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## COSTUMES WITHIN OPERA SERIA HIERARCHIES: A CASE STUDY FROM DRESDEN

One of the most difficult aspects about historic opera performances is their interdisciplinarity: indeed, a broad-ranging expertise is necessary in order to approach historical settings and staging procedures, including costumes and their manifold meaning within a performance. To look at costumes 'only' as historical dresses for singers, e.g. from the viewpoint of an art historian, though necessary, does not take into account the network of other artistic codes in which the representation of a costume on an opera stage is interwoven.

In this study I attempt, as a musicologist, to contextualize costumes within the performance beyond their own realm, in a constant dialogue with the other art forms on stage.<sup>1</sup>

### SOURCES

My case study centers on the Dresden court at the height of its operatic culture during the 1750s during the pivotal collaboration between Pietro Metastasio and Johann Adolf Hasse. Three volumes held in Kupferstichkabinett Dresden, which include costume drawings, are among others by da Ponte held in Vienna (Albertina), the most valuable sources concerning costumes for this time:

- 1) Dresden Kupferstichkabinett, Ca 103 *Attilio Regolo*, Hasse / Metastasio, Dresden, 1750
- 2) Dresden Kupferstichkabinett, Ca 104 *L'Ipermestra*, Hasse / Metastasio, Dresden, 1751
- 3) Dresden Kupferstichkabinett, Ca 105 *L'Olimpiade*, Hasse / Metastasio, Dresden, 1756

They were drawn by Francesco Ponte, who was *Kammerzahlmeister* of the Polish Queen and Saxon Electress Maria Josepha. Supposedly Ponte created costumes for the operas performed at the Dresden court from 1744 to 1756. The art historian Kathrin Schlechte described and analyzed these sources in a chapter of an exhibition catalogue and in her unpublished Master's thesis.<sup>2</sup> The vol-

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<sup>1</sup> The work presented here is the result of an interdisciplinary project conducted at Schola Cantorum Basiliensis and funded by the Swiss National Foundation (for more details on this project see the following [LINK](#)).

<sup>2</sup> KATRIN SCHLECHTE, «Da nun der Vorrath der Theater Garderobbe sehr ansehnlich ist». *Bühnenkostüm, Fundus und Ausstattungspraxis am Dresdner Hoftheater*, in *Eine gute Figur machen. Kostüm und Fest am Dresdner Hof*, eds. Claudia Schnitzer and Petra Hölscher, Dresden, Verlag der Kunst

umes for Johann Adolph Hasse's operas *Attilio Regolo* (1750), *L'Ipermestra* (1751) and *L'Olimpiade* (1756) contain drawings of the protagonists varying in height between 23 and 28 centimeters and in width between 13 and 21. The detailed drawings allow conclusions not only on the various ornaments in use for opera costumes of the time, but also on the material qualities of the cloth used, since small samples are included in one of the volumes. Colors are used in the drawings mainly to enliven the incarnate, in some cases also to color ornaments or parts of the costumes. In the case of *L'Olimpiade*, drawings of several props used in the sacrifice scene of the final act are included next to the detailed images of the characters. In addition, we can count on an invoice, now held in the Saxon State Archive in Dresden, by the tailor of the male costumes.<sup>3</sup> The source describes in detail the specific kind, color and cost of the materials used for the costumes and is signed by Ponte himself, in order to testify that the work was done as requested. In the case of *L'Olimpiade* we therefore have three kinds of sources for costumes: the drawings by Ponte, the cloth samples and the invoices of the tailor for the male costumes.

Because of this combination of sources, which is unique to *L'Olimpiade*, my study will focus on this opera and its production in Dresden in 1756. I will first discuss questions of source criticism, which means in this case mainly try to find traces of the function of these drawings within the process of the Dresden production of *L'Olimpiade*. I will then move on to show possible ways – and there are many more than I can show – in which to contextualize these sources in the performance with the other arts, the libretto, the music, and the stage sets.

