## On the dating of Vivaldi’s *Juditha triumphans* (RV 644)

The motivations for the performance of Vivaldi’s sole surviving oratorio, *Juditha triumphans* (RV 644), are easily understood. In the ebb and flow of military affairs involving the Most Serene Republic, 1716 was a year of particular concentration. Eugene of Savoy was engaged in a succession of battles against the Turks in the expanding Austro-Hungarian empire. It fell to the Venetians to defend their Dalmatian empire by protecting the island of Corfù, which it had possessed since 1396. The Venetian Republic had been shrinking in the Aegean for half a century. Crete was lost in 1669, its Peloponnesian holdings in 1714.

Heady festivities carried on throughout the year, but they were driven in part by diplomatic efforts to promote a sort of martial attitude: thwarting Turkish efforts to capture land or sea was a unifying goal of all the allies. Towards this end arrivals and departures of prominent allies (from Saxony, Bavaria, Hesse, and various Italian duchies), ostentatious entertainments both private and public, and visible evidence of piety at liturgical inflection points punctuated the calendar. Despite our detailed knowledge of these activities and the work’s obvious resonance with the public agenda, the precise dating of the first performance of *Juditha* has remained elusive.

The putative date of November 1716 is not only unverifiable but it is unlikely to be correct. It was extremely rare for an ambitious work, such as this one, to be presented in the absence of the person to whom it was dedicated. For *Juditha triumphans* this was the admiral of the Venetian fleet (*generale di sbarco*), Johann Matteus von der Schulenburg (1661-1747). This account traces Schulenburg’s movements for the entire period from 24 November 1715, when Schulenburg first arrived in Venice to 11 March 1717, when he departed. For most of this period he was at sea or on one of the islands at the southern end of the Adriatic.

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==Giacomo Cassetti could have met the marshal a year earlier, before the new fleet that would sail to Corfù was launched. The idea of creating an *sacro militare oratorio* such as *Juditha* could have been hatched during the preceding winter, when the duke of Saxony was winding up his spectacular 17-month stay in Venice. He was greatly and repeatedly feted, primarily in gondolas on the grand Canal, during the last three days of Carnival [23-25 February 1716], culminating in a banquet at the Teatro San Gio. Grisostomo (a theater in which no Vivaldi opera was ever staged). Yet we need to look back still further to glimpse the first stirrings of the idea.

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Four new warships were launched at the Arsenal in the middle of February 1715. They were Il Terrore Veneta, S. Francesco Xaviero, la Madonna della Salute, and La Fenice.[[1]](#footnote-1) It was the third of these that was to lead the fleet. The preparations made over the rest of this year are not well documented until 21 December 1715, when the Venetian Senate promoted several people in Schulenburg’s service to higher military ranks. They included the *tenente generale* Grimaldi (tenente generale) and two *sargenti generali* surnamed Sala and (Gio. Batta) Rossi.[[2]](#footnote-2)

By the time the festivities for the Duke of Saxony took place, Schulenburg was in the vicinity of Corfù. In a letter from him dated 19 February [1716] the marshal reported that one of his ships was sunk 50 miles off the coast of Corfù. He acknowledged the loss of fifty men but proudly reported that the canon was saved![[3]](#footnote-3)

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Oratorios were performed in the ospedali are times governed by the liturgical calendar. The preferred times were the Sundays of Advent and Lent, although we know of exceptions for the feast of Epiphany (6 January) and the feast of Assumption (15 August). Oratorios were never given during periods when theaters were open. Whatever the philosophy underlying that stance, the prospect of a substantial audience would have been significantly diminished. When the Senate made its charge (21 December 1715), a Saturday, the only remaining Sunday during Advent was the following day. Moreover, the printed libretto is dated 1716. As for Lent 1716, though, Schulemburg was long gone from Venice. The first Sunday of Lent would have been 1 March, with Easter falling on 12 April.

Festivity at the Arsenal occurred occasionally when a significant visitor was feted with a banquet and serenata, sometimes on a new galley afloat in the complex’s interior *bacino*. The small chapel just across the bridge from the official entrance (redesigned in 1687 with four statues of defenders of the Republic) was an appendage of the Pietà but is not known to have been a site where music was performed. It was a mariners’ chapel that lay just across the canal from the houses of the commanders. {pix?} In sum there is no likely prospect of a suitable opportunity for a performance of a major oratorio on the premises of the Arsenal. *Juditha triumphans* was so ambitious in scope that it required the full forces of the Pietà’s *coro* and orchestra. However, it is inevitable that the Vivaldis knew the Arsenal well because of its proximity to the church of San Martino, where the composer’s uncle Agostino had spent most of the adult life, while his father, Giovanni Battista, had lived there for ten years preceding his marriage.

