Il Pesceballo and Francis James Child

Due in part to its derivative nature and pastiche form, Il Pesceballo is a virtually unknown “opera.” Composed in the mid-nineteenth century—with music by the unlikely “Maestro Rossibelli-Donimozarti” and an Italian libretto by Francis James Child, Harvard University’s first Professor of English—the work seems only to have been performed five times: twice in a private home in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and three times in Boston’s Chickering Hall. [There were two revival performances in August 2008 in Bloomington, Indiana.]

When he created Il Pesceballo in the 1850s, Francis James Child was following a musical tradition called pasticcio that dated from the seventeenth century. Indulged in by such composers as Vivaldi, Handel, Gluck, Mozart, and Haydn, this process of piecing together various arias in a patchwork or medley was said to have developed as an expediency in response to rising demand for new operas. An early eighteenth-century “satirical recipe” for making a pasticcio offers a foretaste of what Child did in making his:

> Pick out about an hundred Italian Airs from several Authors, good, or bad, it signifies nothing. Among these, make use of fifty five, or fifty six, of such as please your Fancy best, and Marshall’em in the manner you think most convenient. When this is done, you must employ a Poet to write some English words, the Airs of which are to be adapted to the Italian Musick. In the next place you must agree with some Composer to provide the Recitative ... [in original] When this is done, you must make a Bargain with some Mungril Italian Poet to translate the Part of the English that is to be Perform’d in Italian, and then deliver it into the Hands of some Amanuensis, that understands Musick better than your self, to Transcribe the Score, and the Parts. (Price)

Initially, the term pasticcio was used somewhat pejoratively, but by the second half of the eighteenth century the practice had become respectable. A century later, in Child’s day, the pasticcio had left the opera house and had no doubt lost some of its prestige.

Child is certainly remembered more for compiling the ballads familiarly referred to as “Child ballads” than he is for authoring the libretto to a little-performed pastiche opera. His collection of ballads, that is, stories told in song, was immortalized as The English and Scottish Popular Ballads, which was published as a multi-volume set between 1882 and 1898. Long considered one of the hegemonic works on vernacular literature, and containing 305 ballad texts in multiple versions, this edition has witnessed a twenty-first-century revival: a reprint version is in process by Loomis House and an important digital re-publication has been undertaken by ESPB Publishing, LTD and Heritage Muse™ Inc.

Whether the draft of the libretto was written as an exercise toward improving his Italian or out of his enthusiasm for opera (in the late 1840s he wrote of the value of hearing and seeing a good opera twice over), surely Child’s trip to Italy in the spring of 1851 played an
important part in instigating this work. That trip, part of an almost two-year post-graduate experience, firmly established his lifelong delight in Italian language, literature, and art, and it clearly built upon his book knowledge of the classical texts and languages of antiquity he had been immersed in during his years at Boston’s Latin High School and at Harvard College (class of 1846). His visit to Padua no doubt suggested that locale as the geographical setting for his operatic foray, though at the moment of his visit the frescoes of Giotto at the Cappella degli Scrovegni were the main attraction. A number of things probably called Padua to his mind when he was toying with the idea of a comic opera: on his brief visit, he had visited the newly established Pedrocchi, a large space for eating, talking, reading, and drinking wine or coffee. Not many steps away, in the very center of town, he could not have missed the old entrance to the famous university, dating from the thirteenth century, where Galileo had taught mathematics. What better setting, then, for an opera centered on an eating establishment, where he himself had run into a rascally waiter, and where students would have been present; and what better locale than Italy for his jeu.

Letters suggest that he began to play with the libretto in 1854, working with Grace Sedgwick, a relative of his college classmate Ellery Sedgwick and his sister Elizabeth (who later became Child’s wife). Writing Charles Eliot Norton, another Harvard classmate and close friend who became in time an art historian and Harvard professor, Child said about Il Pesceballa, “If you can make out the subject from the title you are at liberty to do so” (13 August 1854). “The Fish-Ball” had definite resonances for the Harvard crowd; it refers to the story of an impecunious student, returning to school, desperately hungry, with only enough money after the journey to purchase half an order of fishballs—that is, one—but having the audacity to ask for bread to accompany it! The origins of the song/legend are murky, but in Child’s day it was presumed by many that the impoverished student was George Lane (a peer who would later become Professor of Latin), or alternately that Lane had written it about a Professor Lovering. Lane’s son Gardiner, writing Child’s son-in-law G. C. Scoggin on 17 October 1911, suggested the legendary indeterminacy of the account:

The “Lone Fishball” is supposed to be historical and based upon a personal experience. The incident is said to have happened to Professor Lovering; but whether it actually did happen to him or not, I don’t know. The Lovering family, I believe, deny that this is the fact, and my father was always somewhat mysterious as to who the person actually was who tried to buy the lone fishball.