#### SOURCE CRITICISM

The purpose of da Ponte's collection of drawings for *L'Olimpiade* is unknown. The red leather binding with golden inscription of the volume is original and hints to an official context and probably to a presentation volume. This is underlined by the fact that the folii do not show any signs or traces of use. Also, the fact that they were held in the Royal Cabinet Collections is a further hint to a presentational context, already described by Schlechte.<sup>4</sup> Despite this context the volume remained incomplete: a scribe listed all the names of roles and singers on the versos and left the rectos blank for the figurines to be drawn. Some of the rectos were left empty, so no drawings of costumes have been preserved for 'Alcandro', 'pastori per il coro', 'sacerdoti ordinarj' and 'guardie per Clistene. The remark 'provisto dalla Guarderobba' explains that these costumes

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Dresden, 2000, pp. 47-55; KATRIN SCHLECHTE, *Das Opernkostüm des Großen Churfürstlichen Theaters zu Dresden im 2. Drittel des 18. Jahrhunderts – Ein Rekonstruktionsversuch*, Master's thesis, Dresden, Technische Universität Dresden, [2001]. Katrin Schlechte is currently working on her PhD on opera costumes at Technische Universität Dresden.

<sup>3</sup> Sächsisches Hauptstaatsarchiv Dresden (henceforth D-Dla), Geheimes Cabinet, loc. 382/7, «Hoftheater, Ital. Oper, Ausgaben», fol. 80r-84v; see KATRIN SCHLECHTE, *Das Opernkostüm des Großen Churfürstlichen Theaters zu Dresden*, cit., vol. I, pp. 49-50, 130-138 for citations and a transcription of the source.

<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of these points see KATRIN SCHLECHTE, *Das Opernkostüm des Großen Churfürstlichen Theaters zu Dresden*, cit., vol. I, p. 32.

were not newly made for the Dresden performances but taken from the wardrobe of the theatre. Also, the fact that the tailor's invoice does not mention them reinforces this argument. Thus, since Ponte probably did not see them as his creations, he did not want them to be included in the volume. This presentation volume, which was meant to preserve visual aspects of the performances alive in a collector's object, collocated in the Royal cabinet, therefore also manifests a strong sense of authorship. Also the title of the 'vestiarium' which is to be found in an inscription of the frontispiece underlines the importance of da Ponte's authorship:

Vestiario de L'Olimpiade Opera rappresentata nel Real Teatro di Dresda il Carnevale dell'Anno MDCCLVI d'invenzione del Fran: Ponte<sup>5</sup>

But how close are these sources to the performances that actually took place in Dresden in 1756? One must suppose they are very close, having been drawn by the inventor of the costumes, who also supervised the tailor and testified on the invoice that the costumes were made as described by the tailor. But then why do the three sources – cloth samples, invoice and figurines – differ?

The differences between invoice and drawings concern the colors: only the red tones are included in the drawings, whereas other colors described by the tailor are not represented at all, e.g. the blue of Megacle's costume or the green colors to be found in Clistene's. If compared with the cloth samples one can see in the drawings the intention to show other colors with different tonalities of grey. But the drawings – although they obviously had to be seen in a presentational context – aim more at demonstrating the surface structure of the cloth and the attached ornaments than at showing the real effects of colors.

An additional difference between the diverse sources is the fact that the ornaments attached to the costumes are not mentioned in the tailor's invoice, with the exception of the ornaments on Licida's sacrification dress that are woven into the cloth and therefore mentioned in the invoice. In the case of Clistene's costume the tailor even misses to refer to the supposedly very costly applications of Hermelin which dominate the visual appearance of the character as seen in the drawing.<sup>6</sup> Either these works were implicitly included in the bill (which seems unlikely given the estimated great amount of work necessary to realize them) or the ornamentations have been attached at a later stage, which might have taken place outside the tailor's workshop.<sup>7</sup>

The invoice gives additional information on decoration and colors of boots which are not portrayed in the drawings. From the tailor's invoice we also know that every male singer had an additional pair of black velvet trousers, none of which can be seen in any of the drawings.

