

## Towards a Cultural History of the Venetian Oratorio, 1675-1725

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### 1. The Existing Overview

Perspectives on the Venetian oratorio during its formative years are chiefly dependent on two studies—the brief coverage in Howard Smithers' comprehensive study of Baroque oratorio<sup>1</sup> and the Arnolds' slender monograph on the Venetian oratorio in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.<sup>2</sup> The first selects from the few available scores in modern facsimiles and editions to give a taste of the genre in various locales, with only brief coverage of Venice. The latter, which is based on a canvas of surviving libretti, modern editions, and several important manuscripts, gives a more rounded and comprehensive view.

From the perspective of libretto survival, a reader could form the impression that the main force in the early development of the oratorio in Venice was the Oratory of San Filippo Neri at the church of S. Maria della Consolazione (colloquially, della Fava). This view would be compatible with what we know of oratorio elsewhere in Italy. Yet Venetian oratorio was not so much based on this single model as it was mediated by the somewhat different kinds of works which were written for and performed in its four *ospedali*. Comparative statistics give some sense of the parallel development of the genre together with a general appreciation of how each institution diverged in its involvement (Table 1), but they miss many nuances.

	1665-1674	1675-1684	1685-1694	1695-1704	1705-1714	1715-1724	Total
Derelitti	0	0	0	0	0	3	3
Incurabili	0	3	7	9	10	2	31
Mendicanti	1	1	6	3	6	3	20
Pietà	0	2	2	5	11	3	23
Fava	19	4	1	15	2	0	41
Location unknown	1	3	2	12	4	0	22
Total	21	13	18	44	33	11	140

Table 1. Oratorio performance by institution and decade (1665-1725) in Venice.

<sup>1</sup> Howard E. Smither, *A History of the Oratorio, I: The Oratorio in the Baroque Era (Italy, Vienna, Paris)*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1977.

<sup>2</sup> Denis and Elsie Arnold, *The Oratorio in Venice* (Royal Musical Association Monographs, 2; London, 1986).

Such statistics fail to explain what caused the notable changes over this period. They are also incapable of revealing how many oratorio libretti were never published, or how many which were published have disappeared.

Briefly, the rise in numbers at the Incurabili in the 1680s reflects the fervent reception of the works of Carlo Pallavicino (the Incurabili's *maestro* from 1674 to 1688) and, in subsequent decades, Carlo Francesco Pollarolo (1696-1718). Verbal reports indicate that the Pietà was well served by the Spadas (Paolo and Bonaventura) until 1704, but barely any evidence of their music survives. Francesco Gasparini (effectively until 1713; officially until 1715) was a vigorous contributor to the growing oratorio repertory (as he was concurrently to the opera repertory). Vivaldi (from 1715) indulged it far less but produced one masterpiece, *Juditha triumphans* (1716/17). The Mendicanti enjoyed the services of Giovanni Legrenzi (1676-1682) but was unsuccessful through the end of the century in steadily retaining the services of a successor. Antonio Biffi served as *maestro di coro* from 1700 to 1731, but there is little evidence to suggest that he took any interest in the oratorio. Neither did he compose operas.

The apparent symbiosis between opera and oratorio in Venice is hardly news. Those who composed in one genre were likely to compose in the other, while those who had no interest in one were unlikely to have an interest in the other. Excluding Pollarolo, composers whose primary allegiance was to the ducal chapel (e.g., Biffi) may have found the composition of longer works incompatible with their very numerous year-round responsibilities. In particular, the leading musicians at San Marco were in constant demand to compose sacred vocal works of diverse kinds for private functions—*vestizioni* of noblewomen entering convents, patronal feasts at convents, dedications of churches, convents, and seminaries on *terrafirma*, and so forth. This voluminous output is almost totally lost, but verbal reports put the numbers of such works provided by San Marco *maestri* of the later seventeenth century in the hundreds.

This rate of output was slowed in the early eighteenth century only by the monetary enticements offered to composers to work briefly for foreign princes. After the Peace of Passarowitz (1718) the Venetian Republic suffered an enormous slide in political esteem and its currency sagged against most others. Young musicians and well established ones alike were attracted to opportunities in France, England, Austria, and elsewhere. While the talent drain continued unabated for decades, the skills of Venetian musicians continued to be highly valued. The diaspora spread these skills far and wide.