A handwritten note in a copy of the 1862 Riverside edition of the opera held at the Massachusetts Historical Society adds a bit more confusion. It states that the opera was “written by Prof Benjamin Apthorp Gould, Francis J. Child etc for one of their entertainments at ‘Clover Den’ their name for their Batchelor Quarters in Follen Street Cambridge—as a joke against Prof Joseph Levering who found himself away from home stranded without sufficient money.” A bit later, in 1896, the Boston publication Time and the Hour reported that “Prof Lovering ate, Prof Lang versified, Prof Child Italianized and Prof Lowell doggereled the immortal lone Fish ball.” Whatever its origins, the song was included in the college songbooks of the nineteenth century and was (according to an e-list posting) performed at a funeral as recently as late 2003; earlier, Josh White transmogrified it in a blues version called “One Meat Ball.” Since we seldom “see” the origins of such
stories, I suspect that Child and his classmates merely localized the tale; and their version, in turn, provided the outline for the libretto.

Child’s account adds various amusing twists to make the story more operatic: the padrona, the restaurant owner, has been longing for love—or support and help—which is found in the person of the destitute stranger who turns out (of course) to be a count. After his figurative unmasking, the padrona provides free food and drink for all assembled—including, no doubt, full orders of fishballs, bread included.

Inasmuch as Child was clearly familiar with the legend and the song, he was also a follower of opera, admitting in one letter to Charles Guild, also Harvard class of 1846, that he had heard/seen *Norma* some five times (letter of 29 April 1847, MHS) and that he was “nearly sick of music or rather with music and the irresistible [sic] attraction [that] draws me away from all my duties.” The operatic selections chosen for his opera include, not surprisingly, “Guerra! guerra!” and “Meco all’ altar” from Bellini’s *Norma*. And the other selections reflect his own taste, chosen from operas he knew well and loved: works by Donizetti, Mozart, and Rossini in addition to Bellini (thus the composer credit to “Rossibelli-Donimozarti”). Child crafted his Italian libretto to accompany the following arias:

“La dolce aurora,” *Moses in Egypt*, G. Rossini  (Scene I)
“Ecco ridente il cielo,” *The Barber of Seville*, G. Rossini  (Scene II)
“Non più mesta,” *La Cenerentola*, G. Rossini  (Scene IV)
“La dove prende l’amor recendo,” *The Magic Flute*, W. A. Mozart  (Scene V)
“Di pescatore,” *Lucrezia Borgia*, G. Donizetti  (Scene VI)
“The Lay of the One Fish Ball”  (Scene VII)
“Madamina,” *Don Giovanni*, W. A. Mozart  (Scene VII)
“Guerra! guerra!” *Norma*, V. Bellini  (Scene VIII)
“O sole più ratto,” *Lucia di Lammermoor*, G. Donizetti  (Scene IX)
“Meco all’ altar,” *Norma*, V. Bellini  (Scene X)
“Bando, bando a sitriste immagini,” *Lucrezia Borgia*, G. Donizetti  (Scene X)
“Guai se ti sfugge un moto,” *Lucrezia Borgia*, G. Donizetti  (Scene X)
“Vieni, ah! vieni,” *La Favorita*, G. Donizetti  (Scene XI)

(Letters late in life to Emily Tuckerman reveal his continued interest in opera, but not in the Wagnerian sort that she was in the process of hearing: “do not ask me to go to the trilogy—Niebelungen, nie gelungen!” He would prefer, he said “La Sonnambula” and wrote praising Cherubini’s *Requiem Mass*).

In fact, the musical materials selected for Child’s operatic *jeu* were chosen from the still-standard repertoire; they no doubt reflect not only Child’s musical taste, but also the tastes of many nineteenth-century Cambridge- and Boston-dwellers. Of course, the wedding of his comic libretto to these musical selections provided some of the humor of the performances. And they had to be connected by newly penned recitatives and dialogues. Received tradition (manuscript and print, presumably oral as well) suggested that these materials were written by Harvard professor John Knowles Paine—actually the first professor of music in an American university, an organist and composer of large-scale works. If so, the recitatives and interludes were composed by a young Paine, newly returned from years of study in Germany. Undoubtedly, he fell in with Child’s plan for a
musical jeu and in fact perpetrated another several years later with “a setting—for male chorus with bass solo—of the testimonial advertisement of a popular remedy of the day, ‘Radway’s Ready Relief’” (M. A. deWolfe Howe, “John Knowles Paine”). It was thought that the Paine materials for Il Pesceballo had been lost—that Child had loaned the music, but forgot to whom, and never got it back:

The brief interludes were arranged by Child’s friend, Professor Paine.

