

Puppet theatre in Italy

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Many puppet traditions can be traced back to Italy. For geographical, social, historical and political reasons Italy includes some of the poorest regions of Europe. Emigration has always been endemic. Amongst those leaving Italy, whether on a seasonal or more permanent basis, were entertainers. The actors of the *Commedia dell'Arte* found they could earn more money abroad, whether in France, Spain, England, the German states or even Russia. Some of these brought puppets with them. By the mid seventeenth century puppet showmen with their companies were travelling with marionette performances and these were often called after the main figure, *Pulcinella*. Glove puppet players belonged more to the ranks of street entertainers, and travelled with a rudimentary stage and a few puppets. The most famous of these was Giovanni Piccini of Piacenza, who probably reached England around 1780 and became the “father” of the English *Punch and Judy* show. By the nineteenth century, showmen were crossing the Atlantic Ocean with increasing frequency, particularly visiting South America.

In Classical times there are plenty of references to show that puppets were familiar to people in Italy. It is highly likely that medieval clerics used marionettes as a means of teaching the scriptures, but that, like the mystery plays, these passed rapidly into the hands of popular entertainers and soon became secularised. There is also evidence of simple street glove-puppet shows. Until unification in 1861, Italy was a series of states, most ruled or

controlled by different foreign powers, and even the development of a single Italian language spoken by the entire population is a comparatively recent phenomenon. Just as there was a myriad of dialects (reflected constantly on the puppet stage), there was a number of different puppet traditions. By the sixteenth century puppets began to appear, especially in Naples, as an adjunct to the activities of charlatans. A performance of a short farce with puppets, almost inevitably including a fight between the figures, battering each other with sticks, was employed as a lively means of attracting a crowd who might then be persuaded to buy whatever medicines or potions the charlatan was offering. A special squeaky voice has been associated with glove puppets (and sometimes marionettes) from an early time. Paolo Minucci in his 1688 commentary on Lorenzo Lippi's parody of the *Genusalemme Liberata*, *Malmantile racquistato* speaks of 'un certo fischio' to make puppets speak. This is the 'pivetta' or swazzle, still much in use today with both Pulcinella and Punch performers, a small device placed in the mouth that works to a similar principle to the reed of a musical instrument and deforms the voice when the performer speaks through it.

Marionettes were associated with music and dancing from the start, perhaps because, as jointed figures they can be associated with jiggling dolls. Unlike the jiggling doll, the marionette is directly controlled from above by means of a rod attached to the head and a couple of strings to work the hands. Possibly the first mention of marionettes in Italy is in Girolamo Cardano's treatise *De rerum varietate* of 1557: For I saw many others that were moved with several strings, and these were sometime tense and sometimes slackened, but there is nothing strange about that. Moreover this was interesting because the dances and movements went in time to the music.¹¹

Much information about puppet activity in Rome is provided by the seventeenth-century theologian, Gian Domenico Ottonelli, in his treatise *Della christiana moderazione del teatro. Libro detto l' ammonizione a' recitanti, per avisare ogni Christiano a moderarsi da gli eccessi nel recitare*.¹² He describes a glove-puppet stage and its figures:

For this purpose some appear on a platform and appear inside a simulated castle of cloth. Jugglers with various 'fantocci', known as 'burattini', that is little figures, which they make gesture and speak with great force so as to provoke

¹¹ Book XII 'De artificii humilioribus', ch. LXIII. The first part of the paragraph describes two Sicilians with their planchette puppets. Quoted in *Burattini e marionette*, 1980, p.14

¹² Florence, Bonardi, 1652. The relevant sections are reproduced in Cipolla and Moretti, *Commedianti figurati*, 2003, p.23-38.

delight and laughter amongst the spectators. This, when it is carried on without obscenity, remains within the terms of a curious, pleasant even if idle form of popular and plebeian amusement. But when crude words are heard or immoral things are shown, as unfortunately often happens, then the burattini and their booth (castello) serve the devil of Hell to destroy many souls, which is a great offence against the Creator; and the Juggler and Ciarlatano is a shameful and infamous minister of immorality and a means of eternal damnation.¹³

Ottonelli also describes performers on the piazzas using both marionettes and shadow figures to tell a story or put over a dramatic action. He refers to such figures as ‘pupazzi’, and speaks of two types of show: those in which the figures (especially the shadow ones) do not speak but act to accompany a story presented by a showman and those in which the puppets themselves are substitutes for human actors in a dramatic action.

