CHAPTER 21

The Italian Opera

The only form of theatrical music that is at all controversial . .. is the operatic form.

—Aaron Copland (1957, p. 133)

In March, Italian senator Paolo Amato joined placard-waving citizens furious over the removal of an iconic painting from Florence's famed Uffizi Gallery. While protesting the loan of Leonardo da Vinci's "Annunciation" to an exhibition in Japan, the senator took an unusual step: He wrapped himself in chains, looped them around a post outside the museum entrance and snapped the padlock shut. The stunt was the dramatic, even operatic conclusion to a noisy conflict raging for weeks.

—Christopher Knight (2007, p. E1)

Italy for centuries has had a well-deserved reputation for excelling in the areas of painting, music, and living life fully with a general sense of style and vivacity. Other nations excel at waging war and creating economic prosperity for most of their citizens. However, as John Peet (2005) has shown, Italy is a laggard economically, particularly in comparison to other members of the European Union (EU). Some of the causes for this poor situation include high taxes to support social programs such as early retirements from government work, a low rate of labor force participation (57% of those in the 15 to 64 age range versus 66% in Germany and 73% in Great Britain), low productivity, the continuing influence of criminal groups such as the Mafia, widespread corruption, tax evasion, a huge public debt, and inefficient government. Just in the area of tax evasion, one reliable estimate indicates that unpaid taxes are equal to 27% of Italy's gross domestic product (Kahn & Di Leo, 2007).

To make matters worse, much of the prosperity in Italy since World War II has occurred because of the dramatic success that small, entrepreneurial firms in the north have experienced. Because of the competition from China and other nations and the increasing power of large multinational corporations, such small Italian firms have faced serious problems in recent years. There are only 47 large firms in Italy, with its population of 57.3 million, while Britain with a similar population (59.4 million) has 129 (Peet, 2005).

Italy is about the size of Florida, but less fertile and less endowed with natural resources. The country is divided into two main regions. Continental Italy consists of the Alps and the northern Italian plain while Mediterranean Italy encompasses the Italian peninsula and the islands. The Apennine mountains run directly down the peninsula's center, and its northern range almost completely cuts off the north from the south. This geographical division has led to extreme regionalism, and many Italians view Italy as two separate nations: the wealthier, industrial north with its population of 37 million, and the poorer, more agrarian south with 20 million.

North and South

The political scientist Robert Putnam (1991) has empirically and convincingly demonstrated that the civic traditions of the north and south of Italy originated from different sources and that these traditions have persisted for centuries. In the 11th century King Frederico established an autocratic form of government in the south that was both politically and economically successful, but over time his successors corrupted it. The Mafia arose as the middleman between the kings and the people, which tended to reinforce corruption. In the north, by contrast, there has been a centuries-long legacy of civic involvement through guilds and democratic elections that has held corruption in check. Today the north of Italy continues to be successful, even though it is under duress because of globalization. However, the south languishes in poverty, even though millions of dollars have been devoted to eradicating it. There is even a group, the Northern League, which periodically seeks to create two separate nations in Italy. However, this movement is more quixotic than real, as the economically prosperous north depends heavily on emigration from the south for its work-force. Moreover, the north and south are closely linked to one another culturally, as noted below, even though there are regional differences.

Although Italian culture is justifiably renowned, it is in danger of extinction, as are the cultures of some other developed nations. Italy's fertility rate of 1.28 children per woman is far below replacement (2.2) and is one of the lowest in the world. Italy has the second-oldest population among nations following Japan, with 25.6% of its population over 60. Still, the population is large and these trends may reverse. Also, many people want to immigrate to Italy, and in fact there are countless numbers of illegal aliens crossing its borders daily. Thus, while Italy will probably change, its cultural base should be relatively secure, at least for the foreseeable future.

Italy has been historically victimized by overwhelming natural disasters: volcanoes, floods, famines, and earthquakes. It is a geologically young country, most of which cannot be categorized as terra firma, and there have been so many mudslides resulting in great loss of property and life both in the past and in recent years that the Italians nickname the nation "landslide country"("Hand of God," 1998). As a result Italy exudes an aura of precariousness (Haycraft, 1985). Italians tend to accept insecurity as a fact of life. This acceptance may explain why they seem to be able to enjoy life more for the moment and why they are willing to accept events as they happen. Italians tend to feel that if something is going to happen, it will, and that not much can be done about it.

Italy's history is filled with many culturally rich and influential periods, including the Roman Empire and the Renaissance. The country emerged as a nation-state in 1861, much later than many other European nations such as France and England, as a result of national unification, known as the *risorgimento* or revival. Before unification Italians never quite identified with the many foreign bodies that conquered and ruled them. This is a possible explanation for Italians' historic contempt for the law and paying taxes. And even though Italians have been overwhelmingly influenced by foreign rule, they have managed to create a culture that is distinctly their own.

The Opera Metaphor

To understand Italy it is helpful to look at the opera, the art form that Italians invented and raised to its highest level of achievement. It is the only art form for theatrical theater in which almost all of the words are sung rather than spoken. Musical forms that have evolved from the opera include the English operettas of Gilbert and Sullivan and such U.S. musicals as *South Pacific* and *Oklahoma*. However, they have proportionately many more spoken rather than sung words in comparison to opera.

The opera represents most if not all of the major features of Italian culture. It is a metaphor for Italy itself, as it encompasses music, dramatic action, public spectacle and pageantry, and a sense of fate. It may be tragic or comic, intensely personal or flamboyantly public, with the soloists and chorus expressing themselves through language, gesture, and music and always through highly skilled acting. There is a larger-than-life aura surrounding operas, and the audience is vitally engaged in the opera itself, showing great emotion and love toward a singer whose talents are able to express the common feelings that Italians tend to share. Operas and operatic songs reflect the essence of Italian culture, and they are embraced by Italians with an emotional attachment that less dramatic peoples might find difficult to understand. Therefore we chose the opera as our metaphor to understand Italian culture.

Using this metaphor, we focus on five distinctive characteristics of the opera and demonstrate how they illustrate Italian life. These characteristics include the overture; the spectacle and pageantry itself and the manner in which opera-like activities are performed in the daily life of Italians; the use and importance of voice to express words in a musical fashion; externalization, which refers specifically to the belief that emotions and thoughts are so powerful that an individual cannot keep them inside and must express them to others; and the importance of both the chorus and the soloists, which reflects the unity of Italian culture (chorus) but also regional variations, particularly between the north and the south.