Documentary accounts of oratorio performances preserved in weekly *avvisi* (logs of conspicuous activity prepared for diplomatic pouches) of the later seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries bring some welcome

depth to our view of the dynamics of the Venetian oratorio. It is this impression, and the principal findings on which it is based, that are considered herewith.

Although the story of Venetian oratorio is usually related entirely within the context of the four *ospedali*, it is essential to acknowledge the importance of the the Fava, which provided oratorios abundantly, if somewhat sporadically. There is, however, a paucity of first-hand accounts of oratorios given at the Fava, and avvisi do not make major contributions to this side of the equation. In the interest of situating new findings in the context of existing ones, however, we begin with that institution. A brief discussion of Passion oratorios at San Marco is also provided, since it represents a third line of development of the genre. The more extensive discussion of the oratorio in the *ospedali* which then follows is prompted by a greater abundance of documentation, some of it not previously reported.

### **1.1. Santa Maria della Consolazione (Santa Maria della Fava)**

Oratorios given at the Fava were truly devotional. They were intended to stimulate introspection. They were heavily tinged with the rhetorical proprieties. These fell in line, more or less, with the devotional exemplars of the saint, a sixteenth-century mystic who introduced the practice of gathering followers together on Rome's Janiculum for meditation after those Vespers services which fell between Easter and All Saints' Day. The roots of the Baroque oratorio are considered to have been planted in the *laude* associated with the *oratorio vespertino*.

Oratorios given at the Fava were performed by entirely male casts and were apparently accompanied by relatively few instruments. Their subjects suggest austerity (in line with St. Philip's renunciation of worldly grandeur) and convey a pietistic presence. If the Venetian community of oratorians followed the Roman model, the works would have been given in the spring, summer, and early autumn. But outside the Fava, oratorios were not given with the same weekly regularity over months in succession. Instead, they seem to have followed the Venetian inclination to mark special occasions. Oratorios at S. Filippo Neri appear to have been given entirely in vernacular Italian, which would have reflected the humility of the sect.

Between 1671 and 1675 some 19 oratorios, set largely (possibly exclusively) by Giovanni Legrenzi, were given at the Fava. Their emphasis was generally on celestial power (*Creation del mondo*, 1672) and human contrition (*L'huomo moribondo*, *La morte del cor penitente*, *Peccator pentito*, all 1673). In the 1680s and 90s the Fava continued on this track, but morals from the Old Testament (*Il figliuol prodigo*, 1697) and the Apochrypha (*Oloferne*, 1697) gradually made inroads.

It was standard practice for oratorios to be revived at will. Legrenzi's *La morte del cor penitente* was revived in 1705, fifteen years after the composer's death, for example. Only in the 1740s did the Fava begin to offer works which recounted tales of martyrdom. Curiously, the Fava's activities seem to have diminished

as the *ospedali* began to rise in musical stature in the 1670s and 80s. The long list of works by Legrenzi for the Fava coincided, curiously, with his tenure as *maestro di musica* (1670-1676) at the Derelitti (also called the Ospedaletto), where no oratorios were given until 1716. Oratorios for the Fava tapered off sharply when Legrenzi moved to the Mendicanti (1676-1682) as *maestro di coro*. This appointment was succeeded by two at San Marco, first as assistant, and then (from 1685) as full *maestro di cappella*.

## 1.2. Oratorios in the *Ospedali*

Within the *ospedali* the musical repertory expanded in proportion to the growing skills and numbers of *figlie del coro*. The distinction between all-male performances at the Fava and all-female ones in the *ospedali* was manifestly clear to audiences, even if it is largely ignored today. The rapid growth of commitment to a musical education in orphanages, which occurred between 1675 and 1725, must be attributed in part to the Baroque belief in the cleansing power of affective music. The performers had grown from infant girls whose known history had begun with being passed anonymously through small grills (*scaffette*).

The somewhat noisy debate of recent decades concerning the “sensational” idea that the (presumably nubile) *figlie* could have sung tenor and bass parts has been laid to rest both in the modern performance of early music<sup>3</sup> and in the ongoing research of Micky White on the musicians at the Pietà. Having determined the exact ages of all of the *figlie*, White (forthcoming) has determined that the span of ages within the *coro* ranged in the early eighteenth century from 14 to 80. Low parts were assigned to older women, whose voices had deepened with age. Although new *figlie* were admitted from time to time, the post of *figlia di coro* was a lifetime career. Young *figlie* were apprenticed to older ones, just as young male performers were to their masters in the secular world. Instrumental music of all kinds was promoted at the Mendicanti and the Pietà, suggesting that oratorios there would have had substantial accompaniment and appropriate arias an instrumental obbligato. The use of the organ was more prominent at the Derelitti. The scope and nature of instrumental usage at the Incurabili are largely uncharted, as little documentation for the institution has so far been identified.