In a letter from Professor G. C. Scoggin, of the University of Missouri, March 2, 1912, he points out a fact we have not seen stated elsewhere: “You may know that the original score was long ago loaned to friends for a private rehearsal and was never returned. Meanwhile dear Mr. Child had forgotten to whom he had entrusted it!” This, we presume, settles the fate of the musical arrangement. (Mosher, ed. Il Pesceballo, 45)

As it turns out, the recitatives and interludes were given to Harvard College Library by Child’s daughter Sue in 1945 (as Mrs. Gilbert Scoggin, she was also the wife of the writer of the very definitive statement above, dated 1912). Sometime, then, between 1912 and 1945, the Scoggins acquired the originals, no doubt as part of Professor Scoggin’s research on the life and creative work of a father-in-law whom he probably never knew (see in particular, Scoggin). In due time, the music materials were gifted to Harvard where today they can be seen at the Houghton Library (MS Mus 240); they had been listed (with slightly erroneous information) in Barbara Wolff’s Music Manuscripts at Harvard.

The music manuscript offers some hints about the actual performances. The music is scored for the Italian libretto, that is, Child’s original; it was never intended to be sung to the free English translation made by Child’s good friend and colleague James Russell Lowell as a humorous aid for audiences. And it is most likely that the opera was sung with piano accompaniment with continuo minimally indicated for the recitatives. It is probable that the manuscript was prepared in two stages—first, for the original parlour performances, with additional copies made later by a Mr. Ribas, at the request of J.C.D. Parker, for the now expanded chorus. Parker, like Child, had attended the Boston Latin School and Harvard College (class of 1848), and was a composer, an organist (Trinity Church), and a teacher (New England Conservatory). He directed the performances at the Chickering Hall; thus, his request for additional copies on a blank page in the music manuscript. The musical score also indicates that the original one act format in the libretto was changed to two acts for the formal performances (Act I: Scenes 1-6; Act II: Scenes 7-11)—at least for those in the Chickering Hall. From time to time, the score also marks certain shifts in action and music—referencing transitions to the integral operatic selections by noting “scene changes” or “segue.” Perhaps the operatic selections as well as the musical interludes and recitatives had a somewhat improvised quality in performance.

The performances took place in 1862 and 1864, in a private home in Cambridge—that of Judge and Mrs. (Bessie) Parsons—and then at Chickering Hall in Boston, the showroom of the Chickering pianos and a frequent location for concerts. In each instance Child was centrally involved, directing, selecting the participants, and serving as prompter (he was even stage manager for the domestic production). Bertha Langmaid, daughter of one of the principals, recorded her own father’s memories of the production in a letter to Scoggin. The tenor, that is, the impecunious student, was to begin with the recitative before moving
on to the Serenade from *The Barber of Seville*, but he forgot: Child closed the curtain in order to prompt him to get things on track. This was clearly an under-rehearsed parlour performance.

Child’s account records suggest that he also took on the role of business manager, noting all the expenses involved in the production, including the printing of the libretto in Italian and in the English of Lowell’s loose translation (both were sold). In his inimitable and difficult-to-decipher hand, Child kept a list of those who purchased tickets; they included Agassiz, Norton, Paine, Lowell, Ashbrunner, Dixwell, Houghton, Guild, Peirce, Sedgwick—names familiar in the Harvard/Cambridge milieu.

Several letters describe Child’s approach to gathering singers for the performance, individuals with whom he was already familiar, being himself a regular on the local concert scene. The one below, dated 1 November 1861, clearly comes from an early planning stage. It also suggests that the reason for the performance was not his own pride in his work—far from it—but rather his desire to do something concrete in support of the war effort, that is the War Between the States, then underway:

> My dear Mr Underwood  
> We have a plan for a little fun, which is to help raise some money for the Sanitary Commission & may therefore be lawfully indulged in. It is proposed to have a small opera (in Italian) of three characters & a chorus. The subject is the now well known story of the Fishball. Signor Langsmaid will take the Tenor—some Cambridge lady the soprano—as usual you to assume the basso. Mrs Norton has offered us her house for the theatre. There will be some trouble no doubt attending the rehearsals which ought to be three or four to have things go off well. Mr Hover will conduct the music. Your part would include besides Recitative the Catalogue song from *Don Juan*, an air from *Lucrezia* of which I know not the name, the Trio from *Lucrezia* “Guai se ti sfigge un moto” and an air from *Favorita*.  
> We mean to begin as soon as we have secured you & the soprano.  
> Please say that you will accept.  
> Yours faithfully,  
> F. J. Child  

In a later letter to the same performer, now referred to as Signore Sottobosco, and hypothetically dated 1863, Child reported that they were aiming for the Chickering “room” production in April, wanted more tenors and members for the chorus, and hoped that Underwood would help identify possible participants. He thought that one rehearsal would work. And then, he signed the letter “just one fishball”!