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<sup>5</sup> A picture can be seen at [LINK](#): «Vestiario of L'Olimpiade, an opera performed in the Royal Theatre of Dresde during carnival 1756, invented by Fran: Ponte».

<sup>6</sup> For a picture see [LINK](#)

<sup>7</sup> KATRIN SCHLECHTE, *Das Opernkostüm des Großen Churfürstlichen Theaters zu Dresden*, cit., vol. I, p. 60-71.

While there are relevant differences between drawings and the tailor's invoice, the cloth samples and the invoice comply with each other – except for one case: the costume of Aminta is said to be fabricated from 'mordore Atlas' which is a golden brownish color,<sup>8</sup> while the cloth samples show a light greyish blue.

Therefore there is reason to assume that cloth samples and tailor's invoice give close insight in the production process, while the drawings probably have been made with some chronological and possibly geographical distance from the production process and the performances. The placement of all the cloth samples in the middle of the *L'Olimpiade* volume might also suggest that they are related to another layer of the production process, not in compliance with the well organized order of the drawings.

#### THE OTHER ARTS

To consider opera costumes as one part of a whole bundle of parts of an opera seria performance, which were all meant to negotiate social hierarchy with their own means in performance, inevitably means a specification of the definition of the category of decorum, which is usually deployed for descriptions in contemporary sources and scientific work<sup>9</sup>. In this specified sense, 'decorum' of costume means that the costume found its place in the intertwining of the arts and conveyed by its own means and categories of meaning characteristics of the spectacle, including the role, the performer and the text. It therefore served the intention of the whole performance which does not necessarily mean that the codes conveyed by the costumes were meant to double codes conveyed by other arts involved in the performance: costumes' codes can be conceptualized in opposition to other arts in a performance, and nevertheless serve the whole purpose – e.g. if a costume serves as disguise of 'true' identity, a motive often found in opera seria.<sup>10</sup>

The case of the *L'Olimpiade* performances in February 1756 in Dresden clearly points towards a counteraction of different hierarchic systems on stage, in which costumes played their specific part.<sup>11</sup> The final judgment on conveyed

<sup>8</sup> KATRIN SCHLECHTE, *Das Opernkostüm des Großen Churfürstlichen Theaters zu Dresden*, cit., vol. II, p. 10.

<sup>9</sup> See BERNHARD JAHN, *Die Sinne und die Oper. Sinnlichkeit und das Problem ihrer Versprachlichung im Musiktheater des nord- und mitteldeutschen Raums (1680-1740)*, Tübingen, de Gruyter, 2005, pp. 60-66; BERNHARD JAHN, *Die Künste als Schwestern? Das Zusammen- und Gegeneinanderwirken der Künste in der Oper als Problem für die zeitgenössische Operntheorie und -praxis*, in *Oper als "Gesamtkunstwerk" – zum Verhältnis der Künste im barocken Musiktheater*, eds. Christine Fischer («Basler Jahrbuch für historische Musikpraxis», 33), Winterthur, Amadeus, 2009, pp. 53-65; KATRIN SCHLECHTE, *Das Opernkostüm des Großen Churfürstlichen Theaters zu Dresden*, cit., vol. I, pp. 20-23.

<sup>10</sup> BERNHARD JAHN, *Die Künste als Schwestern?*, cit., p. 62; SILKE LEOPOLD, *Mannsbilder. Weibsbilder. Händels Personendarstellung im Kontext höfischer Sitten*, in *Musik und Theater als Medien höfischer Repräsentation*, ed. Georg-Friedrich-Händel-Gesellschaft Halle («Händel-Jahrbuch», 49), Kassel, Bärenreiter, 2002, pp. 263-282.

