

Ellen Rosand

Commentary: Seventeenth-Century Venetian

Opera as *Fondamente nuove* The standard party line on seventeenth-century Venetian opera—or Venetian public opera, as it is usually characterized—distinguishes it from court opera. Court operas were commissioned and created to celebrate particular political or social occasions; they responded to the interests of an individual patron—the ruling family, whether Medici, Gonzaga, or Barberini—who footed the bill. The aim of such works was to extol the ruling dynasty, to brighten its image at home and abroad. Venetian operas, on the other hand, were a seasonal entertainment; they appealed to a broad public rather than private audience. Although presented in theaters owned by patrician families, they depended on the sale of tickets to the heterogeneous audience that traditionally participated in carnival activities. Some recent authors have attempted to blur these distinctions, arguing that opera in Venice was just as indebted to aristocratic patronage as court opera, that patrician theater owners rarely made a profit, and that they too regarded operatic entertainments as a means of bur-nishing their reputation and enhancing their political or social standing.

As I argued more than a decade ago in *Opera in Seventeenth-Century Venice*, recognizing the particular conditions under which opera in Venice took form is crucial. Notwithstanding the question of finances or the importance of aristocratic patronage, Venice’s cosmopolitan context had much to do with how opera was able to take root and evolve as an art form there. It provided regular demand from a broad and dependable audience (enthusiastic carnival visitors to the city) and ready financial backing from the many patrician theater owners. Venetian nobility was of a fundamentally different order from that of the dynastic courts in that *venezianità* transcended individual ambition. That a similar set of favorable circumstances could also exist—in somewhat different

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configurations—within other cosmopolitan centers helps to explain the development of opera in later periods.¹

Edward Muir's contribution to this special issue explores the intellectual politics behind these conditions, especially their relationship to the financing of operatic production. He emphasizes the continuity between earlier theatrical entertainments sponsored by the *compagnie della calza*, productions that also involved both patricians and carnival visitors. He also ascribes great importance to the political and social freedoms enjoyed by Venetians in the early seventeenth century—and not just during carnival—linking them specifically to Venice's expulsion of the Jesuits from 1607, the year of the Interdict, until 1652. His emphasis on the Jesuits' absence provides an interesting contrast to Mauro Calcagno's contribution, which shows how the Jesuits' *presence* seems to have affected the configuration of a particular opera.

Venetian public opera may have been just as much a manifestation of political self-imagining as court opera, but the image was communal rather than individual. As Beth and Jonathan Glixon recently put it, "The city of Venice itself perhaps best qualifies as patron: a successful opera season reinforced the status of the city (and not just its patrician rulers) as the entertainment capital of Europe."²

Like all of the arts that flourished in Venice, opera was constructed to place the city on display and enhance its image. Venice was literally on stage in 1642 at the Teatro Novissimo, as the backdrop at the end of the prologue for Francesco Saccati's *Il Bellerofonte* (a scene familiar from the dust jackets of two twentieth-century monographs on the subject). As a contemporary description of the scene noted, "The eye was deceived by the Piazza with its public buildings imitated to the life, and it delighted increasingly in the deception, forgetting, thanks to that fiction, that it was actually in the theater."³

Following the magical appearance of so beautiful a sight, the figures of Innocence and Astraea, the virgin goddess of Justice, join Neptune in singing a hymn to the city's honor: "City wise,

1 Rosand, *Opera in Seventeenth-Century Venice: The Creation of a Genre* (Berkeley, 1991).

2 Beth Glixon and Jonathan Glixon, *Inventing the Business of Opera: The Impresario and His World in Seventeenth-Century Venice* (New York, 2005).

3 For the contemporary description, see Rosand, *Opera*, 134, n. 16. The backdrop of Venice is reproduced on the dust jackets of Rosand, *Opera*, and Simon Towneley Worsthorne, *Seventeenth-Century Venetian Opera* (Oxford, 1954).

rich, and noble above any the world admires; Sparta, Athens, and Stagira are but a modest shadow of your greatness. Henceforth the ages to come will see Heaven, swollen with light, rush to your shores as a river to pay your tribute.” The Olympian deities and personifications so gloriously portrayed in the sixteenth-century painted decorations of the Ducal Palace find their voices on the Venetian stage of the seventeenth.⁴

From the very beginning, opera represented the history of the Republic (or, first, its presumed pre-history). It is hardly a coincidence that in the first five years of operatic activity—which saw the opening of four different theaters, all patrician-owned or managed—so many operas relied on the genealogical myth of Venice for their subject matter, or one particular strand of it (see the Appendix for a chronology of Venetian Opera from 1637 through 1645). This strand, woven over the course of the previous centuries, depicted Venice as the culmination of a historical line beginning with the fall of Troy and continuing through the foundation, rise, and fall of Rome. All of the librettos on the subject were written by members of the *Accademia degli Incogniti*—the group of libertine aristocrats for whose scandalous activities, Muir suggests, the apparent commercialization of opera provided a cover.