George Lyman Kittredge, once Child’s student and later his colleague, friend, and finally literary executor, wrote Scoggin in 1917 that Child had told him that the only thing worth remembering about *Il Pesceballo* was Lowell’s English translation of the libretto. And indeed the very free translation is attractive. For example, the catalogue accounting of the Bill of Fare, sung to the aria “Madamina” from *Don Giovanni*, was rendered thus:

> Soup, with nothing, twenty coppers,  
> Roast spring-chicken, three-and-nine,  
> Ditto biled, (but then they’re whoppers!)

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Soup, with nothing, twenty coppers,  
Roast spring-chicken, three-and-nine,  
Ditto biled, (but then they're whoppers!)
Fish-balls, luscious, two a dime,
Two a dime, sir, hot and prime, sir,
Fried codfish-balls, two a dime!
There’s the bill, and cash procures ye
Any viand that allures ye:—
Cutlet, pigeon, woodcock, widgeon,
Canvas-backs, if you’re a painter,
Plover, rice-birds, (they’re your nice birds!)
And, to cut it short, there ain’t a
Thing but you can play the lord in,
If you’ve got the brads accordin’.
Wines? We get ’em right from Jersey,—
Coffee? Our own beans we raise, sir;—
Ices? ’Cept we warmed ’em,—mercy,—
Freeze your tongue too stiff to praise, sir!
Best of all, though, ’s the fish-ball, though,
We have made ’em all the fashion;
Come to try ’em as we fry ’em,—
*Presto!* liking turns to passion!
There we carry off the banner,
’Taint so easy, neither, that ain’t,—
But, you see, we’ve got a patent,—
Do ’em in the Cape Cod manner,—
That’s the way to make ’em flavorful!
Fried in butter, tongue can’t utter
How they’re brown, and crisp, and savorous!

Lowell and Child were extremely good friends: Child valued his creative work, they enjoyed a mutual appreciation of balladry, and they commiserated with one another over their common enemy, gout. Lowell was clearly always willing to enter into intellectual, artistic, poetic play with his friend and colleague, providing a decidedly New England flavour in his translation of the libretto. And in more than one instance Lowell helped to advance Child’s ballad research when he was Ambassador to the Court of St. James (he was earlier Ambassador in Spain and was, of course, Professor of French and Spanish at Harvard, following H. W. Longfellow).

Perhaps the life of *Il Pesceballo* has been more long-lasting in publication than in performance: several reprint editions were made, with the 1899 Caxton Club publication being a notable example. It actually reproduced Charles Eliot Norton’s daughter’s copy of the original publication, which included Child’s autograph notation of the operatic selections he had chosen. Ed Cray of the University of Southern California kindly sent me Xeroxes of several letters from Norton to Charles L. Hutchinson (Chicago financier and philanthropist and one of the founders of the Art Institute, the latter perhaps explaining his friendship/acquaintance with Norton), then president of the Caxton Club, agreeing to the use of the Norton copy and subsequently requesting its return. The rareness of the printing—210 copies, of which 207 were on “American hand-made paper” and three “on Japanese vellum”—contributed to their being collector’s items. By 1950, a Dr. Herman T. Radin was congratulated by M. A. DeWolfe Howe (a student of Child’s and editor of the correspondence of Child and Lowell [with G. W. Cottrell, Jr.], as well as Child’s letters to
Emily Tuckerman) on his “good fortune in obtaining a copy.” A 1909 article in The Nation called “News for Bibliophiles” suggested that copies were valued by collectors of the materials of James Russell Lowell, mentioned three editions, and explained how to identify them. In 1901, the 1862 first editions were going for $140. By 1909, the price had fallen to $60! That, however, does not seem to have kept others from reprinting the work. Thomas Mosher, music publisher, corresponded with G. C. Scoggin about his own plan for an edition, indicating that he had found a copy of the original playbill and was doing research on the original poem, Lane’s involvement, and so on. Mosher actually printed Il Pesceballo twice, once in 1911 in The Bibolot; a reprint of poetry and prose for book lovers, chosen in part from scarce editions and sources not generally known (337-409) and as a freestanding publication in 1912 as Il Pesceballo, Opera in One Act by Francis James Child and James Russell Lowell in fifty copies. The work lives on, then, as a bibliographic prize and as a by-word for cognoscenti.