<sup>11</sup> For a similar analysis of the 1763 performances of *Talestri* by Maria Antonia Walpurgis in Dresden see CHRISTINE FISCHER, *Instrumentierte Visionen weiblicher Macht. Maria Antonia Walpurgis*

meanings and allegorical interpretations of the performance, therefore, is a difficult, multifaceted issue, one cannot decide about in a unidimensional approach.

## LIBRETTO

One of the most fascinating aspects of Metastasio's libretto *L'Olimpiade*, created in 1733 for Vienna and used by Hasse with minor changes for the Dresden performances,<sup>12</sup> is the unclear hierarchic relation between the two main male characters Licida and Megacle: Licida is believed to be the son of the King of Crete and has come to Sicyon, where the action takes place, because of his love for Aristeia, king Clistene's daughter. Megacle, a young nobleman from Athens, who is a good sportsman and already has won titles in the Olympic games is also in love with Aristeia but not allowed to marry her because Clistene detests the Athenese. Judging from this situation at the beginning of the opera Licida is the most 'noble' character, therefore the role of primo uomo should be attributed to him.

In the end the situation has become different: Licida turned out to be the son of Clistene, therefore brother of Aristeia. Despite this high noble position, his moral attitudes are questionable: by having let his friend Megacle fight for him in the Olympic games under his name in order to win Aristeia's hand, he betrayed everyone. When Clistene found out about the deceit and banished him, he even tried to kill the king. On the other hand Megacle, of less noble origin, appeared as more just and fair during the action: putting aside his own love for Aristeia he fought for Licida – in the service of friendship – and afterwards left. Because of that and because he turns out to be the one who actually won Aristeia in the Olympic games, Clistene offers him Aristeia's hand.

The *Argomento* clearly states the values and attitudes of the two friends, speaking about «l'eroica amicizia di Megacle» and «l'incostanza, ed i furori di Licida».<sup>13</sup> In the end it remains unknown who is going to reign after Clistene (a question the king himself explicitly refers to in scene 6 of the third act)<sup>14</sup>: his son Licida, legitimized by blood, or his son in law Megacle, legitimized by virtue.

*gis' Werke als Bühne politischer Selbstinzenierung* («Schweizer Beiträge zur Musikforschung», 7), Kassel et al., Bärenreiter, 2004, pp. 80-398.

<sup>12</sup> See KENNETH J. WILSON, *L'Olimpiade: Selected Eighteenth-Century Settings of Metastasio's Libretto*, PhD dissertation, Ann Arbor (MI), UMI, 1982, vol. I, pp. 146-148; some of his assignments of arias and accompagnato recitatives differ from the Dresden score of Hasse's music, see below footnote 25.

<sup>13</sup> [Pietro Metastasio], *L'OLIMPIADE / DRAMMA PER MUSICA / DA RAPPRESENTARSI / NEL / REGIO ELETTORAL / TEATRO / DI CORTE / NEL / CARNEVALE / DELL'ANNO M DCC LVII.*, DRESDA, Vedova Stössel, Giovanni Carlo Krause, 1756, *Argomento*, see full text at [LINK](#)

<sup>14</sup> «[...] Io son custode / Della ragion del trono. Al braccio mio / Illesa altri la diede; / E renderla degg'io / Illesa o vendicata a chi succede.» [Pietro Metastasio], *L'OLIMPIADE*, cit., act III, scene 6. For link to full text see fn. 13.

In Costantino Maeder's interpretation the opposition between culture and nature is assigned to the protagonists Clistene and Licida, see below, footnote 30.

This typical pastoral conflict between nobility of blood and nobility of virtue has a remarkable open ending – leaving open hierarchical questions probably also to the contemporary audience in Dresden. The predominance of the pastoral subject otherwise unusual in Metastasio's oeuvre<sup>15</sup> might have been employed for that purpose: to veil social hierarchies which in most of the opera seria endings turn out to be clearly established. That king Clistene is overruled by the chorus of priests at the end of the opera and therefore Licida is not sentenced to death only adds another facet to the deconstruction of hierarchies in the libretto.