Ottonelli provides further details of the stage and the marionettes with their control rod to the head. He comments on their ability to dance and the use of a musical accompaniment of a violin or guitar and mentions one company with more than one hundred figures that performed plays at a certain time of year (presumably Carnival). One performer spoke for all the characters, whilst another worked all the figures with the help of an assistant. Two others were responsible for the scene changes, an indication of the close parallel between the marionette stage and that for live actors.

According to Ottonelli the marionette stage used for street performances was at about the height of a man’s chest from the ground, with an opening two palms high (about eighteen inches), a stage of the same depth, and about two ells (braccia) wide. It was illuminated by a multitude of little lights, above and below (which would have made evening performances possible), and in front of it was a mesh of wires.¹⁴ A travelling puppet stage remarkably similar to that described by Ottonelli, is that of the Bonecos de Sto Aleixo in Portugal, which even has a double screen of fine strings stretched in front of the proscenium opening, and corresponding to the wire mesh mentioned by Ottonelli.

The idea of using artificial figures to animate the scenic concepts of the baroque theatre can be found with Sebastiano Serlio in book 2, chapter

¹³ Ottonelli, p.437. Reproduced by Cipolla and Moretti, *Commedianti figurati...*, 2003, p.31. Cali, 2002, p.69, indicates that this seems to be the first time that ‘burattino’ is used in the sense of puppet.

¹⁴ Ottonelli’s description is quoted by Cipolla and Moretti, *Commedianti figurati*, 2003, p.35.

III, of *De Architectura* (1545). Serlio advocated flat figures that could appear further back on the stage within the perspective scene, in front of which the live actors appeared. They would both animate the scene and also be of a suitable scale to contribute to the illusion of depth. By the seventeenth century members of the aristocracy and princes of the church began to have their own private puppet theatres to present miniaturized operas with all the wonders of baroque. Puppets could also be an acceptable way of bypassing the frequent Church objections to live actors. In Rome in the 1680s, Filippo Acciaiuoli created a puppet theatre, using flat figures operated from underneath and which could make a number of gestures by means of wires and a simple mechanism. At the San Moïse Theatre in Venice between 1682 and 1684 a company, probably organised by Acciaiuoli, performed a series of operas for which he had written the libretti. These were performed by figures of wood, almost certainly marionettes, in a paying public theatre.¹⁵

The Fiano, with Cassandrino as the comic figure, often presented parodies of operas with elaborate scenery, such as Rossini's *L'Italiana in Algeri* (whose title was modified to "L'Italiano" to satisfy the censors).

The more popular audiences in Rome went to one of the theatres on or near the Piazza Navona, notably the Ornani (later Emiliani), or else to those in the populous Trastevere district. The theatres, which had disappeared by the end of the century, presented rod marionettes in armour, generally referred to as pupi, and regaled audiences with a heroic repertoire, generally referred to as "cavalleresche" or "guerresche", based mainly on the cycles of legends associated with Carlo Magno. These had been passed down through the writing of Ariosto, Boiardo and Pulci, and were source material for street street-tellers or "contastorie" (known as "rinaldi" in Naples, after the popular hero Rinaldo). Like the modern television "soap" these went on night after night for many episodes and corresponded to what might be called a Brechtian rather than an Aristotelian form of theatre.

In Naples and in Sicily a painted sheet or "cartellone" was hung outside the theatre itself with a picture indicating the episode of the day. In Palermo it was quite common for a "cartellone" to be painted on cloth which might be divided into six or eight sections. A small sign "oggi" (today) might be attached to indicate the relevant episode. In Catania the "cartellone" were

¹⁵ A few years later, Cardinal Ottoboni, vice-chancellor of the Roman Catholic Church, converted a part of the Cancellaria palace in Rome for private performances of operas (some of them written by himself). This was probably also a theatre with figures worked from below, like those of Acciaiuoli. Filippo Juvarra, one of the greatest scene-painters and architects of the early eighteenth century, worked on this for him.

