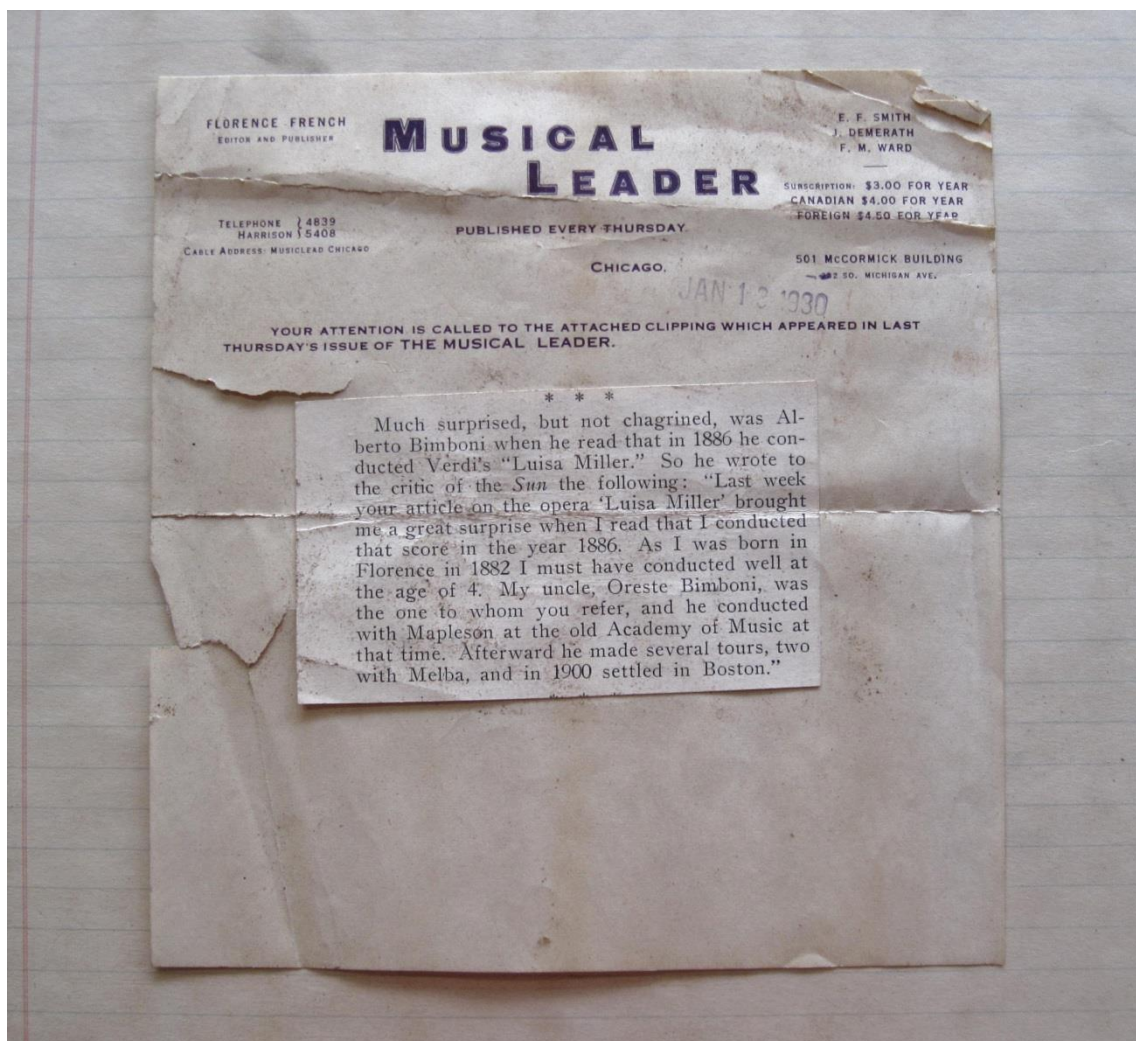
¹⁸ “Convention of the Sinfonia,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, May 17, 1903.

¹⁹ “Death of Oreste Bimboni: Italian Composer Once Conductor of New York Opera Company,” *Washington Post*, August 20, 1905, and (untitled), *New York Times*, August 20, 1905.

²⁰ McPherson and Klein, *Measure by Measure*, 61.