Arguably, one of these mythically inspired operas was *L'incoronazione di Poppea* (discussed by Heller in this special issue), a work that almost demands to be read as a cautionary tale: The triumph of vice over virtue that it portrays could happen only in a decadent empire like Rome, never in a civilized republic like Venice. In this connection, Francesco Busenello's distortion of Tacitus was part of the librettist's attempt to warn an audience of republican sympathizers and patriotic Venetians against imperial excesses as well as the dangers of female political power. In this regard, Muir's argument for the importance of the *Incogniti* for the development of opera gains support from two particular features of the *Incogniti*'s librettos (and other writings), their patriotism (reflected in their focus on the genealogy of Venice) and their sexual libertinism and ambivalent interest in women, which Heller discusses in great detail in *Emblems of Eloquence*.⁵

Venetian operas continued to air the city's political themes

4 Translation of the hymn from Rosand, *Opera*, 134–135

5 Wendy Heller, *Emblems of Eloquence: Opera and Women's Voices in Seventeenth-Century Venice* (Berkeley, 2003).

throughout the seventeenth century, but the concern shifted increasingly to current events. The 1650s and 1660s witnessed a preference for plots featuring legendary Roman heroes, whose exploits invited comparison with the Venetian heroes in the contemporary War of Candia with the Turks. Other plots revolved more generally around the defeat of the Turkish barbarians, with which Venice was preoccupied at the time.

At least some segments of the audience were accustomed to reading political meaning in, and deriving moral lessons from, the operas that they attended. Such is the argument that underlies Mauro Calcagno's thesis regarding *Eliogabalo* in this special issue. Calcagno suggests that Francesco Cavalli's version of the opera was a victim of censorship, replaced by Giovanni Antonio Boretti's version for ideological reasons. It ran afoul of Jesuit notions (the Jesuits having returned to Venice in 1652) by depicting the death of a legitimate, if vicious, tyrant.

Even more relevant, Cavalli's depiction of a senate composed entirely of women—prostitutes, to be precise—who distributed political appointments blindly through participation in an erotic game was apparently too blatant a critique of Venetian institutions and practices for the Grimanis, the patrician patrons of the theater presenting the opera, to support. (Calcagno also teases a *Poppea*-like moral lesson from the words “*melius eligendi*” on the frontispiece of Boretti's libretto: Venice must choose better than Eliogabalo did when he appointed female senators and awarded political favors on the basis of sexual performance.) Calcagno's suggestion that theaters managed by professional impresarios would be more receptive of politically sensitive works than those under the direct control of their patrician owners seems particularly worthy of further investigation.

Venetian operas communicated with the various segments of their heterogeneous audience in different ways: In addition to reflecting Venice's political culture, they parodied its mores (for example, its manner of dress and carnival behavior) and its characters (courtesans, procuresses, gondoliers, etc.). So far as pure aesthetics is concerned, they supplied increasing numbers of arias to satisfy the audience's desire to hear favorite singers display their vocal abilities.

A point that Heller raises somewhat obliquely in her contribution about the importance of Venetian opera for what was to

follow merits further discussion. The first, experimental opera production at the Teatro S. Cassiano in 1637 started a virtual avalanche. Within the next five years, four theaters had opened, all of them owned by patricians, who hired professional companies to produce operas on a regular basis, usually one but sometimes two per season. The effects of this avalanche are readily apparent in the Appendix: In 1642, for instance, the sixth opera season in Venice, carnival audiences could have seen seven different operas by six different librettists and six different composers. Stimulating and propelling all of this activity was another peculiarly Venetian institution, the publishing industry, which encouraged the printing of librettos and other kinds of publicity for the productions and which, like opera, benefited from the freedom that was integral to the republic's self-image.