The Overture

The overture was such an influential innovation that it inspired the development of the German symphony. Essentially the orchestra sets the mood for the opera during the overture and gives some idea as to what the audience can expect to occur. Typically the overture is about 5 minutes long, and it frequently includes passages that are emotionally somber, cheerful,

reflective, and so forth. At various points the overture is quick, moderate, or slow in tempo, and it employs different instruments to convey the sense of what will happen in the various acts —usually three—into which the opera is divided.

Italian culture emphasizes overtures. It stands somewhere in the middle of the continuum between U.S. low-context culture and Asian high-context culture. U.S. Americans tend to ignore the overture and get down to business rather quickly. Many Asians, on the other hand, devote a significant amount of time getting to know their negotiating counterparts before doing business with them. Italians take a midway position on the issue of personal trust and knowledge, but they do tend to convey their feelings and thoughts at least partially at the beginning of the relationship. The other party has some understanding of what will unfold, but it is only a preview that is imperfect, as the unexpected frequently occurs.

There are regional differences in the manner in which the overture is performed in daily life. In Milan, which has been influenced by its proximity to Switzerland and Germany, there is a tendency to shorten the overture. Still, it occurs, even in the smallest café, which has only a few tables and a modest menu featuring sandwiches. The sandwiches are presented in a colorful and appetizing manner, and *paninis*— invented in Italy—are frequently featured, as are various forms of coffee and espresso. There may be just a few moments of conversation with the owner, but they are pleasant, like the display of food. Department stores emphasize the same pattern of behavior, and the tendency to interact with the salesperson is much higher in Italy than in the United States.

In the south the overture can be much more involved. When looking for a pair of shoes, for example, the buyer frequently visits a shop and indicates to the owner that a mutual friend suggested he or she make a purchase there. This information leads to a pleasant conversation and perhaps the offer of a cup of espresso. Frequently no purchase is made, or expected, on the first visit. When the buyer visits a second time, the same pleasantries occur, and he or she may or may not make a purchase. However, both parties expect that a purchase will occur if the buyer visits the shop for a third time. At this time the real negotiations or opera begin. Both parties—and the audience—have a good idea about the outcome, but expressions of emotion, various uses of argument and persuasion, and different tones of voice will help to facilitate the final outcome or sale. This strengthens the general sense of living life fully and with vivacity. Still, the unexpected can and does occur, as fate is a critical element in the mix.

Pageantry and Spectacle

By and large, Italy is a land of spectacle and pageantry. Italians tend to be more animated and expressive than most other nationalities. Many Asians, for example, attempt to minimize emotions and gestures when communicating with others. Italians, particularly those in the south, enjoy communicating in an expressive manner. The level of noise in Italy tends to be high in public places, and people tend to congregate rather than to be isolated from one another. Also, some bystanders do not mind becoming part of the action. For example, a driver stopped by a police officer for excessive speed may be debating the issue while a crowd vocally supportive of the driver's plea for mercy offers comments. In one situation a bus driver

argued with a mother that her son, who was obviously not a child, should pay the adult rather than the child's fare, but he also had to argue with the many other passengers who vehemently came to her defense.

Once the overture is done and the curtain goes up, the audience is greeted by a set so visually stunning that it elicits applause. This is the beginning of the pageantry and spectacle. They play such an important role in Italian life that people and things frequently tend to be judged first and foremost on their appearances.

Barzini (1964) in his classic portrait of the Italians points out that the surface of Italian life, playful yet bleak and tragic at times, is similar to what has occurred in Italian history and has many of the characteristics of a show. It is, first of all, unusually moving, entertaining, and unreservedly picturesque. Second, all of its effects are skillfully contrived and graduated to convey a certain message to, and arouse particular emotions in, the bystanders. Italians are frequently great dramatic actors, as we might expect of the creators of the opera. Current portraits of Italy in best-selling books, such as *Under the Tuscan Sun*, reaffirm Barzini's descriptions, suggesting that cultural change in Italy is occurring slowly in many areas.

The first purpose of the show is to make life acceptable and pleasant. This attitude can largely be explained by the circumstances of history, both natural and man-made, where four active volcanoes, floods, earthquakes, and continuous invasions by outsiders have created a sense of insecurity. Italians tend to make life's dull and insignificant moments exciting and significant by decorating and ritualizing them. Ugly things must be hidden; unpleasant and tragic facts are swept under the carpet whenever possible; and ordinary transactions are all embellished to make them more stimulating. This practice of embellishing everyday events was developed by a realistic group of people who tend to react cautiously because they believe that catastrophes cannot be averted but only mitigated. Italians prefer to glide elegantly over the surface of life and leave the depths unplumbed (Barzini, 1964).

The devices of spectacle do not exist simply because of the desire to deceive and bedazzle observers. Often, to put on a show becomes the only way to revolt against destiny and to face life's injustices with one of the few weapons available to a brave people, their imagination. To be powerful and rich, of course, is more desirable than to be weak and poor. However, it is frequently difficult for the Italians, both as a nation and individually, to have both power and wealth.

The Importance of *Garbo*

This eternal search for surface pleasures and distractions is accompanied by *garbo*. Although this term cannot be translated exactly, it is the finesse that Italians use to deal with situations delicately and without offense. *Garbo* turns Italian life into a work of art. Italians tend to have a public orientation, are willing to share a lot, and are used to being on stage at all times.

As this description suggests, many Italians wish to portray a certain image to those around them. This is termed *la bella figura*, which Brint (1989) has defined as the projection of "a confident, knowing, capable face to the world." Wilkinson (2007a, p. A5) expands on this definition by pointing out that *la bella figura* represents the Italian obsession that allows

substance to be ignored for style; it is the art of public performance.