## STAGE DESIGN, SCENERY AND MUSIC

Because of the importance of pastoral topoi in the libretto of *L'Olimpiade*, rural atmospheres and scenery became more important for the stage design than stunning effects by machinery.<sup>16</sup> No direct sources survived of the stage design by Giovanni Niccolò Servandoni, who worked in Dresden beginning in 1754, after having been a celebrated designer for the Parisian stages.<sup>17</sup>

Scenic highpoints of *L'Olimpiade* were not created via machinery like in the other opera of the season, *Ezio*, in which the audience was impressed by splendid visual effects created by new machines which were especially fabricated for this opera. In *L'Olimpiade* other qualities were considered as breathtaking, and in some instances they were musical: Scene 5 of the first act is a description of the Arcadian life which Argene leads as Licori, together with her fellow *pastorelle*. Musically, she conveys this idyllic image by singing a choir aria, which is a song in praise of Arcadian liberty and therefore strongly interwoven to the visual aspects of the setting. As described by Bianconi, this scene uses the self-presentation of music (Argene's singing is diegetic) as a mean to convey pastoral attributes to Argene and the whole scenery.<sup>18</sup> Hasse's music itself, however, does not have any pastoral traits. Although Argene's solos and the choir of *pastorelle* alternate, the motives of choir and solo sections are densely interwoven. This musical homogeneity of the pastoral setting makes Argene's disguise as a *pastorella* even more perfect. Also Argene's costume reflects the pastoral characteristics of the role by floral ornaments on her dress. But the dress itself shows

<sup>15</sup> See LORENZO BIANCONI, *Die pastorale Szene in Metastasio's "Olimpiade"*, in *Bericht über den internationalen musikwissenschaftlichen Kongress Bonn 1970*, eds. Carl Dahlhaus, Hans Joachim Marx, Magda Marx-Weber, Günther Massenkeil, Kassel et. al., Bärenreiter, 1973, 185-191, here 185; ALBERTO BENISCELLI, *Luci della pastorale ed ombre della tragedia nel trittico viennese: Demetrio, Olimpiade, Demofonte*, in *Il melodrama di Pietro Metastasio la poesia la musica la messa in scena e l'opera italiana nel Settecento*, eds. Irena Sala di Felice, Rossana M. Caira Lumetti, Roma, Aracne, 2001, pp. 233-265 for intertextual relations of *L'Olimpiade* to other, earlier pastoral plays.

<sup>16</sup> Especially the performances of *Ezio* (Metastasio/Hasse) in the same year 1756, revival of the new production of 1755, offered splendid and impressive visual effects, including new stage machinery, see CHRISTINE FISCHER, *Tier und Macht. Oper im Spannungsfeld zwischen Natur und Zivilisation*, in *Oper als "Gesamtkunstwerk"*, cit., pp. 67-95, here 92-95.

<sup>17</sup> For the scenic descriptions in the libretto see [Pietro Metastasio], *L'OLIMPIADE*, cit., *mutazioni di scena*. For link to full text see fn. 13.

<sup>18</sup> LORENZO BIANCONI, *Die pastorale Szene in Metastasio's "Olimpiade"*, cit., p. 187.

the contemporary 'noble' shape, with the wide long skirt used for the roles of prime and seconde donne.<sup>19</sup> Comparably to the musical situation – Argene sings the same motives like her fellow *pastorelle* but is ennobled among them by her position as solo singer – her costume features pastoral ornaments but puts them in aristocratic context as Kathrin Schlechte has described.<sup>20</sup> The 'real' *pastorelle* on the other hand lack those noble qualities in their costumes wearing narrow skirts that only reach down to the middle of the shin.<sup>21</sup> We can trace a virtuoso pastoral depiction without splendid visual elements, deriving its strength from the strong 'pastoral' correspondence between different scenic arts (stage design, costume, diegetic singing on stage), being highlighted in addition via formal musical 'irregularities': Argene's choir-aria is not only interrupted by the appearance of Aristeia, but this is also the reason why the singing *pastorella* does not leave the stage after her solo.