much larger, painted on wrapping paper, and each represented only a single episode. The main subject was battles between Christians and Saracens, and, in fact this type of puppet theatre was an extension of the general Mediterranean folk tradition of Moors and Christians. The Saracens might be noted for their cruelty, but the most hated character was Gano di Magonza, the traitor who eventually caused the destruction of Carl Magno's paladins at Roncisvalle. In Rome and Naples, and originally in Sicily, Pulcinella played a comic squire to the heroic figures of Orlando or Rinaldo, Paladins of Carlo Magno.¹⁶

Some complete texts survive but most "pupari" (as the puppeteers were called in the South) worked from a scenario in the same way as the actors of the Commedia dell'Arte. This simply indicated the different scenes into which the day's episode might be divided and served as a sort of aide-mémoire. Depending on the literacy of the puparo, the material might be orally transmitted or based on his reading. A stock of scenarios was regarded as composing part of the capital of a company. In many cases, especially where there were family links, scenarios circulated from one company to another.

In Palermo it was common for the puparo to take all the voices and in many ways he was similar to a street story-teller, except that he used puppets as a strong visual aid. In Catania the puparo seldom operated the figures. It is thought that the heroic style of puppet was brought to Sicily from Naples around the 1820s. Catania was a mercantile city and as such had a larger middle-class population who often frequented the pupi theatres. Amongst the earliest recorded performers in Catania are the Crimi and Grasso families in the mid nineteenth century. The standard repertoire was the heroic one with some religious pieces, but around 1900 popular retellings of medieval romance, such as *Erminio della Stella d'Oro*. Towards the end of the nineteenth century the Catanian puppets began to grow in size, perhaps in proportion to the theatres which could house about 500 spectators and which were often used for live performance as well. The figures reached a height of 130-140 centimetres and were proportionately heavy. Generally the puppeteers stood on a bridge which was high enough to allow for the space behind to be used for scenes that required a deeper stage for special effects.

In Palermo there was a much greater social gulf between nobility and the church on the one hand and an enormous impoverished population living in squalor. The pupi theatres of Palermo were very small, situated in

¹⁶ A popular Roman figure was Rugantino who occasionally replaced Pulcinella as the comic anti-hero.

back streets and, like those of Trastevere, catered for a very local audience. The earliest known puppeteers were Alberto Canino and the Greco family, around 1830. The chivalric repertoire had special meaning in Palermo with its Norman castle and cathedral and audiences identified with the heroic age which was converted into a sort of Sicilian national mythology. The Sicilians needed to create a sort of national myth set in a remote past and subscribing to a number of social and moral values and codes of honour that have often been seen as expressing the spirit of the Mafia. There is a parallel to be drawn between the cult of the pupi performing heroic material in Sicily and the awakening of a nationalist consciousness in other parts of Europe, most notably Ireland and Finland. Between 1858 and 1860 Giusto LoDico, a primary school teacher of little education, published his *Paladini di Francia*, a compendium of stories from Carolingian and Arthurian cycles, drawing heavily on Ariosto, Boiardo and Pulci. Gradually this became a sort of vade-mecum for the pupari providing them with a ready source of chivalric material.

In Naples stories of the 'guappi' and the 'Camorra' with their realistic presentation of Neapolitan low life seemed more relevant than a remote heroic age. Heroes, and villains, were mostly drawn from the underworld, but, like the knights, they too operated according to a number of codes of honour, and in the performances a knife fight was the equivalent of a combat with swords in the heroic repertoire. The heroic repertoire was eclipsed, but did not die out. It was encouraged by the authorities, who were far less happy with plays about the Camorra, and this continued through the Fascist period. Outside Naples, in the Campagna, Puglia and elsewhere, the urban 'Camorra' repertoire did not enjoy anything like the same success.

In the North by the early nineteenth century there was a number of travelling marionette companies. Most would stay for a period of some weeks in a town, performing in theatres, halls, barns, disused convents or whatever space might be available, presenting a wide repertoire in the hopes that the same audience would return again and again. The average company was a family one, though assistants might be taken on. The Lupi family, from Ferrara, established themselves in Turin towards 1820. Like every company they had their own favourite comic mask, in this case Arlecchino, who could play a small part and comment on the action. At the start of the century the repertoire was largely that of the eighteenth-century theatre, with a large number of Harlequinades, but the masked zanni, Arlecchino, survived long after the company developed a more modern repertoire. The main rivals to the Lupi were Bellone and Sales, two glove-puppet showmen who had their own theatre. Their comic figure was the recently created