The importance attached to impressions is shown in the basic document of the Italian republic, the constitution. In the U.S. Declaration of Independence, the first of the self-evident truths is that all men are created equal. In the Italian constitution, the first basic principle is that "all citizens are invested with equal social dignity"(Levine, 1963). Similarly many Italians would rather sit inside their home than go outside and make a bad impression. Wilkinson (2007a) describes the extreme pursuit of *la bella figura* in Italy among those who are wealthy but not sufficiently wealthy to pay for this pursuit from their perspective as to what is expected. They have joined a club that allows them to rent either a prestigious car for an afternoon or to obtain an impressive but temporary collection of paintings on their walls for a party. While such ostentatious displays are common in other nations, Italy seems to outshine many if not all of them in this regard.

A large number of Italians pursue *la bella figura* through material possessions. Giving a good impression, not only with demeanor but with material wealth, is important. Various explanations have been offered for this tendency, including years of domination by foreign nations, overcrowding in various areas, and natural disasters. Whatever the explanation, it seems that the creation of a show through an eternal search for pleasures and distractions is an attempt to deal with the difficult realities of everyday life.

The Italian reliance on spectacle and *garbo* or turning life into a work of art helps people solve most of their problems. Spectacle and *garbo* govern public and private life and shape policy and political designs. They constitute one of the reasons why Italians have excelled in activities in which appearance is predominant. During medieval times Italian armor was the most beautiful in Europe: It was highly decorated, elegantly shaped, and well-designed but too light and thin to be used in combat. In war the Italians preferred German armor, which was ugly but more practical. Similarly, on the occasion of Hitler's visit in 1938, Rome was made to appear more modern, wealthy, and powerful with the addition of whole cardboard buildings, built like film sets.

Italians believe that "anybody can make an omelet with eggs" and that "only a true genius can make one without" (Barzini, 1964). For example, warfare during the Renaissance, as it was practiced outside of Italy, consisted of the earnest and bloody clash of vast armies. The army that killed more enemies carried the day. But in Italy warfare was an elegant and practically bloodless pantomime. Highly paid leaders of small companies of armed men staged the outward appearance of armed conflict, decorating the stage with beautiful props, flags, colored tents, horses, and plumes. The action was accompanied by suitable martial music, rolls of drums, heartening songs, and blood-chilling cries. The armies convincingly maneuvered their few men back and forth, pursued each other across vast provinces, and conquered each other's fortresses. However, victory was decided by secret negotiations and the offer of bribes. It was, after all, a civilized and entertaining way of waging war. Although this approach often left matters as undecided as warfare practiced elsewhere, it cost less in money, human lives, and suffering.

Church Ritual

The operatic pageantry of Italian life also occurs in the rituals of the Catholic Church, which still exercises considerable political and cultural power ("By Hook," 2007). Italians prize these rituals for their pageantry, spectacle, and value in fostering family celebrations more than for their religious significance. Many Italians view the church, much like the opera, as a source of drama and ritual but not authority. Although they do not attend church regularly, the church still exerts a strong cultural and social influence on their behavior, and almost all Italians identify themselves as Catholics.

Furthermore, the spectacle of Italian life is quite apparent in the area of communications. Italians tend to be skilled conversationalists. Onlookers can frequently follow the conversation from a distance because of the gestures and facial expressions that are employed to convey different emotions. Similarly one can understand many of the actions that take place in an opera without fully understanding the words the actors are singing.

Although Italians tend to be emotional and dramatic, decisions are influenced rarely by sentiments, tastes, hazards, or hopes but usually by a careful evaluation of the relative strength of the contending parties. This is one of the reasons why, when negotiating even the smallest deal, Italians prefer to look each other in the face. They read the opponent's expression to gauge his or her position and can thus decide when it's safe to increase demands, when to stand pat, and when to retreat.

Transparent deceptions are employed to give each person the feeling that he or she is a unique specimen of humanity, worthy of special consideration. In Italy, few confess to being "an average man." Instead they persuade themselves that they are "one of the gods' favored sons" (Barzini, 1964).

The operatic Italians must always project a capable face to the world. Therefore, they prefer to engage only in work that will create the image of confidence and intelligence. In Italy middle-class people tend to work when they have a profession and not while being a high school or university student. In fact, many lower level jobs such as waiting on tables are full-time in nature and not readily available to students. In the universities, students specialize immediately in their first year and do not dabble, as is the custom in the United States. However, there is no set term for most university careers—for example, 4 years devoted to undergraduate work and 3 years to law school—and so many Italians spend more time in school than their U.S. counterparts.

Business Negotiations

Pageantry and spectacle also apply to business presentations and negotiations. When presenting ideas during such negotiations, managers are expected to ensure that the aesthetics of the presentation are clear and exact; they should demonstrate a mastery of detail and language and be well organized. Polish and elegance count for a great deal. However, although pageantry is important in business presentations and negotiations, Italians also tend to expect good-faith bargaining.

Most if not all Italians feel that it is infinitely better to be rich than to seem rich. But if a man or a nation does not have the natural resources necessary to conquer and amass wealth, what is he to do? The art of appearing rich has been cultivated in Italy as nowhere else. Little

provincial towns boast immense princely palaces, castles, and stately opera houses. Residents of some small coastal villages have completed elaborate paintings on the rocks that can be seen from the sea to give the illusion of wealth and prosperity. In spite of economic difficulties many Italians wear good clothes, drive shining cars, and dine at expensive restaurants. However, some of these people may have few material possessions. Decoration and embellishment are important so that the realities of economic insecurity, uncertainty, and a scantily endowed land can be changed into a spectacle of illusion.

The pageantry of Italian life is highlighted by its lack of a rigid social hierarchy. There is no permanent and rigid class structure in Italy. Rather, there are conditions on which a person is judged. These include occupation and the amount of authority a person has in that role, education, ancestry, and, in most instances, wealth. However, the major focus is placed on social behavior. The Italians term this focus *civilta* or the extent to which someone is acculturated to the norms of the area (Keefe, 1977). These norms include styles of dress, manners, and participation in the local community.

Position in the social hierarchy can be clearly judged by the amount of respect shown to a person and his or her family by the members of the community. However, respect is also associated with age and family position. Younger people will almost always show deference to older people, just as children show respect for parents.

Class consciousness and the social hierarchy will inevitably change as a result of industrialization, massive migration to urban areas, low birth rates, an aging population, and the Americanization of Italian youth. However, certain titles still command much respect. These include doctor, lawyer, and professor. Many people feel honored to speak to or have affiliations with someone holding such a title and will refer to him or her in a respectful, subordinate manner.

