

A portrait of a man with dark, wavy hair and a prominent mustache. He is wearing a dark grey suit jacket over a red vest and a white shirt with a red bow tie. The background is a textured, light grey wall.

# Opera Meets New Media

*Puccini, Ricordi and the Rise  
of the Modern Entertainment Industry*



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of the Modern Entertainment Industry*

*Edited by*  
Gabriele Dotto

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Catalog edited by  
**Gabriele Dotto**

Project Management  
"Archivio Storico Ricordi"  
**Pierluigi Ledda**  
**Helen Müller**

Project Coordination  
**Chiara Gasparini, Alissa Nordmeier**

Archival Research  
**Maria Pia Ferraris, Chiara Gasparini,**  
**Martina Intiso, Carlo Lanfossi**

Text Editing  
**Alissa Nordmeier**

Translations  
**Anna Herklotz**  
**Lara Wagner**

Layout  
**Alessandro Marchesi**

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**Mohn Media Mohndruck GmbH**  
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Exhibition concept and principal curator  
**Gabriele Dotto**

Co-curators  
**Ellen Lockhart and Christy Thomas Adams**

Structural and visual concept and design  
**Neo.Studio Neumann Schneider Architekten**

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**Puccini posing on the Brooklyn Bridge, 1910**  
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Dear reader,

After more than ten years, Bertelsmann is once again presenting historical treasures from the Archivio Storico Ricordi, one of the most important music archives in the world, to a broad public. While in 2013 we dedicated the international traveling exhibition “The Enterprise of Opera” to Giuseppe Verdi, our present project “Opera Meets New Media” is dedicated to Giacomo Puccini, who died 100 years ago, in November 1924. The work of Puccini, Verdi and other great Italian opera composers – recorded in 7,800 scores, 10,000 libretti, photographs and magazines as well as 31,000 letters – have found a permanent home in Milan’s Archivio Storico Ricordi.

This one-of-a-kind music archive has been part of the international media, services, and education company Bertelsmann since 1994. Back then, and then again in 2006, when we sold the parent company but deliberately kept the archive, we sought to preserve a world heritage of classical music and make it accessible to scholars as well as the public. Be it digitally or, as now, in the visual experience of an exhibition with invaluable exhibits and modern installations. We want to show that archiving is not an end in itself; providing innovative access to the Archivio Storico Ricordi enables us to use its holdings as a source of inspiration and knowledge.

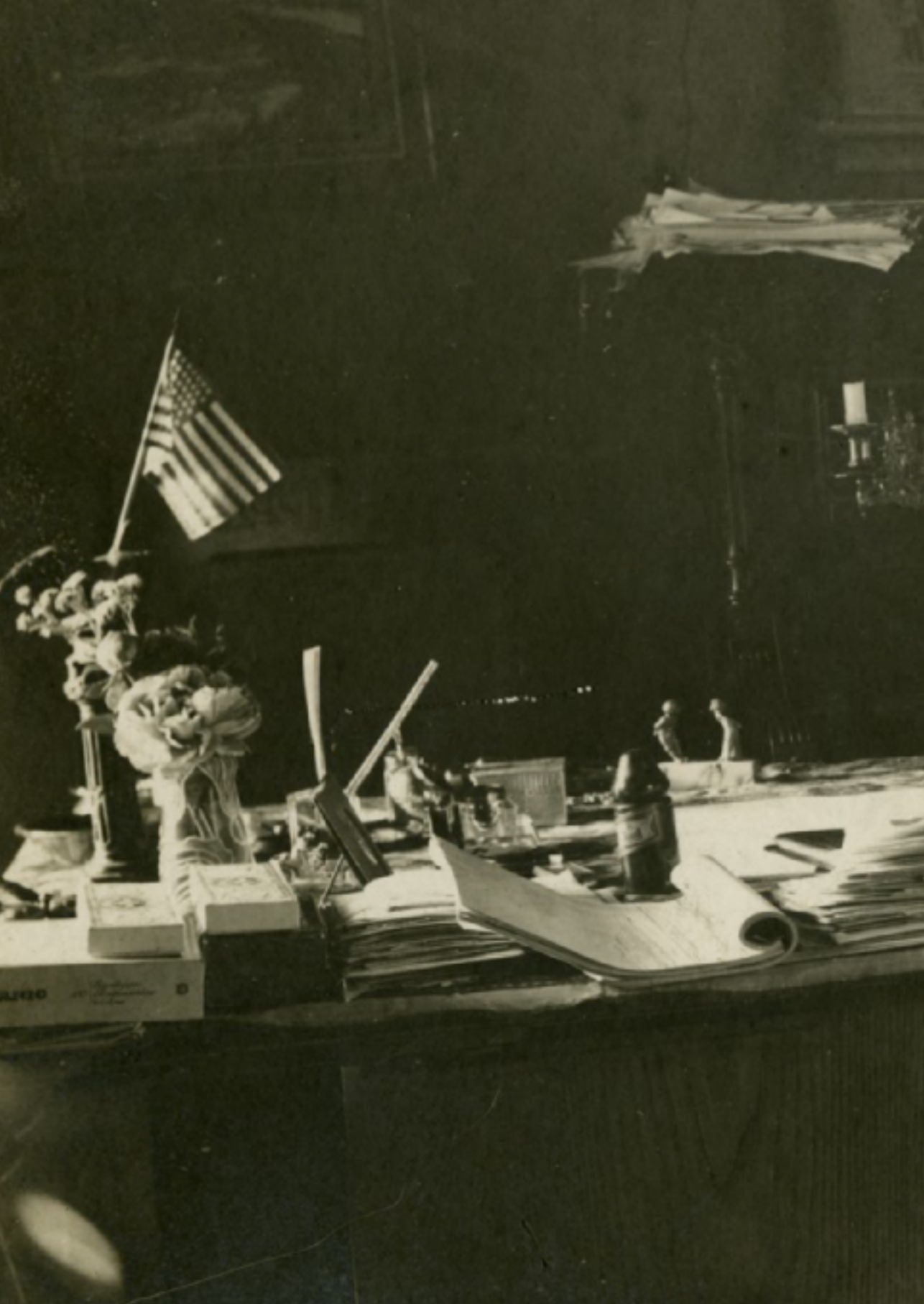
And so “Opera Meets New Media” sheds new light on the “Puccini era”: The exhibition focuses not only on the role of the Ricordi publishers in the composer’s career and work – distribution, marketing, and exploitation – but also on the influence of new media and technical innovations on music theater at the time. Ricordi publishers played a key role in the industrialization and internationalization of music theater in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. They set trends that would become decisive drivers, first for the international success of one of the most successful composers of all time, and later for countless other composers, artists, and creatives. By taking this thematic approach, the exhibition can contribute to the ongoing debates about new media and their disruptive influence on the economy, culture and society.