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The build-up of foreign dignitaries began late in 1715. Count Colloredo, who was anticipating his public entry as imperial ambassador the following summer, arrived the week ending 16 November.[[4]](#footnote-4) That same week a request from the electoral prince of Bavaria to shorten his period of quarantine was denied.[[5]](#footnote-5) Marshal Schulenburg reached the lagoon on 24 November and reported directly to the Lazzaretto for quarantine.[[6]](#footnote-6) Schulenburg’s quarantine must have been 28 days, because he was feted on 22 December.[[7]](#footnote-7)

On 21 December the Senate promoted to the rank of Tenent General xx Grimaldi. The colonels xx Sala and Gio. Battista Rossi were also elevated to the rank of sargeants general.[[8]](#footnote-8) We learn further that “General Co[nte] di Schiulemburgo, che va vedendo le cose più cospicue di questa Seren[issima] Dominante, si portò la mattina di Martedì [24 dicembre[ à vedere questo grand’Arsenale, over si travaglia incessantemente alla costruzzione delle scritte Navi da Guerra.”

By long-standing tradition, the first three days of January were reserved for demonstrations of penitence in the ducal basilica, San Marco. The much venerated Pala d’Oro, a display of jewels from the Republic’s many conquests, was on display. During this period in 1716 a concerted effort was made to raise the profile the forthcoming campaign in the Adriatic. We read on 4 January 1716 that

Mercordì mattina primo giorno dell’Anno nuovo, per consagrar alla Maestà Divina le Primizie del medesimo, si fece per ordine Publico nella Chiesa Ducale di S. Marco con li due susseguenti l’Esposizione del Venerabile con apparato, e sontuosa Musica; & ad essempio di Sua Serenità, che vi calò con la Seren[issima] Signorìa, e Monsig[nor] Nunzio Ponteficio, vi fù in detti 3 giorni un continuato concorso di Popolo à porgere fervorose Preghiere all’Altissimo, acciò si degni *benedire l’Armi della Seren[issima] Republica contro il commune Nemico*: e vi sermoneggiarono tanto la mattina, che nel doppo pranzo*li più celebri Sacri Oratori*; & hieri sera se ne fece la reposizione con una Processione seguita da Sua Serenità, Seren[issima] Signorìa, e Nobiltà tutta à due à due con Candele accese in mano. Restarono nelli sopradetti 3 giorni sospesi li divertimenti dell’Opere, e Comedie, come pure chiuso il Ridotto grande.[[9]](#footnote-9)

This would seem to have been a perfect opportunity to perform *Juditha triumphans*, but since the devout were supposed to practice their piety in droves in San Marco, which symbolized the alignment of the doge’s power with that of the Church, the Pietà would not have been in a good position to compete. Conversely, there is no chance that the work, in which individual figlie are occasionally cited, could have been given off the premises of the Pietà. They were carefully guarded and chaperoned, when appropriate, only by the governors of the institution.

Further promotions were made on 5 January 1716, when the title of Capitano Generale was conferred on Michiel Morosini.[[10]](#footnote-10) However, it was a short-lived assignment. He was succeeded a week later by Andrea Pisani, who had been serving as Generale dell’Isole.[[11]](#footnote-11) The electoral prince of Bavaria and his retinue reached Venice by 11 January.[[12]](#footnote-12) While Marshal Schulenburg was preparing for his departure to Corfù,[[13]](#footnote-13) the imperial ambassador, Giovanni Battista Colloredo, held a “gran Magnificenza” for the general.[[14]](#footnote-14) Carnival opened on the 14th, but the usual festivities were diminished by a week of cold so extreme that the entire lagoon froze. The amusement of the moment was walking across the water between Venice and Mestre.[[15]](#footnote-15)

The freeze diminished enough to permit the launch on the 23rd of a new “first-class ship,” the Madonna [della Salute]. Her launch was celebrated with the firing of 80 canons under the supervision of Marshal Schulenburg.[[16]](#footnote-16) On 1 February Schulenburg was preparing for his departure for Corfù, Zante, and Cephalonia.[[17]](#footnote-17) After this he was to take command of the army in Dalmatia.