One final example of pageantry is appropriate, especially because it shows how some other cultures are similar to that of Italy (see Chapter 23, “The Mexican Fiesta”). Once a year in every village and city there is a celebration in honor of its patron saint (*santo patrono*) in which a parade is featured. The statue of the saint is placed in the lead position in the parade, followed by the clergy, members of the upper classes, and then all other citizens. A celebration follows in the piazza or town center. This traditional festival and parade help to strengthen the feeling of solidarity and permit people to escape from the regular routine in a dramatic, spectacular, and fun-filled manner.

The reliance on spectacle must be clearly grasped if one wants to understand the Italians. Spectacle helps people solve most of their problems and governs public and private life. It is one of the reasons why Italians have always excelled in activities in which impressions are important: architecture, decoration, landscape gardening, opera, fashions, and the cinema.

Voice

Italians tend to believe that their language is the most beautiful one in the world. Much of the beauty of the Italian language derives from the fact that it has a higher proportion of vowels to consonants than all or most languages, which gives it something of a musical effect. Italians put

great emotion into their language, speaking with passion, rhythm, and changing tonality. It is the quality of the way people speak that is of utmost importance, and this bias is replicated in the opera in that there are several strikingly different types of voice registers such as the soprano and the bass. And, like the opera, the sound and cadence of the communication play a role at least equal to the content of what is said in getting the message across. Italians are often much more interested in engaging and entertaining their listeners than in conveying their thoughts accurately.

Perhaps the most difficult operatic singing is associated with bel canto, or beautiful singing, introduced by the romantic Italian composer Vincenzo Bellini. This form of music requires extraordinary exertion and ability on the part of the singers, especially when they are singing together to express their thoughts and emotions. Bel canto is so difficult a form of opera that only a limited number of singers can perform it effectively, and only Italian composers have been successful in writing music in this style.

Italians tend to talk louder than many other nationalities, but more so in the south than in the north. At meetings or informal gatherings individuals talk simultaneously and begin to raise their voices without realizing that they are doing so. Stories are told with passion, anger, and joy. The air in Italy is filled with so many voices that one must frequently talk in a loud voice to be understood, thereby increasing the total uproar.

Speech and Gesture

Oral communication in Italy is something of a show itself. Speaking is punctuated by elaborate gestures, befitting the Italian operatic tradition. Whatever the section of the country, Italians talk with their hands. Quick, agile expressive movements of the hands, arms, and shoulders contribute emphasis and sincerity to the spoken words and facial expressions. For instance, a man thinking about buying fish in a market empties his imaginary waist pocket when he is told the price and walks away without a word (Willey, 1984).

However, the gestures are not, as many believe, unrealistically exaggerated. In fact, the gestures are so realistic that they may be unapparent. The acting of the opera singers, directly derived from the Italian's natural mimicry, contributes to the erroneous impression of excessive exaggeration. In reality, Italian gestures are based on natural and instinctive movements and can therefore be understood by the inexperienced at first sight. Many of these gestures have been traced back to classical antiquity (de Jorio, 2000).

In addition to gestures, Italians sometimes employ flattery and polite lies to make life decorous and agreeable. The purpose is to reduce the turbulence of day-to-day living and to make life more acceptable. Flattery somehow makes the wariest of men feel bigger and more confident, similar to the larger-than-life opera singer. This perspective accounts for the fact that Italians sometimes make promises they know they cannot fulfill. Small lies can be justified to give pleasure, provoke emotion, or prove a point. This applies not only to the businessman who swears with soulful eyes that he will deliver his product on a certain day (and does so a month later) but also to officers of government cabinet rank. Ministers will promise an appointment, will confirm it and reconfirm it, but on the appointed day will find an excuse for evading the appointment. Casualness toward promises is part of accepted Italian behavior.

Contentious Spirits

Contentiousness is generally not far below the surface of the Italian personality. This argumentativeness surprises many because it is discordant with the usual Italian demeanor. Yet the accusatory words shouted by offended drivers, the sidewalk conversations that often sound like arguments, and the tedious monologues by Italians reciting some imagined wrong they've suffered testify to the argumentative side of Italians. For most Italians controversy is a hobby or a sport, something in which they take immense pleasure (Levine, 1963).

Italians are frequently portrayed as joyful people with an operatic song on their lips. This is not completely accurate. They can also be rather somber, just as many of their operas end in death and tragedy. This dark side is emphasized through humor, which tends to be more insulting than witty. Humor generally implies the ability to detach oneself from the object of wit. However, the Italians tend to be passionate people who easily identify with what they are talking about.

Italians make up for this type of humor by analyzing everything around them through conversation. Talking is a great pastime for most Italians, who frequently meet in cafes to discuss the latest news. Privacy is frequently lacking in any Italian community, even though Italians say they mind their own business. Unlike the reserved Englishman, an Italian is apt to tell an acquaintance of a half hour's standing all about his or her financial status, family health problems, and details of current emotional attachments. The Italian love of conversation as a pastime usually limits the chances of something secret staying so for very long, and it is this love of conversation (and voice) that is intimately related to externalization, the fourth characteristic of the opera.

Externalization

Externalization refers specifically to the fact that feelings and emotions are so overwhelming that people must express them to others. It also refers to the assumption that the event is more important than the actions of one individual, which is consistent with the Italian reaction to catastrophes and uncertainty described previously. That is, the drama is of more significance to the viewers or community than to the individuals because of its symbolism and generality. This pattern of behavior is the opposite of the Anglo-Saxon mode, which emphasizes that people should control emotions and not express them or, as the British say, keep a stiff upper lip (see Chapter 17). At Italian funerals, for instance, there is no shame in showing emotions, and both women and men cry openly and profusely to express what they feel. Similarly a major victory such as a World Cup Championship is accompanied by excessive noise, large gatherings in piazzas, and communal festivities at which everyone talks excitedly and simultaneously. Although there will be some drinking, the Italians do not tend to emphasize this aspect of victory as much as do the English and U.S. Americans.

Given their emphasis on externalization, it is generally not wise to ask Italians: How do you feel? Unlike Anglo-Saxons, who will usually give a cursory reply, the Italians may well describe in minute detail all of their aches and pains, what the doctors have prescribed for them, and even the most intimate details of any operations they have experienced.