“Opera Meets New Media” is an exhibition about how media upheavals can inspire and change the world of art and culture; how technological innovations can disrupt traditional art forms and give rise to new ones; how and through whom national content can become an international success. But it is also, quite simply, an exhibition that seeks to immerse you in the beauty and diversity of the world of opera.

I hope that you will enjoy this catalog and wish you an informative and inspiring visit to “Opera Meets New Media“, our contribution to honoring Puccini in the year 2024.

Happy reading!

*Thomas Rabe*  
Chairman & CEO of Bertelsmann









# Curator's note

It all seemed to have happened so quickly. Recordings and cinema had been around for years before the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but they had been considered “niche” novelties. Now suddenly they blossomed into serious commercial endeavors – a 1905 opera record sold a million copies; new cinema theaters were proliferating in every major city – and traditional publishers were caught off guard.

The transformation was as overwhelming as it was fast. The very *concept* of these new technologies appeared disturbingly disruptive. Traditional sheet music sales thrived on amateur performances by more or less skilled practitioners, while a significant stream of Ricordi's earnings – from public performance of staged works – relied on the attraction of famous artists who drew audiences to theaters that generated box office revenues. But now mechanical recording, of images or sound or (often) interlinked, meant that a broad audience could enjoy the finest singers and actors of the day, in their own homes or at inexpensive cinemas, over and over, always perfect. Music publishers worried this would inevitably subtract revenue: How were they to address such a challenge? And for the composers, how could royalties be collected fairly and effectively, if at all? Puccini noted with astonishment that, as legislation lagged behind technology, producers and performers were becoming rich while the composer earned not a penny. And – just as importantly – how could the artistic integrity of his original work be guaranteed? The rise of unauthorized uses of classical music, and pop arrangements (on the tailcoats of the success of records) that liberally adapted such melodies, represented novel forms of piracy. Even the very concept of considering the “art” forms of theater and opera as mere “entertainment” rankled critics of the day – it took years for cinema to become considered the legitimate “seventh art” (as coined by the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Italian theorist Ricciotto Canuto).

To be sure, these were challenges that every composer and art-music publisher faced. But the fact that Puccini was the most famous and economically successful living composer of opera, and Ricordi one of the largest music-publishing enterprises, makes theirs a particularly compelling “case study”. In hindsight, neither Puccini nor his publisher needed to fear these new technologies: but we can understand how, at the time, they very much seemed a threat to their established worlds. Publishers had to adapt. Over time, and once fair compensation and control over licensing was resolved, both recordings and cinema proved to be enormous marketing tools, attracting new and unexpected audiences to the opera repertory. How Ricordi skillfully navigated these challenges – staying true to its core publishing mission, avoiding the temptation of embracing unknown business models, while building a vast distribution network and devising modern publicity practices – is a fascinating story. As is the story of how the publisher worked to guarantee the continuing legacy of one of its most cherished artists. Furthermore, the remarkable analogies to our current period of technological upheaval of established production and distribution methods of audio, video, and information overall, are irresistible. Were we to time-travel to back 1893 (the year of Puccini's break-out success *Manon Lescaut*) we might find the cultural and theatrical environ-