Gianduja (replacing the countryman Gerolamo, who was unacceptable during the Napoleonic period, as his name was that of the Emperor's brother). Gianduja gradually became the emblematic figure for Turin and the surrounding areas, and in 1865, after the death of Sales, he doubled with Arlecchino, whom he eventually replaced, at the Lupi theatre. In the 1820s the Lupis were performing in some sort of booth in a courtyard, but then they moved into the San Martiniano theatre. Their reputation grew and grew and they were noted for the splendour of their staging. All the great successes of the mid nineteenth century theatre, including the Parisian repertoire, found their way to the Lupi stage. Their scenery was painted by the main scene-painters of the day, including those who decorated the stage of the Teatro Regio of Turin. In 1884 they moved again, this time into a theatre seating over 1,000, the Teatro d'Angennes, which would remain their home until the late 1930s. The Lupi theatre was now one of the most fashionable theatres in Turin. In 1872 they upstaged the Teatro Regio of Turin by presenting the great success of La Scala, Verdi's *Aïda*, as a ballet (without any of Verdi's music to start with). It was framed by a comic piece in which Gerolamo, mayor of a small town, employed a third-rate troupe, specifying he did not want any singing and should be provided with a happy ending. In the latter part of the century the Lupi repertoire moved in the direction of large musical spectacle, such as Manzotti's *Ballo Excelsior*. Large revues of the year in Turin became very popular, and allowed for bringing onto the marionette stage all the latest developments in science and transport.

Giuseppe Fiando, with Gerolamo as his main comic mask, appearing in different roles in every production, created his theatre in Milan during the Napoleonic period and rapidly became a Milanese institution. When it had to be demolished in the 1860s, a new theatre was specially built and this remained in use until 1957. The Fiando family managed the theatre until 1881. During the late years of the century the Colla and Zane companies, two of the major companies of the century, performed at the Gerolamo, and finally the company of Carlo Colla e figli became the resident one in 1911. They performed a very similar repertoire to the Lupi theatre, and like the Lupis catered extensively for the juvenile public.

Simple glove-puppet stages could be found on the streets from one end of the peninsula to the other. These were operated by solo performers, usually accompanied by someone (partner, wife or boy) to collect money, provide music (often a fiddle) and sometimes exchange wisecracks with both puppets and audience. Such stages occur again and again in topographical paintings and prints from the seventeenth century onwards

and were evidently perceived as an integral part of street life. The simplest solo shows are exemplified by Gaetano Santangelo, known as Ghetanaccio, who was active in Rome in the 1820s and known for his sharp satirical wit, which often landed him in prison. He worked with the southern figure of Pulcinella, but often in combination with a more recently invented figure, Rugantino, a rather grotesque figure of small stature dressed in a somewhat militaristic costume, which was really a parody of the swaggering captain of the Commedia dell'Arte. Such shows were similar to the English Punch and Judy (which derives from them). They consisted of encounters between the main figure and a series of others and were enlivened by numerous and often well-choreographed stick fights.

In the Po valley and adjacent areas such as Bergamo, a very important glove-puppet tradition grew up. By the late eighteenth century there were travelling glove-puppet companies presenting a dramatic repertoire not widely different from the marionette companies. The glove-puppet companies retained the masks of the Commedia dell'Arte far longer than the marionette ones, but also took on board new local masks, mostly created during the Napoleonic period. Bergamo had Gioppino, a peasant character distinguished by a triple goitre; Piedmont had Gerolamo, Gianduja and Famiola; but the richest glove tradition was in Emilia Romagna, whose masks included Fagiolino and Sandrone. Most of the new masks, in keeping with the spirit of the French Revolution, were positive characters with a strong belief in natural justice, which they generally meted out with a heavy stick. The booths in this area became larger to accommodate more than one performer and were often set up in more sheltered places under arcades, or in enclosures where an admission charge might be made. The repertoire was often similar to that of the marionette theatres, but the Commedia masks usually had a larger role and the performance itself usually leaned more towards comedy than tear-jerking.