Because of the importance of drama in everyday life, Italians value the piazza as the center of every town and village. It is the stage on which people gather to share conversation and relate experiences. The actions that take place in the piazza are minor dramas of Italian life. Most people do not schedule meetings with others, but everyone knows that gatherings will occur at regular times at the piazza, usually around noon and at 5 or 6 p.m. after work, and it is easy to see old friends and acquaintances and make new ones. This pattern of strolling (*fare la passeggiate*) is in sharp contrast to the German *spatziergang*, which occurs primarily on Sunday afternoons. Even in Italian cities where there is no central piazza, it is well-known that certain avenues serve as substitutes for them, and the village-like behavior is replicated along them. On these avenues there are many outdoor cafes at which people meet and greet one another, and sometimes there are even small open-air areas with benches that are miniature replicas of the village piazza. As might be expected, Italy has far more bars and restaurants per capita than comparable European nations: 257 inhabitants per café and restaurant in Italy versus 451 for Britain, 795 for France, 558 for Germany, and 778 for Spain (Richard, 1995). An Italian doctoral dissertation has wedded the importance of externalization with changing cultural circumstances by suggesting that the large piazza is more descriptive of southern Italy whereas bars (and the adjoining small parks) are more descriptive of northern Italy (Venezia, 1997).

The View From the Piazza

Italians tend to be great spectators of life. The show at the piazza can be so engrossing that many people spend most of their lives just looking at it. Café tables are often strategically placed in such a way that nothing of importance will escape the leisurely drinker of espresso. A remarkable result of this pastime occurred when an old woman died at her window and 3 days passed before any of her neighbors thought that something might be wrong with the immobile figure.

Foreigners are frequently impressed by the fact that many Italians seem to be doing their jobs with whole-hearted dedication and enthusiasm. This does not mean that these Italians do everything with efficiency, speed, and thoroughness. Rather, they frequently complete their jobs with visible pleasure, as if work were not man's punishment. However, when the visitors look closely at the actions of Italians, they realize that many Italians have a theatrical quality that enhances but slightly distorts their actions.

In the opera the best example of externalization is the crowd scene. There are so many crowd scenes in Italian opera that some writers have identified them as one of its essential characteristics. Members of the crowd represent the chorus for the lead singers, and there is a dynamic interplay between the lead singers and the chorus. This interplay is analogous to the behavioral dynamics in a small village in which there is a problem and everyone will comment on it in the piazza.

There is little if any private life for most Italians. Everything of importance occurs in public or is at least discussed in public. There is no word for privacy in the Italian language, and information is widely shared. There are some regional differences, as northern Italians tend to be more reserved than southern Italians. However, once a person is perceived to be a member

of the community, it is assumed that he or she will externalize, at least to some degree, when in public.

Business confidentiality can be a problem in Italy. Everyone discusses secret business negotiations with friends and family as well as the press. Therefore leaks are common for most large business deals. The media in Italy are volatile and speculation-prone due to people's interest in their neighbors' activities. Hence ordinary business dramas become a theater with a large audience of spectators. Furthermore, to uncover corruption and tax evasion, the government has dramatically increased the use of wiretapping of phone conversations in recent years, which makes keeping secrets even more difficult. The Italian think tank Eurispes estimates that the government spent nearly $1.6 billion on nearly 200,000 phone call intercepts between 2000 and 2005 (Wilkinson, 2005).

La Bella Figura

We have already indicated that dressing is important to Italians, as it represents pageantry and spectacle in the form of *la bella figura*. Dressing is also an aspect of externalization, as it is an outward expression of the emotions that Italians feel and want to convey. Italians dress differently in public than at home at least in part for this reason. In the business environment clothing is well tailored and sophisticated. Through their clothing Italians externalize the feeling of confidence.

Many aspects of daily life yield endless opportunities for drama. A well-known example of externalization is Italian driving behavior. In the larger cities such as Rome and Naples, drivers blow their horns impatiently, swear at one another, gesture colorfully, and drive in a dramatic and seemingly reckless manner. To Italians, such behavior is normal because it allows them to communicate with others even when behind the wheel. Even when two drivers get out of their cars to confront one another, they rarely come to blows, although their gestures, body movements, shouts, and the torrent of words would lead the onlooker to the conclusion that blood will be spilled. The drama of the occasion is what gives Italians emotional satisfaction.

Even politics takes on a dramatic and entertaining edge, especially during elections. Television coverage of such events is said to have somewhat of a carnival atmosphere (Brint, 1989). Such an atmosphere reflects the Italian penchant for pageantry, voice, and externalization. Even though the Italian political system is changing radically, as discussed below, we can expect that such drama will continue to be part of the political process.

Feelings and emotions are expressed through direct communications and through subtleties in Italian culture. The Italian history of natural disasters and foreign invasions has created a fear of the unpredictable. This fear can be detected behind the Italians' peculiar passion for geometric patterns and symmetry that can be easily destroyed (Barzini, 1964).

Weddings are considered the highlights of life and constitute an excellent example of externalized behavior. In fact, the wedding scene is quite common in Italian opera. Italians often save for a lifetime to marry their daughters off in an appropriate manner. Guest lists frequently include the entire village. The wedding ritual is often something of a mini-opera, beginning with the bridal party traveling in open automobiles to the church, with relatives and

friends following. The success of the wedding ritual is judged by the number of cars, the size of the crowd, and the feast served. Parents are content to spend years of savings and even get into debt to correctly carry out the social obligations of a society that may, in the eyes of outsiders, be living at a subsistence level but that carries on ancient traditions with real satisfaction (Willey, 1984). Throughout the wedding ritual the emotions of sadness and joy are expressed by all. It is not uncommon for both the bride and her father to be crying while walking down the church aisle.

Family Ties

The family and the extended kinship group are the basic building blocks for externalization. Familial relationships tend to be close and emotional, and the behaviors found in the piazza are replicated within the family. The family is generally seen as one's greatest resource and protection against all troubles. For example, children are critically important, and normally everything is done for them, even to the extent of satisfying their smallest wishes. Parents often go without comforts to pamper their children and to see that they go to school and reach a higher rung on the social ladder. This attitude can be directly linked to the constant influx of foreigners who compete with the Italians for jobs, to rapidly changing governments, and to the overwhelming natural disasters that have characterized Italian history. Of course, externalization plays a part in this support, as the family views its children as public expressions of its values and lifestyles.