Also Licida, Argene's secret fiancé, is distinguished by a costume referring to an extraordinary pastoral scenic constellation and by formal musical irregularities: indeed, after having been sentenced to death for the attack on king Clistene, Licida enters the stage in a white costume decorated with flowers – a reference to Arcadian attributes of innocence.<sup>22</sup> The similarity of the applied cloth ornaments with the *pastorelle* costumes neatly puts Licida on the pastoral side. But like in the case of Argene, the noble characteristics of the shape of the costume remain unchanged. Also the scenic context of this sacrifice which is meant to take place in the temple of Jupiter differs from the landscapes and the hippodrome that were seen up to this point. The scarification props in the 'vestiario' and the priest at the altar as a frontispiece of the volume hint to the special scenic and visual qualities of this last and probably most impressive scenic setting of the opera. In the scene after his first appearance in his splendid and costly new white costume, Licida first sings an aria without B-section, *Consola il genitore*, and then a recitativo accompagnato *Strali, terror de' mortali* (III.7) which is an unusual formal sequence, chosen to highlight the imminent danger of his scarification. The impression of this aria, sung by the castrato Giuseppe Belli, is reported to have been one of the emotional highpoints of the performance:

Everybody who heard *L'Olimpiade* back then remembers the tears he shed when Belli sang the aria "Consola il genitore".<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Picture at [LINK](#)

<sup>20</sup> See KATRIN SCHLECHTE, *Das Opernkostüm des Großen Churfürstlichen Theaters zu Dresden*, cit., vol. I, pp. 51-54 for the discrepancies between pastoral scenery and noble aspects of Argene's dress.

<sup>21</sup> Picture at [LINK](#)

<sup>22</sup> Picture at [LINK](#)

<sup>23</sup> ERNST LUDWIG GERBER, *Historisch-Biographisches Lexicon der Tonkünstler welches Nachrichten von dem Leben und Werken musikalischer Schriftsteller, berühmter Componisten, Sänger, Meister auf Instrumenten, Dilettanten, Orgel- und Instrumentenmacher, enthält*, Leipzig, Breitkopf, 1790, vol. I, p. 129: «Jedermann der damals die *Olimpiade* gehört, erinnert sich noch der saßen [sic!] Thränen die er vergossen hat, als Belli die Arie sang *Consola il genitore*».

Compared to the two pastoral and formal outsiders, Licida and Argene, the couple Aristeia/Megacle is conventional in its noble heroism: Aristeia as the true loving princess, Megacle as the hero who values duty over love. This role disposition is also conveyed by their conventional noble costumes without pastoral traits.<sup>24</sup> In other operas, among them the *Ezio* revivals of 1756, Angelo Maria Monticelli, the singer of Megacle, interpreted the *primi uomini* while Belli (Licida) was booked for the *secondo* roles. The music in *L'Olimpiade*, however, puts Megacle and Licida on the same hierarchic position considering the number of arias (both have 4 arias, one of Megacle's arias being a duetto with Aristeia)<sup>25</sup> and voice ranges (both sopranos). But when analyzing the tonality of the arias of Megacle and Licida, one can trace a difference: the noble Megacle proves to have a wider spectrum of affective states, featuring arias in E, D, F, and E flat while Licida stays in a tighter tonal ambitus of D, twice C and F.<sup>26</sup> His situation proves to be more 'tragic' than Licida's, having to cope with the conflict between his friendship (to Licida) and love (for Aristeia), features otherwise mostly attributed to a *primo uomo*.