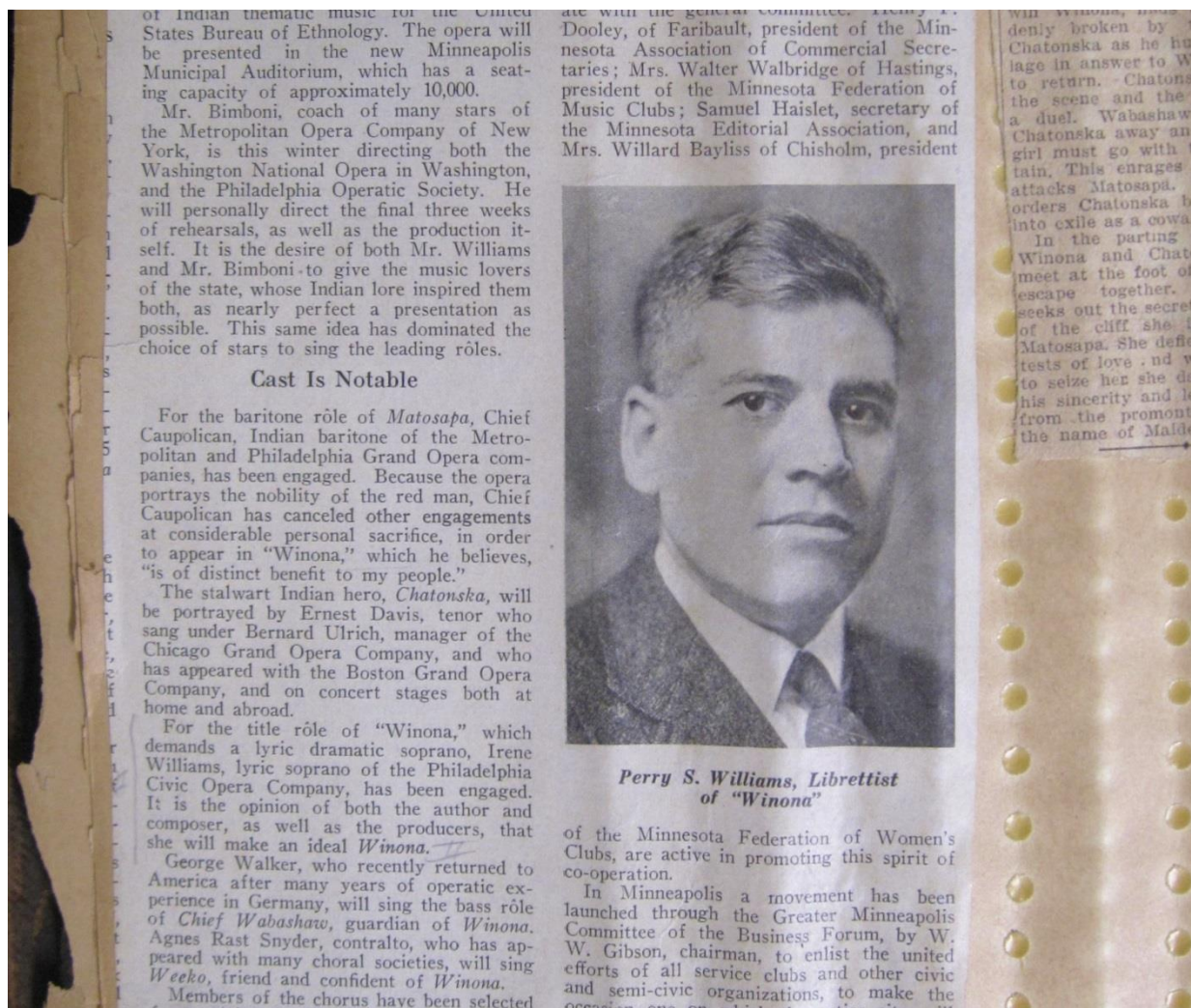
²¹ Search “Bimboni” in <http://www.libertyellisfoundation.org/passenger-result>.

Canton, Ohio to direct a local opera company. He later returned to New York City, where he resided until his death.



Alberto Bimboni on his uncle, Oreste Bimboni, and himself, in a January 1930 article of *The Musical Leader*. Alberto Bimboni's Scrap Book, loose paper, The ICAMus Archive.

Alberto was mostly known as a conductor. He was not an especially prolific composer, though he still wrote four operas: *Winona* (premiered in 1926 in Portland, OR), *Karina* (Minneapolis, 1928), *Il cancelletto d'oro* (New York City, 1936) and *In the Name of Culture* (Rochester, NY, 1949). *Winona* was the work that put Bimboni on the map as a serious composer. In 1915 he began writing this opera in collaboration with the Minneapolis newspaper critic Perry Williams. Likely inspired by Giacomo Puccini's *La fanciulla del West*, which Bimboni conducted in the United States in 1912, *Winona* was based on a Native-American folk legend, and blended authentic melodies with Italian lyricism. The opera immediately raised questions in the press concerning nationalism and exoticism with regard to the future of American opera.



Perry S. Williams, Librettist of *Winona*. Alberto Bimboni's Scrap Book, The ICAMus Archive.

Perry Williams clearly remembers how he first came into contact with Bimboni. After meeting the famous tenor, Riccardo Martin, on Broadway in the mid 1910s, the singer suggested that Bimboni write to Williams. As Williams recounts:

Out of a clear sky came this letter from Signor Bimboni asking permission to compose an opera about my libretto. Mr. Bimboni had asked Mr. Martin if he knew of a libretto, in the English language, suitable for an opera. Mr. Martin immediately referred him to me. This is how *Winona* was composed.²²

²² “Minnesota Indian Legends Give Rise to Opera *Winona*,” *The Oregonian*, November 2, 1926.



Alberto Bimboni and librettist Perry S. Williams, at the time of the Portland production of *Winona*, 1926. Alberto Bimboni's Scrap Book, The ICAMus Archive.