The Italians themselves see the irony and humor in having family relationships that seem to be excessive. A few years ago a best-selling book, *Mammoni* or "Mamma's Boys" was widely discussed in Italy, and there was even a segment about it on the U.S. TV news show, *60 Minutes*. It is estimated that 40% of Italians between the ages of 30 and 34 still live at home and males far outnumber females at a ratio of 2 to 1 (Peet, 2005). Some unmarried male Italians in this age group also live independently but come home for dinner every night. One mother ironed her son's clothes, including underwear, and shipped them to him weekly by bus; and one town was thinking about introducing a tax on unmarried males over the age of 25.

Furthermore, family connections are often extremely important for handling problems and getting ahead. Outside the family, official and legal authority is frequently considered hostile until proven otherwise. Closeness within the family is transferred to outside relationships and brings a personal edge to most social interactions. This helps to explain why Italians are so demonstrative and why men feel almost no hesitation to show affection to one another.

In the Italian business environment family contacts tend to be necessary to run a successful company. An example of the importance of contacts is the general lack of hiring policies. Hiring is usually accomplished through personal connections and recommendations. Many corporations select people not on the basis of their skills but on the basis of their relationship with employers and their families. Bond and Smith (1998) have reviewed national preferences for various selection techniques, and Italian business is distinctive in that the interview by itself is the preferred alternative, even though this method when used by itself has been shown to be the least effective of all techniques.

The family remains the center and stronghold of Italian life, despite all modern trends,

where the role of each member is understood and performed as elaborately as any Italian opera. Although men are the official leaders of the families while women are subordinate to them, the reality of family life is much more complex. The main character in the family, who might be compared to the lead tenor, is the father. He is in charge of the family's general affairs. But while he holds center stage, his wife is an equally important figure, like the lead soprano. Although the Italian father is the head of the family, the mother is its heart. While yielding authority to the father, she traditionally assumes total control of the emotional realm of the family. The mother usually manages the family in a subtle, almost imperceptible way; she soothes the father's feelings while avoiding open conflicts. However, the woman of the house frequently has the last unspoken word. The factors that determine the strength of the family are placed in the hands of women. Wives engineer appropriate and convenient marriages, keep track of distant relations, and see to it that everybody does the suitable thing, not for individual happiness but for the family as a whole. The fact that women form the predominant character of Italian life can be seen through many small signs. For example, popular songs frequently highlight the role of mothers, and in some years there are more songs devoted to mothers than to romance.

Gender Issues

However, Italy tends to be a man's world. When a child is born, the proud parents tie a blue ribbon to the door for a son, but only sometimes do not-quite-so-proud parents of a girl put out a pink ribbon. The principle of male superiority is less strictly enforced in the north than in the south. For example, in some Sicilian villages, unmarried women are supposed to sit indoors during the day when unchaperoned.

Divorce and abortion have recently been legalized in Italy. Legal abortion symbolizes the loosening of individual morals and the breaking of the hold of the Catholic Church over the family. In 1974 civil divorce became legal, but it seems to be more a symbol of social independence than anything else. Not many marriages have actually ended in divorce. For example, there are only 0.8 divorces per 1,000, whereas the comparable figure in the United States is 4.8, second only to Aruba's 5.3. The number of separated couples, however, has increased significantly.

Many Italians view divorce as unacceptable because it chips away at the foundation of the family and entire clans. Others argue that it has not increased in popularity due to the fact that, without husbands, most women would be in dire financial straits. This argument is losing merit as industrialization ushers women into the workforce. Divorce, however, is still viewed seriously. If a man leaves his wife, sometimes the ex-wife will move in with the husband's family while he is ostracized, especially in the South.

The family frequently extracts everybody's first loyalty. Italians raise their children to be mutually supportive and to contribute to the family. Separation from the family is generally not desired, expected, or easily accepted. Things that create conflict in Italian families may be sources of celebration in other cultures. Some normally joyful events that may cause operatic sadness are a job promotion that necessitates moving away from the family, acceptance into a prestigious university in a foreign land, and marriage. While these experiences may be sources

of personal growth for the individual, they are likely to be experienced negatively if they weaken the collective sense of family.

Many Italians view education and vocational training as secondary to the security, affection, and the sense of relatedness the family has to offer. Personal identity tends to be derived significantly from affiliation with the family, and also from one's occupation or personal success.

Family connections are extremely important for handling problems and getting ahead. Italians, not wanting to work for outsiders, often start their own family business. The business naturally adds to the solidarity of the family. Closeness within the family is transferred to some outside relationships and brings a personal edge to most social interactions. This helps to explain why Italians, like operatic singers, are emotionally passionate toward friends and extended family.

As noted previously, the north of Italy has been successful economically, and most of this success is due to the existence of small firms specializing in particular products. Moreover, these firms both compete and cooperate with one another. If one firm cannot honor an order, a neighboring firm will help it produce the product so that the commitment can be kept. At the same time firms will cut prices to move ahead of neighboring competitors. These types of close business relationships echo family and village patterns that are also expressed in the opera.

Personal Style

Sex for Italians, especially men, is seen as the essential life force (Newman, 1987). While honor is a quality all strive to achieve, virility and potency are still the basis on which many men are judged. This is confirmed by the fact that an adulterous wife is considered to be a direct reflection of her husband's manliness. For many Italians the ideal man is not necessarily intelligent or well off but rather of good character and physically and sexually strong.

Most Italians do not put much faith in what others say. Everyone is considered to be an outsider except members of the family. It is not surprising that Italians, living as they have always done with the insecurity and dangers of an unpredictable society, are among those who find their main refuge among their blood relatives. This overall fearful, suspicious attitude may be partially due to a quality on which Italians place high value, namely cleverness. Because of the constant change and struggle in the country, those who can survive through enterprise, cunning, imagination, and intelligence are held in high esteem by others around them. In other words, many Italians admire those who can create the most imaginative show. Minor deceptions, cleverly and subtly executed, are acceptable even if not necessary. Because everyone is trying to outsmart everyone else, the population as a whole is placed on the defensive. Visitors to Italy often comment on this feature of Italian life. For example, it is common practice to shortchange customers, sometimes significantly. If, however, the customer questions the transaction, the correct amount and profuse apologies will be offered immediately and without question.