Further news about Schulenburg is then eclipsed in the *Corriere* and other news-sheets covering Venice by coverage of the electoral prince of Bavaria **and** other important visitors (the duke of Saxony, the prince of Guastalla). The electoral prince and his retinue were taken to the Arsenale (2 March 1716), where they received a salute and were shown around the Leon Trionfante.[[18]](#footnote-18)

We read that the same week, after the Electoral Prince of Saxony presented a lavish banquet for the electoral prince of Bavaria, the latter reciprocated with an entertainment (*trattenimento*) and also the papal nunzio plus the imperial ambassador, who had already hosted the Saxon prince. On Thursday evening (5 March) of this busy week there occurred the further treat of an oratorio in musica given by the *putte* of the Ospedale of the Pietà.[[19]](#footnote-19) A performance of *Juditha* (posited by Talbot) at this juncture could have built enthusiasm for the task ahead. However, we know that Schulenburg had reached Corfù by mid-February. In his letter of 19 February 1716 (cited in another report of 7 March[[20]](#footnote-20)) he reported a fire on board one of his ships [the Regina del Mare] which lay about ten miles from the island. It resulted in the loss of 50 men, but he proudly noted that the canon was saved! The 7 March report included in the *Gazetta Bolognese* (17 Marzo) added that 500,000 German troops were en route to Corfù. Another 300,000 troops committed to General Schulenburg reached the border north of Verona during the week ending the 18th. Having been dismissed from quarantine, they reached Venice one month later.

The Electoral Prince of Bavaria is reported to have named one of the new galleys the Leon trionfante at its launch on 7 March,[[21]](#footnote-21) but the ship did not actually leave for Corfù until 30 April.[[22]](#footnote-22) He was honored was a big regatta on the 7th and departed on the 9th, after receiving numerous gifts from the Venetian Republic. The warship La Fenice was launched with the participation of the papal nuncio and the imperial ambassador during the week ended 28 April.[[23]](#footnote-23)

Venetian naval personnel periodically returned from Corfù over the coming months, passed a month in quarantine, and brought news of the fortifications. English, French, and Flemish merchants also called in to the port of Venice with goods and news of the build-up. A typical travel time was 7-9 days. Troops from Germany, the Swiss cantons, and the Grissons continued to arrive at the border and eventually be dispatched (in most cases around the end of June) to the embarcation point at the Lido. Work continued in the Arsenal on further warships. Meanwhile a number of supernumerary procurators were installed upon making of a contribution 25,000 ducats each to the war effort.

==start at october 1716

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The next word of Schulenburg comes from the battle of Corfù, fought between 25 July and 20 August 1716. Owing to the slowness of communications, word of the end of the siege of Corfù started to reach Venice on the week ending 15 September but it was not until the following week that celebrations began to occur. Troops began to arrive at the Lido. Schulenburg was offer a pension of 5,000 ducats a year for life. (He would invest much of it in a stellar collection of Venetian paintings.) Schulenburg himself was on the island of Zante on 15 September 1716.[[24]](#footnote-24)

Two couriers from Vienna brought news of the victory of Eugene of Savoy (1663-1736) at Temesvar on 11 October.[[25]](#footnote-25) Now that the Ottomans had been checked on land the need for further defense of the Adriatic began to dwindle, although Eugene went on the lead the battle of Belgrade in 1717. Schulenburg’s fleet must have set sail in November. Its leader, who would have sailed in the last galley, began quarantine in the Old Lazzaretto on 6 December. Late on the night of 5 [12?] December the ship carrying Schulenburg and Sala reached the lagoon. They began quarantine at break of day.[[26]](#footnote-26) It was intended to last for 21 days.[[27]](#footnote-27) However, one might wonder at the effectiveness of the arrangement. According to the avviso as carried in the Gazzetta Bolognese, many government officials and representatives of the highest ranking noble families went to congratulate Schulenburg and his allies on their victory. Schulenburg’s brother, who had arrived a few weeks earlier, went daily to see him at the Lazzaretto. Four the ships were being unloaded in the lagoon and two more were moored at Malamocco. Soon a much larger flotilla was present in the lagoon, and the cessation of hostilities seems to have signaled the entire Venetian fleet to return home. The area around the Arsenal was animated for many days afterwards (and despite a heavy snowfall), as various salutes were made for each returning ship. Meanwhile, however, two new war ships—La Fortuna Guerriera and La Gloria Veneta—were launched on 14 December. As Schulenburg continued his confinement, it was expected that he would be released on Christmas Eve,[[28]](#footnote-28) although later reports suggest that this was not the case. One of his well-wishers of the Prince of Darmstadt.[[29]](#footnote-29)

Thus their island confinement removed not only Schulenburg but the entire population of defenders from any potential activities in Venice until the full period was completed.

The galley crews were released on January 3 1717:

La mattina di Domenica [3] sortì poi da questo Lazzareto vecchio il maresciallo Generale Conte di **Sciulemburgo** col Generale Sala, & altri Ufficiali, che vennero dal Levante, doppo havervi terminata la scritta loro contumacia di 28 giorni.[[30]](#footnote-30)

Carnival opened on the following day. We know, however, that the crews and command were released in the morning of the 3rd. It was a Sunday, the normal day for the performance of oratorios in the *ospedali*. The standard time for oratorios was after *pranzo*.