Bimboni began working on the opera in 1915, but Williams’s libretto was conceived well in advance. Williams had been interested in Native-American folklore since his high school days.

The Sioux legend of *Winona* inspired him so much that he set it into a poem. Williams was quoted as saying:

I therefore undertook ... to arrange [the events of the legend] in such a way that strung together they would make a complete story, with a given plot, a given setting, and everything, in short, essential to the composition of a poem.²³

Williams turned the poem into a libretto a few years later. As Bimboni recounts:

[Martin] told me he had just mailed back the libretto for an American Indian opera to Perry Williams of Minneapolis and that it was a lovely manuscript with many opportunities for a composer. So I wrote Mr. Williams and he sent the libretto and I composed the opera. So it was done. It took much patience to choose the Indian melodies. I had five books on Indian music by Miss Frances Densmore of the Smithsonian Institution, and I studied them long—long!²⁴

While Williams thoughtfully adapted the Native-American legend, Bimboni perused the collection of Densmore, an ethnomusicologist specializing in Native-American music. The composer took great care to preserve the original melodies of the Minnesotan Native Americans. It was not only the melodies of Densmore’s transcriptions that Bimboni used in his opera, but also the monophonic and antiphonal textures suggestive of Native-American music. While Bimboni preserved many of the original melodies, his music possessed an inherent Italianate lyricism, which reminded critics of Verdi. In a volume published in 1927 and titled *American Opera and Its Composers*, one early scholar of American music, Edward E. Hipsher, focused on these qualities of the score:

The score, though modern in treatment, follows in the wake of Verdi, in that it is an opera for voices rather than for the orchestra. The rhythms are masterful, compelling, at times, electric; the work breathes of the theater.²⁵

Unlike typical operatic arias, however, the Native-American melodies were narrow in range and with limited wide leaps. The melodies included war songs, Moccasin songs, a Chippewa lullaby, Chippewa and Sioux serenades, in addition to Native-American flute calls.²⁶ A critic of *The Oregonian* newspaper would praise the composer for his synthesis of Native-American and Italian styles:

Far from proving that the Italian style was blatantly unfit for an Indian opera, last night’s performance demonstrated beyond all doubt that none was more fit than the Italian. The maestro’s musical patterns, ostensibly Italian in their flavor and tint, enhanced the characteristic Indian rhythms and melodic patterns to a degree [that] indicated the free play of genius.²⁷

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Hipsher, *American Opera and Its Composer* (Philadelphia: Theodore Presser, 1927), 69.

²⁶ Hipsher, *American Opera*, 68.

²⁷ “Minnesota Indian ...,” *The Oregonian*, November 2, 1926.



Alberto Bimboni and librettist Perry S. Williams collaborating on *Winona*. The same 1926 article, together with other newspaper clips, glued to another folio of Alberto Bimboni’s Scrap Book, The ICAMus Archive.

The use of “tint” (*tinta* in the original Italian) clearly refers to the carefully chosen orchestral coloring of Verdi. These repeated references to Verdi and his techniques were likely the result of Bimboni’s ethnic origins. Nonetheless, *Winona* contained quintessentially Native-American idioms, which resonated with the local press. Hipsher, for example, remarks:

America is a heterodox country, and it has often been said that it will never express itself in art until it succeeds in emphasizing the anomaly of traits, which make up the American character. This is the best theoretical reason why *Winona* should be accepted as a godly stride toward the expression of American life.²⁸

In today’s musicological climate, situating the opera within the context of nationalism and exoticism is a complicated issue. Other essays contained in this collection will further elaborate on this matter.

Despite Alberto’s “ostensibly Italian” musical language, as reported by the critic of *The Oregonian*, he maintained a reputation as a composer of American opera. A music critic of the same newspaper writes:

²⁸ Hipsher, *American Opera*, 69.

Winona is an American opera. It was composed to a libretto in the English language and adapted to the taste of the American people. It expresses the anomaly of the American nation, the heterodoxy of American life.²⁹

In the 1910s and 1920s, Italian opera composers such as Verdi, Puccini, and Mascagni, among others, were the most performed in the United States. All of them, however, were based in Italy. Bimboni, on the other hand, moved to the United States permanently, fusing his musical language and traditions with those of his adoptive home.

In conclusion, it was a Florentine who wrote one of the most representative American operas of the 1920s. As Edward Hipsher writes one year after *Winona*'s premiere:

Till such a plane in our musical art is reached, let us welcome, among our own, the musical art creator, from whatever race or clime, so long as he comes willing to fuse his identity with our national life. Let him bring his art, his education, his traditions, and then let him cast these and his lot, whole-souled, with the rest of us, and grow into as a good American as he can.³⁰

These lines perfectly match the spirit of Bimboni's *Winona*. While the work is almost never performed today, this opera not only reflected the spirit of its time, but also showed the importance of transnational exchange on musical culture during the early twentieth century.



²⁹ Untitled article in *The Oregonian*, October 24, 1926.

³⁰ Hipsher, *American Opera*, 17.



Davide Ceriani presenting at “Intersections/Intersezioni” - ICAMus Session, Kent State University, Florence Program, June 1st, 2017.