Such was the new literary economy described by Muir. The demand for fresh works placed enormous pressure on composers and librettists, not only to find new subject matter but also to produce operas quickly and efficiently. In order to satisfy this demand, they worked out a set of musico-dramatic conventions, some of them inherited from comedy, that facilitated composition as well as reception and that could apply to any kind of subject matter. Many of these standard elements occur in *Claudio Cesare*: two pairs of lovers who are separated and then reunited at the end; comic nurses and pages; disguises, scenes of sleep, lament, incantation, and the like; props like mirrors and musical instruments; and a clear distinction between speech and song, or recitative and aria. As Heller indicates, rather than overruling or distorting sincere engagement with history, these conventions helped to shape librettists' manipulation of their historical sources.

While burnishing their city's image as a center of free expression, libertinism, and carnival spectacle, the writers and composers who created these conventions in Venice enabled an industry to define itself, setting the pattern for the future of the art. Indeed, though their works originally emerged in response to conditions unique to sixteenth-century Venice, the conventions that framed them have persisted throughout the subsequent history of opera, even to the present day. They show their traces in operas from every time and place—whether by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Giuseppe Verdi, Christoph Willibald Gluck, Richard Wagner, Igor Stravinsky, or Benjamin Britten. The nature of the rapport that the operas of

seicento Venice established with their heterogeneous audience—exploiting links with their culture, their history, and their politics—adumbrates the political resonance of opera from the French revolution and the Italian Risorgimento to Glasnost.

Muir concludes his contribution by describing Venice's declining fortunes, economic shifts, and the shrinking of its markets as a result of its various wars. Opera represented both a relief from such cares and an investment opportunity. Today, it is probably the former function that is the more secure.

APPENDIX: VENETIAN OPERA CHRONOLOGY, 1637–1645

- 1637
S Cassiano *Andromeda*, Ferrari/Manelli
- 1638
S Cassiano *La maga fulminata*, Ferrari/Manelli
- 1639
S Cassiano **Le nozze di Teti e di Peleo*, Persiani/Cavalli
SS Giovanni e Paolo *La Delia*, Strozzi/Manelli; *L'armida*, Ferrari/
Ferrari
- 1640
S Cassiano *Gli amori d'Apollo*, Busenello/Cavalli
SS Giovanni e Paolo *L'Adone*, Vendramin/Manelli; *Il ritorno d'Ulisse*,
Badoaro/MonteVerdi
S Moise *L'Arianna*, Rinuccini/MonteVerdi; *Il pastor*
regio, Ferrari/Ferrari
- 1641
S Cassiano **La Didone*, Busenello/Cavalli
SS Giovanni e Paolo **Il ritorno d'Ulisse*, Badoaro/MonteVerdi;
**Le nozze d'Enea in Lavinia*, Anonimo/
MonteVerdi
S Moise *La ninfa avara*, Ferrari/Ferrari
Novissimo *La finta pazzza*, Strozzi/Sacratì
- 1642
S Cassiano *La virtù de' strali d'Amore*, Faustini/Cavalli
SS Giovanni e Paolo *Il Narciso ed Ecco immortalati*, Persiani/
Marazzoli
Gli amori di Giasone, Persiani/Marazzoli
S Moise *L'Amore innamorato*, Fusconi/Cavalli; *Il Sidonio*
e Dorisbe, Melosio/Fontei

Novissimo	<i>*Il Bellerofonte</i> , Nolfi/Sacрати; <i>L'Alcate</i> , Tirabosco/Manelli
I643	
S Cassiano	<i>L'Egisto</i> , Faustini/Cavalli
SS Giovanni e Paolo	<i>*L'incoronazione di Poppea</i> , Busenello/Monte-verdi; <i>*La finta savia</i> , Strozzi/Diversi
Novissimo	<i>La Venere gelosa</i> , Bartolini/Sacрати
I644	
S Cassiano	<i>L'Ormindo</i> , Faustini/Cavalli
SS Giovanni e Paolo	<i>Il prencipe giardiniero</i> , Ferrari/Ferrari; <i>L'Ulisse errante</i> , Badoaro/Sacрати
Novissimo	<i>La Deidamia</i> , Herrico/Cavalli?
I645	
S Cassiano	<i>La Doridea</i> , Faustini/Cavalli; <i>Il Titone</i> , Faustini/Cavalli
SS Giovanni e Paolo	<i>*Il Bellerofonte</i> , Nolfi/Sacрати; <i>Il Romolo e Remo</i> , Strozzi/Cavalli?
Novissimo	<i>Ercole in Lidia</i> , Bisaccioni/Rovetta

NOTE Works with an asterisk deal with the genealogical myth.