While the family is the group that above all else dramatically influences the individual, another important group, the political party, can be the difference between employment and

unemployment. Italians move from group to group, feeling little remorse when doing so because they tend to be skeptical of all groups besides the family. Members of groups often create powerful coalitions that are used to gain power and influence. These subcultures, groups, and parties allow for intergroup bargaining to create coordination and cooperation between all involved.

Sometimes these powerful coalitions lead to widespread corruption. The worst example of corruption in Italy's history was exposed beginning in 1992 when a company in Milan refused to give a kickback, a regular business practice that is estimated to add 15% to 20% to the final price. However, in this instance public officials vigorously pursued various leads involving large numbers of prominent people. More than 1, 200 businesspeople were indicted and many served prison time, as did several Mafia members and two former prime ministers; some committed suicide in prison. While these and related activities seemed to weaken the Mafia, even more virulent and violent strains of crime became prominent in the south: the Camorra and the 'Ndranghera. There has been a backlash against this reform movement, even to the extent of limiting the use in Italian courts of evidence gathered abroad and decriminalizing convictions for false bookkeeping. Silvio Berlusconi, prime minister until 2007 and a well-known businessman, has had at least nine legal actions against him, and there are others still pending. He used his position as prime minister to change the laws so that he would be immune from prosecution.

Italians of many persuasions would like to see the emergence of a genuine two-party system that is normally associated with much less corruption. Still, the sense of family and coalition behavior is so strong in Italy that we can expect many of the behaviors described in this chapter to persist. For example, we can expect that many job referrals and recommendations will still be based at least in part on family connections, much more than in the United States.

Problematic Attitudes

Externalization also influences the management style of Italians. There is little delegation of authority or effective communication between the different levels of management in most Italian firms. Employees have little say about decisions concerning the company or about their own work. In fact, superiors are likely to cut off emotionally the ideas and suggestions of subordinates.

One final example of externalization is somewhat disturbing, as Italy is experiencing difficulty integrating the large number of legal and illegal immigrants flooding into the country, particularly those from the African nations of Morocco, Nigeria, Senegal, and Tunisia. The poorest Italians are most affected in that they feel that these immigrants are taking jobs away from them. There have been some disturbing events such as the burning of immigrants and the hanging of a 16-year-old immigrant. Many Italians are upset by this trend and, in true Italian fashion, have externalized it dramatically in newspapers, on television, and in the traditional piazza. Although such outbreaks of violence occur in many societies, these Italians are confronting the problem in an open manner involving everyone in the society, and solutions are gradually being implemented.

Externalization is directly related to the mixing and balancing of diverse elements in both

the opera and in the Italian society. Because the entire community or audience is involved in the unfolding of the drama, several issues and factors come into play that involve numerous individuals. It is not an accident that the Italians have not specialized in one-person stage shows or dramas. Thus Italy, while primarily stressing individualism, is oriented toward specific aspects of group behavior or collectivism. Although individuals might not give the country as a whole much consideration, they place great importance on local and regional affiliation. This is directly related to the next characteristic of the opera, the influence of soloists and the chorus.

Chorus and Soloists

When Italians created the opera about 1600, there were no soloists. The first great Italian composer, Claudio Monteverdi, basically used different parts of the chorus to express the ideas and emotions. However, singers vied with one another for the spotlight and gradually soloists became prominent. Today it is difficult to conceive of an opera without great solo performances, which may help to explain why Monteverdi's operas are so seldom performed. This tension and balance between the chorus and soloists epitomize the struggles between regions, as each region retains certain easily perceptible characteristics among its inhabitants, even if the major division is between the wealthier north and the poorer south. Most Italians define themselves by the town where they were born. These regional differences are similar to the chorus and soloists in operas. Soloists represent the regional differences in the culture whereas the chorus is the embodiment of the overall Italian culture. Still, in spite of the fact that there are distinct regional differences, most Italians retain the cultural characteristics described above.

The Italian word that expresses the idea of belonging first to a town, then to a region, and third to a nation is *campanilismo*, derived from *campanile*, which means "bell tower." It refers to the fact that people do not want to travel so far as to be out of sight of the piazza church steeple.

Because of industrialization northern Italians have had the benefit of a thriving economy and a relatively prosperous existence. In contrast, southern Italians, who have relied on farming for their livelihood, have tended to be poorer and less educated. The people from these two regions are similar in that they love life and enjoy creating the illusion of a show. However, the difference between the people from these two regions is that southerners tend to cling to past ways of living whereas many northerners look toward the future.

To most northerners, wealth is the way to ensure the defense and prosperity of the family and close friends over the long term. Northerners are perpetually trying to acquire wealth in its various forms. They want a job, a good job, and then a better job. They also want the scientific and technical knowledge that will assure them better paid employment and advancement. Many southerners, on the other hand, want above all to be obeyed, admired, respected, and envied. They want wealth, too, but frequently as an instrument to influence people. Southerners are preoccupied with commanding the respect of the audience throughout the many operas of life. Many southerners, be they wealthy or poor, want the gratitude of powerful friends and

relatives, the fear of their enemies, and the respect of everybody. Southerners seek wealth as a means of commanding obedience and respect from others (Barzini, 1964).

A Culture of Death

In the south the culture centers around death. The Italians worry that the operatic drama of life will fall apart when a family member dies. The experience of dying and the fear of not being able to react properly to such an event has forced southerners to create a complex strategy to enable them to face and conquer death (Willey, 1984). The strategy encompasses hundreds of beliefs, customs, and rituals. The purpose of these rituals is to reestablish contact between the living and the dead because, according to southern beliefs, the family includes both the living and the dead. Each family member has reciprocal rights and duties. The dead have to protect the living and the living have to keep alive the memory of the dead, and people tend to attach great value to these obligations. Thus, in the early 1980s a parish priest in one Calabrian village thought he would discourage the long local funeral processions by levying a special fee per kilometer on the family of the deceased. His bishop promptly transferred him to another part of Italy (Willey, 1984).