By the mid-century the theatres and cheaply printed popular fiction (including condensed prose versions of dramas and operas) began to provide a fund of easily accessible material. Amongst these we find such classics as the *Povero Fornaretto di Venezia*, revolutionary in sentiment, in which a baker is accused of a murder committed by a cuckolded nobleman and executed. Banditry was endemic in Italy, especially in the poorer regions of the South, where it could often be a part-time profession. Brigands were usually presented as Robin Hood type figures, helping the poor and opposed to the authorities, from whom they had often received injustice (in some cases bandits were simply presented as illustrious and feared criminals). The most celebrated included Giuseppe Musolino, Maino della Spinetta

and Stefano Pellone (*Il Passatore*). Bandit plays also fitted with a popular desire for topicality. Audiences enjoyed re-enactment of battles and particularly of Garibaldi's campaigns. The "cinque giornate" of the Milan uprising of 1848 against the Austrians, like the revolution in Palermo against the Bourbons or the earlier *Pietro Mica* (in which a seventeenth-century soldier/suicide bomber saved his city of Turin from the French), all satisfied a growing tide of nationalism.

With the exception of Sicily, marionette companies were beginning to decline in the early years of the twentieth century. Popular audiences flocked to the cinemas and the audience for marionettes was increasingly made up of children. This affected the programming and the performance. Big marionette companies (with the exception of Colla and Lupi, who had their own theatres in busy commercial cities) found the economic situation too difficult and younger members of the families looked elsewhere for more remunerative employment. Some marionette companies (Salici-Stignani and Monticelli, for example) even switched to glove puppets. In 1914 Vittorio Podrecca opened his Teatro dei Piccoli in the Odescalchi Palace in Rome. He grouped together members of some of the older marionette companies. His initial aim was quality entertainment for young people, but it rapidly proved a huge success with the artistic intelligentsia. Via the marionette stage, Podrecca managed to introduce the European avant-garde to the Italian theatre, introducing excellent production values whilst design was by artists rather than the more traditional scene painters. A large part of the repertoire consisted of lesser known eighteenth-century operas, some of which were already in the repertoires of the marionettists who came to work with Podrecca. He also introduced new works, commissioning the *Balli Plastici* from the futurist artist Fortunato Depero and a new opera, *La Bella dormiente nel Bosco* (Sleeping Beauty) from Ottorino Respighi. The company included good singers and a small orchestra. Podrecca travelled widely, first in Italy, then abroad, and wherever he went received acclamations.

In 1922 the company visited Uruguay, Argentina and Brazil, and London and New York in 1923. In the United States they discovered that audiences greatly preferred their variety numbers to the operas, so the latter gradually disappeared from the repertoire. In 1939, when war broke out, the company was in Mexico. They moved to New York, but had to leave the United States in a hurry to avoid internment. A company of 24 was expensive to maintain and costs were high. Thanks to financial help from Arturo Toscanini, they reached Brazil, but when it declared war on the Axis they had to go to Argentina, returning to Italy only in 1951. Podrecca died

in 1959 and the company struggled on until 1964. The shift to the perception of puppet theatre as an art was championed by Maria Signorelli, whose father had helped subsidize Podrecca and who herself set up the Italian section of UNIMA, and also assembled an enormous private collection of puppets. After the war she created her own company, the Opera dei Burattini in Rome, using unconventional materials and designs. She was also one of the first to employ soft sculpture figures.

The 1960s really spelt the end of the great wave of popular puppet theatre. Even the Sicilian pupi could not withstand the new prosperity of the post-war world, the consumerism and, above all, the advent of television. Television itself provided a medium for some puppeteers, notably Maria Perego, creator of the mouse Topo Gigio.

The 1960s, with the spread of a consumerist mass culture, brought a new interest in popular culture, no longer simply classified as folklore. A new awareness came about the value of preserving traditions by practicing them. A younger generation began to see the value of continuing an activity that had been in their families for some generations, whilst the profession also attracted people from a more educated background who were prepared to devote their lives to the puppet. An excellent example is Bruno Leone of Naples who in the 1980s was attracted by one of the last performers of the Neapolitan “guarattella” show (Pulcinella), met him and made him his master. He also researched the history and social context of the guarattella, discovered old scripts or scenarios, and, in an attempt to bring the activity forward as a living one, and not just a museum, created new pieces, often with political resonances (for example a piece with Bush and Bin Laden not long after 9/11). For a period he also set up a school which produced a number of younger people able to bring the Pulcinella tradition of Naples forward. Something similar has happened with the Sicilian pupi, notably with Mimmo Cuticchio, who has created a new type of performance combining the art of the puparo with that of the street story-teller, where the presenter is onstage, sometimes using the pupi in full view, but where elements of the older show remain in the background. Cuticchio has had particular success with Mozart’s *Don Giovanni* presented this way, and seen through the eyes of Leporello, who has become a Palermitan street character.