A performance of Juditha triumphans on this date would have formed a perfect symmetry with the Senate’s charge of a year earlier. The leaders were summoned to their mission, they went, they accomplished their goals, and now it was time to celebrate.

==At the same time, once the leaders had been released, there was no wiggle room. Carnival opened the following day (4 January). Lent would begin early, on 10 February. Although the message of *Juditha triumphans* would arguably have been very appropriate for the same period a year earlier, circumstantial evidence does not allow for it. It would have been easy to make the naïve assumption that Eugene’s victory in October would have paved the way for a November performance, but a performance while the crew was en route or in quarantine would have frustrated the political ambition of the work. All things considered, the afternoon of 3 January 1717 appears to be the one viable opportunity for this stellar work’s premier with all parties present.

15 December 2013

1. *Il corriere ordinario*, issue of 16 febbraio 1715 (A-Wn xx) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Il corriere ordinario*, issue of 28 dicembre 1715. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Il corriere ordinario*, issue of 7 marzo 1716. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. I-Rvat, Archvio Segreto, Nunziatura di Venezia, N. 165 (1715), f. 599v. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Op. cit., f. 600. The electoral prince and 30 of his party were reported to be en route to Verona in the report of 14 dicembre, while another 50 were traveling with Count Bertonelli (f. 667v). A week later (f. 686v) we learn that he had stopped in Salzburg. His arrival in Trento was noted one week after that (f. 705). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Op. cit., f. 637 (report ending 30 novembre 1715). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Nunziatura di Venezia, N. 165, f. 703v (report of 28 dicembre 1715). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Il corriere ordinario, issue of 28 dicembre 1715. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *Il corriere ordinario*, issue of 4 Gennaro 1716. *Sacri oratori* were speakers [in most cases the word was *predicatori*], not oratorios. This was a conventional time for such preachers to address their audiences. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *Il corriere ordinario*, issue of 11 January 1716. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. *Il corriere ordinario*, issue of 18 January 1716. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Of the 14th. Like many details that appear to be exact, this date varies from one report to the next. The Corriere indicates the 11th, the legate’s report the 14th. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Nunziatura di Venezia, N. 166, ff. 27, 25. The electoral prince managed to have his quarantine reduced to 22 days. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Nunziatura di Venezia, N. 166, f. 45v (report of 18 gennaro 1716). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. *Il corriere ordinario*, issue of 25 January 1716. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. *Il corriere ordinario*, issue of 25 January 1716. *Pallade veneta* is circulating stale news when it states in its 21-28 marzo issue (xx, f. 1v) that “La caduta dom[eni]ca [15 marzo] uscì al pro. Arsenale una nuova Nave nominata la Madonnadell’Arsenale, sotto li di cui Auspicij all’orche combatterà si può tenere p[er] certa la vittoria, q[ues]ta delle gran Vergine.” [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. *Il corriere ordinario*, issue of 1 February 1716. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. An *avviso di Venezia* dated 7 marzo 1716 and incorporated in *La Gazzetta bolognese*, issue of 10 Marzo 1716, p. 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. *Loc. cit.* [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. *Il corriere ordinario*, issue of 7 March 1716. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. *Avviso di Venezia* dated 14 marzo 1716 quoted in the *Gazzetta Bolognese* of 17 marzo, p. 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. *Avviso* of 2 Maggio 1716 quoted in the *Gazzetta Bolognese* of 5 maggio 1716, p. 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. *Avviso* of 16 maggio in the *Gazzetta Bolognese* of 19 maggio 1716, p. 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Letter reported in the *Corriere ordinario* of 10 October 1716. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. *Il corriere ordinario*, issue of 14 October 1716. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Avviso of 12 dicembre 1716 in the *Gazzetta Bolognese* of 15 dicembre, p. 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Periods of quarantine at the borders of the Venetian Republic were determined by current threats and the directions from which they came. The range was from two weeks (low threat level) to five weeks. At this particular time it was four weeks. While at mountain passes arrivals could be made by coach and thus in small numbers, ships carried much larger populations, all of whom were quarantined together. The intent was to make sure no one in the group showed symptoms of any current illness until the period of incubation was past. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. *Avviso* of the 19th, carried in the *Gazzetta Bolognese* of 24 dicembre 1716, p. 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. *Avviso* the 19th, as above. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. *Il corriere ordinario*, issue of 9 Gennaro 1717. Newspapers published under the auspices of the Church and the Empire were dated modern style. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)