This distinction between north and south is easily found in Italian operas, which tend to depict the characteristics of one region or the other. For example, *Cavalleria Rusticana* by Pietro Mascagni represents a classic southern opera with its emphasis on humble folk, suspicion, and revenge. In contrast, Giuseppe Verdi's *Tosca* emphasizes the north, as it takes place in elegant urban settings in which important personages display more subtle and complex feelings, although no less passionate (and perhaps even more so) than those found among the southerners.

Education has been a major mechanism for bringing about the modernization of Italy and minimizing the regional differences. By diffusing the national culture through the teaching of one Italian language and by raising literacy levels, Italians have stressed cultural unity and deemphasized regionalism to a greater degree than in the past.

Different Ways of Doing Business

Although many of the differences between "the two Italys" have been defused and minimized through time, business dealings differ in the two regions. Working with people from northern Italy, a low-context subculture that emphasizes written rules and agreements, is much like dealing with U.S. Americans or Germans. To negotiate effectively with northern Italians essentially means communicating with them in a straightforward sophisticated manner. Social talk should be kept to a minimum to get down to business. When negotiating with people from southern Italy, a high-context subculture in which oral communication and subtle nuances are stressed, visitors must spend time establishing rapport with their counterparts. Long-term relationships are important to southern Italians and trust must be built up before business dealings become truly effective.

In spite of these subtle differences, most Italians use a collaborative style of negotiating in that they will continue a dialogue until everyone's needs are met. Part of this style is due to the

emotional nature of many Italians. Communication involves much more than words. The emotional nature of such Italians enables them to see past the words spoken to the emotions felt. This insight helps them empathize and understand the needs of those with whom they negotiate. Such aggressive yet emotional Italians want to please everyone, including themselves. Therefore, the collaborative style of negotiating is common throughout Italy.

Similar to the operatic importance of both the chorus and soloists, the regional differences combined with the overall Italian culture helped Italy gain economic strength during the 1970s and 1980s. This strength resided in the proliferation of small-scale commercial and industrial enterprises, usually family run. People whose families used to be southern farmers brought their deep-rooted traditions to the north. Some of these traditions and skills enabled many southerners to move their families from farming into the commercial market. The tradition of keeping ownership within the family, combined with the skills of managing a diverse product mix and willingness to work long hours, enabled the new entrepreneurs to compete effectively with their European neighbors. However, as noted earlier, in the modern era of globalization, such small firms face increasing competition from China and elsewhere and do not enjoy the scale of operations of large multinational corporations, which are becoming more and more common throughout the world.

Italy is facing major economic problems, and today its economy is only about 80% of the size of that of Great Britain, which it had overtaken in 1987; the populations of these two nations are very nearly equal in size. Some governments in villages and even large towns do not have the money to manage critical services. For example, in 2007 Naples experienced a garbage strike during which the high and extensive piles of garbage created a major health crisis. To maintain a leading role in the EU, Italy must change this situation.

Chorus and Culture

The characteristics of the chorus and soloists can also be applied to other aspects of Italian culture. Italians tend to be individualistic people, yet they place importance on the group. As we have seen, the family is the primary group that influences individuals. Whenever important decisions are made, the individual usually consults with family members to get their opinion and evaluation of the situation. Although the family's opinion is important, the final evaluation is made by the individual. This is similar to the relationship between the chorus and soloists in the opera. The chorus frequently gives the soloists the facts and opinions about the drama unfolding on stage, yet the soloists are the ones who dramatically decide how to handle the peril or situation, even when such decisions lead to disaster and tragedy.

The influence of the group is also felt in the business environment. In business meetings people will externalize their feelings and opinions about a subject. They will listen to everyone's ideas and freely give their own opinions. Business meetings tend to be productive in Italy due to the openness displayed by everyone. However, like the chorus and soloist, the decisions coming out of a meeting are frequently made by one or two dominant or domineering people. In spite of the influence of the group, Italians tend to be aggressive and materialistic individualists due to their bias toward spectacle and externalization.

Furthermore, the vocal sections of the chorus are directly comparable to the many regional

variations of the Italian language. Although each section is important to the harmony of the chorus, each has its own melody. The Italian history of invasions has produced many dialects, each the product of the particular regional invader. The language of Italy consists of both local dialects and Italian, a derivative of the Tuscan language. Although linguistic variations are disappearing to some extent due to the homogenizing effects of television and telecommunications, Italians still cling to the notion of having their own regional dialect.

In the opera there is inherent inequity in the amount of fame given to each of the soloists. The same is true in the Italian economy. Today poverty still exists in some areas, particularly in the south. While Italian industry has been successful since the end of World War II, success is not shared equally by everyone. Because northern companies believe there is a difference in the northern and southern work ethic, they are reluctant to locate branches in the south. The large migration of workers from the south to the north has left behind people who are not willing to give up customs and traditions that have been followed since early European civilization. Still, although the Italian culture consists of many regional subcultures, the modernization of Italy has begun to unify these subcultures. The Italian culture is continuously changing to one where the melody of the regional soloists blends together into a harmonic chorus.

In this chapter we have not explicitly treated the Italian orientation toward time, space, and the other culture-general concepts (see Chapter 1). As the discussion of the piazza suggests, Italians tend to be more polychronic than monochronic, performing many activities simultaneously. In Geert Hofstede's (1991) study of the cultural values of 53 countries, Italy clusters with those countries emphasizing a large power distance between groups in society, that is, Italians tend to accept the fact that some groups are and perhaps should be more powerful than others, and they act accordingly. The GLOBE study (House et al., 2004) confirms this feature of Italian life in the daily practices that take place. Italians also try to avoid risk and uncertainty in everyday life, preferring friends over strangers and familiar over new or strange situations, as their behavior in the piazza and externalization would confirm. Although the family and kinship are important, Italians tend to cluster with those countries that are more accepting of individualism and aggressive, materialistic behavior, all of which reflect their externalized bias.

This, then, is Italy. It is still a grand and larger-than-life society whose citizens love pageantry and spectacle, emphasize a range of voices in everyday life, externalize emotions and feelings, and feel a commitment to the town and region of the country in which they were born. Italians have had a difficult history. The institutions have changed, rulers have come and gone, and people have to survive—and do—thanks to their personal, unofficial relationships. In Italy life is the theater, each act carefully played out for everyone to witness. From this perspective the opera is not only helpful but possibly essential for understanding Italian behavior and culture.