When it was performed, however, it was—as Child made clear to Langmaid—fun with a purpose, and that purpose was to support the war effort. Child had a long history of charitable giving; his account books record his donations to beggars during his first European visit, and he was always aware of the plights of others. The war effort touched him enormously: he knew many people who were in the war and had taught a number as well; further, he was aware that he could not enlist due to his family responsibilities, age, and personal health. How then to show, materially, his support? At Harvard College he was instrumental in remembering on Memorial Tablets those who had sacrificed their lives; Child worked to make the list and have its members honoured at Commencement or Class Day celebrations. Additionally, he put together a small booklet, War-Songs for Freemen, dedicated to the Army of the United States. The proceeds from the sale (and perhaps performances) were to go for copies for the soldiers. And the book included quotations justifying battle and the soldiers’ involvements—for the sake of unity. Thus, the production of Il Pesceballo was very much a part of his activity, his life, his academic approach to the national crisis. Proceeds from the performance at the Parsons’ house were given to the Sanitary Commission, a network of private hospitals set up during the Civil War. The Chickering Hall performances on May 10, 12, and 14 of 1864 raised $1163, which was given to Edward Everett for the East Tennessee Fund (Mosher) in support of a group of “isolated unionists in East Tennessee” (Cockrell xv).

The writing and production of Il Pesceballo were in other ways congruent with Francis James Child’s life: the opera’s very structure, a piecing together of various musical selections, approximated what he did in his academic life, taking texts and putting them together in new ways. In fact, he had told his college classmate (later brother-in-law) Ellery Sedgwick that collections were a “great temptation” (23 May 1872, MHS). Pastiche was Child’s preferred mode of creativity. And support for music, acquisition of knowledge of it, was a conscious part of his life.

In the years immediately after his graduation from Harvard and before he had become a Professor (1851), he purchased a piano and took lessons; he went often to the opera. This effort to become musically literate and aware no doubt derived from the fact that he had not received much musical background in his natal environment or in the curriculums of
various educational institutions. He must have perceived music, however, as something that he should learn about, a facility he should acquire to enter the social milieu he anticipated. And it is clear that he was aesthetically attracted to it. Music and stimulating conversation figured in the life of Shady Hill, the Norton house, which became almost his second home. In the years between his return from Europe (1851) and his marriage (1860), he became “impresario,” arranging concerts on a yearly basis, managing the subscriptions and accounts himself. Lists of subscribers can be found in his account books, including familiar names (Dixwell, Ashbrunner, Norton, Dana, Lowell, Gray, Eliot, Felton) that hint at the cultural/social milieu of Cambridge in the second half of the nineteenth century. By arranging these concerts, Child surely made the acquaintance of the community’s musicians, including some of the very performers he called on to participate in *Il Peseballo*. Certainly those musicians and his own acquired musical knowledge and taste prepared him for selecting the music for a musical memorial he arranged in 1892 in memory of James Russell Lowell. He had described what he was planning in December of 1891 in a letter to Emily Tuckerman:

> The 22nd of February I am planning to have a solemn music in the afternoon in memory of J. R. L. There will perhaps be a choir of 50 boys, besides a fine choir of men’s voices. So far I have chosen the most exquisite of Cherubini’s Requiems, with the Kyrie pertaining to the same mass, a very beautiful Sanctus of Gounod, and perhaps Handel’s famous Largo (with proper words). (*A Scholar’s Letters to a Young Lady*, 117)

Early in February, Child sent her “the whole programme, as we have it now, fixed” (119).

- Requiem—Cherubini—C Minor Mass.
- Miserere—Allegri (part).
- Pie Jesu, Agnus Dei, Cherubini—D Minor Mass.
- Palestrina, Omnes amici.
- Mendelssohn—Beati mortui.
- Christopher Bach—Motet.
- Gounod—Sanctus.
- Mendelssohn—Periti autem.
- Schubert—Great is Jehovah. (*A Scholar’s Letters to a Young Lady*, 119)

*Il Peseballo*, then, derives from an interesting context—nineteenth-century Cambridge; music-loving, concerned citizens; one man’s lived experience. As such it offers a glimpse of artistic taste and provides evidence of art in the service of national events. And, no doubt, its performance provided a humorous night at the opera, for a good cause.

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