The hierarchic question about who is the first and who is the second couple in this opera stays unresolved, also if one looks at the order in which they are mentioned in the *dramatis personae* lists: Licida is listed before Megacle in the libretto and 'vestiario', but Aristeia before Argene – an order which contradicts the final constellation of the couples Licida/Argene and Megacle/Aristeia. When considering stage presence, Licida wins over Megacle, being present in 19 scenes, compared to 16 by Megacle. As for what concerns the costumes, Megacle<sup>27</sup> and Licida<sup>28</sup> seem to be on equal positions; their dresses even cost the same amount of money in production, which was 24 thaler (later corrected to 18). However, this accounts only for the situation before Licida entered the stage in his second white sacrifice costume, which cost an additional 30 thaler (later corrected to 22).<sup>29</sup>

The performance therefore did not establish a planned hierarchical order, because different parameters communicated different preferences between the two main couples. It opened an opposition between two worlds, the 'natural'

<sup>24</sup> Pictures at [LINK](#) and [LINK](#)

<sup>25</sup> Based on the score in Sächsische Landesbibliothek Dresden, Mus. F 2477-F-83, OLIMPIADE / Damma per Musica. / Del Sig.r Gio. Adolfo Hasse, primo Maestro / di Cappella di S. R. M.; see COSTANTINO MAEDER, *Metastasio, L'Olimpiade e l'opera del Settecento*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 1993, pp. 21-22 for the aria numbers in Metastasio's libretto for Vienna, 1733; for a comparison between the Vienna and Dresden versions see KENNETH J. WILSON, *L'Olimpiade*, cit., vol. I, pp. 53-60, 146-148.

<sup>26</sup> See REINHARD WIESEND, *Tonartendisposition und Rollenhierarchie in Hasses Opern*, in *Colloquium Johann Adolph Hasse und die Musik seiner Zeit (Siena, 1983)*, ed. Friedrich Lippmann («Analecta Musicologica», 25), Laaber, Laaber, 1987, pp. 222-231.

<sup>27</sup> Picture at [LINK](#)

<sup>28</sup> Picture at [LINK](#)

<sup>29</sup> D-Dla, Geheimes Cabinet, loc. 382/7, »Hoftheater, Ital. Oper, Ausgaben«, fol. 80r-84v; see KATRIN SCHLECHTE, *Das Opernkostüm des Großen Churfürstlichen Theaters zu Dresden*, cit., vol. II, pp. 130-138.



pastoral world of Licida and the 'artificial' aristocratic world of Megacle.<sup>30</sup> On the sensual side Licida seems to be the winner, with one more costume and a formally outstanding musical scene. The wider range of musical affects and heroism in the action speaks for Megacle as *primo uomo* (who would have become Clistene's successor if Licida had not turned out to be his son) – but most probably impressive costumes and an aria sung under imminent threat of death were far more impressive features than noble qualities derived from dramatic action that might not have been understood in detail during the course of a performance. That the audience probably could not follow the action completely might be underlined by a remarkable feature of the costumes. Who of the two young men in the end gets which one of the two ladies was not at all foreseeable at the beginning of the action: Argene wants Licida who wants Aristeia who wants Megacle who is not allowed to marry her. But the audience knew that the opera action would end with two happy couples as a convention. Therefore already at the beginning of the performance the costumes gave a visual guideline on this point: via colors. Aristeia and Megacle were dressed in blue and white, while Argene and Licida were dressed in red and white. Therefore, color-wise, the audience was able to anticipate the final constellation of couples.

This, however, gave no definitive answer to the unresolved question of hierarchy between the couples, which was left open to the audience's judgment – at least according to the traces of these specific performances of *L'Olimpiade* in Dresden in 1756: the audience was asked to make a choice between a heroic couple as moral and musical winner for its conventionalism and a pastoral couple as representative of visual splendor and unconventionalism, legitimized by noble blood.

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<sup>30</sup> See COSTANTINO MAEDER, *Metastasio, L'Olimpiade*, cit., pp. 41-44, who attributes the conflicting worlds to an opposition between Licida and Clistene (son and father).