Because of the extraordinary richness of its various puppetry traditions, Italy was relatively slow in becoming involved in the development of modern puppetry, where the emphasis had largely shifted to Eastern Europe in the decades following the Second World War. However, the Italian puppet landscape has been significantly affected by the creation of festivals, notably

that of Cervia, which from the 1960s onwards has introduced many foreign companies to Italy and also allowed for the showcasing of work by young or experimental Italian companies.

During these years Italy has followed other countries, placing the puppet actor on the stage with the puppets, and thus freeing up the stage space. To further complicate matters, many companies present performances that combine different forms in the one performance, often mixing in shadows and projections or video, employing non-animated figures and using ordinary objects, or even parts of the body for communication with an audience. The Cervia festival, which opened up so many different forms of puppet theatre, needed to find a new term, since Italian does not have a general term such as the English “puppet” or the French “marionnette”. As a result the expression “teatro di figura” was chosen.

Pioneers of object theatre were the Briciole Company, born in the late 1970s and also thought of as a “theatre of images”, where direct narrative or dramatic structure is often abandoned. They looked for inspiration in the imagination of the child and from their first performances of *The Little Prince* and *The Wizard of Oz* they set out to find a new language of theatre using puppets and anything else they could. Assondelli and Stecchettoni of Bergamo employed a broader technique which also depended on a dynamic created by the relationship between the performer and the object. For others, notably Gyula Molnár and Gigio Brunello, with their *Macbeth all'improvviso* (2001), the conventions of the apparently standard glove-puppet theatre are completely called into question in a self-referential attempt by a group of commedia masks to perform Macbeth in spite of the puppeteer, at the same time raising the entire Pirandellian question of what is real and what is not in the theatre.

The idea of the puppet as metaphor and the extensive use of metonym provide a basis for much of the highly theatrical (and often operatic) work of Claudio Cinelli. In his solo *Just one more kiss*, a couple of eyes and a few feathers mounted on the hand can become a character in *La Traviata*, whilst his large scale productions employed various forms including shadows and human-size body puppets.

From an international perspective, the single most important contribution to the art of puppetry has been the shadow work of Gioco Vita of Piacenza. Initially an experimental theatre group inspired by the Bread and Puppet troupe and others, in 1978 they decided upon light and shadow as their main medium of expression in *Il Barone di Munchausen* (the figures were designed by Lele Luzzati, the celebrated opera designer, who subsequently collaborated with them on a number of projects). Inspired

by the French artist, Jean Pierre Lescot, they broke with the idea of a single light source to throw shadows. Projectors from many angles allowed the superimposition of shadows, both black and coloured. As they developed they replaced the fixed screen by mobile silk draperies with shadows thrown both from behind and from the front, and mobile lights often held by the operators themselves, thus giving an extraordinary degree of flexibility. In many cases in their work three-dimensional puppets are combined with shadows. With *Il corpo sottile* of 1988, and later their *Orfeo e Eurydice* (1998) the body of the performer was also used to throw shadows. Their work has resulted in a total liberation of the scenic space, giving it the most extraordinary flexibility and fluidity and providing what is often a cinematic effect whilst remaining with an essentially low tech and artisan approach, which even deliberately allows the spectator to see how it is done through the occasional gap in the drapes. Apart from their own productions, Gioco Vita have worked on co-productions with a number of major opera houses.

Gioco Vita, following a very different line from the Briciole, has achieved a theatre of images. Shadow theatre has always existed in relation to other forms of puppetry, but Gioco Vita have given it a new importance, and one which in international terms, arguably makes theirs the single most significant contribution of Italy to the art of puppetry in the late twentieth century.¹⁷

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¹⁷ A more recently formed company, Controluce of Turin, has many technical similarities to Gioco Vita, but has often achieved an amazing synthesis of music and painting, which gives it its own distinct identity.

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