The repertory of the *ospedali* emphasized stories well suited to female casting. The lives of female heroines, saints, and martyrs frequently formed the basis of oratorios, but so too did personifications of political entities. Among the frequently cited oratorios of the early period were Ruggiero Fedeli’s *Santa Catterina d’Alessandria* (location undetermined<sup>4</sup>, 1675), Pallavicino’s *Maria Maddalena* (Incurabili, 1686 et

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<sup>3</sup> The late Andrea von Ramm (of the Schola Cantorum Basiliensis) told me in c. 1985, with specific reference to this subject, that her range extended downward to F of the “great” octave (i.e., a fourth above the lowest note on a violoncello).

<sup>4</sup> The work was dedicated to Domenico Morosini, who came from a prominent noble family. The composer’s father, Carlo Fedeli, a prominent violoncellist, had served as *maestro di strumenti* at the Mendicanti from 1662 to 1671.

al.), Giacomo Spada's *Santa Maria Egiziaca* (Pietà, 1687), C. F. Pollarolo's *Sant'Orsola* (Incurabili, 1702); and Vivaldi's *Juditha triumphans* (Pietà, 1716/7). Only the Mendicanti defied this convention; its oratorios generally concentrated on male patriarchs or political figures (e.g., Legrenzi's *L'Erodiade*, 1687; Partenio's *Tomaso Moro*, 1688 and 1703; and an anonymous *Lazarus reviviscens*, 1710).

Each of the conservatories was responsive to particular patrons. The governors of each institution were undoubtedly responsible for the overall quasi-political subtexts that inhered in many of oratorios. First among equals in the patronage of music (especially the Pietà and the Incurabili) in the seventeenth century were princes and princesses (as well as dukes and duchesses) from Florence and Modena. The Mendicanti, perhaps trading on the associations of the adjacent church of SS. Giovanni e Paolo, seems to have built its base of patronage more among august families in the Venetian government, particularly those with naval or military connections. This could account for its preference for portraying male heroes.

A common denominator among the *ospedali* was the consistent performance of oratorios during the two liturgical seasons of spiritual preparation—Advent and Lent. This stood quite in contrast to the practice of the oratorians at the Fava for presentations in the warmer months of the year and reflects an entirely different religious attitude. At the *ospedali*, new music for Vespers and Compline was often created for Marian feasts, especially that of Assumption, but instrumental music also played a major role in these services at the *ospedali*, particularly at the Mendicanti in the later seventeenth century and the Pietà in the early eighteenth.

The treatment of oratorio texts within the *ospedali* was somewhat inconsistent. At the Incurabili, for example, oratorios in the time of Pallavicino were in the vernacular. Carlo Francesco Pollarolo seems to have subcontracted some of the oratorio writing to Antonio Lotti and Francesco Gasparini. In the first years of the eighteenth century, the language of oratorios at the Incurabili became exclusively Latin and remained so under the later masters Nicola Porpora, Niccolò Jommelli, Gioacchino Cocchi, Vincenzo Ciampi, and Baldissare Galuppi. The Incurabili may have been following the lead of the Mendicanti, which had adopted the same practice by 1690 and maintained it throughout the eighteenth century. (At least 55 Latin oratorios were set by Ferdinando Bertoni for the Mendicanti between 1752 and 1779.) All works given at the Derelitti were in Latin. The earliest work to be given in Latin at the Pietà was an anonymous one in 1694. Works given at unidentified locations were exclusively in Italian. This suggests that they were intended principally for devotional venues.<sup>5</sup> The Latin oratorio may have served more distinctly as a genre for the nobility, for oratorio audiences in the conservatories were decidedly that.

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<sup>5</sup> Some items in the Arnolds's listing were actually given outside Venice. For example Benedetto Marcello's *Il pianto e il riso delle quattro stagioni* (1731) and *Il trionfo della poesia e della musica* (1733) were given in Macerata. See E. Selfridge-Field, *The Works of Alessandro and Benedetto Marcello* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), pp. 310-315, and Michael Burden, ed. *Il pianto e il riso delle quattro stagioni* (Middleton, WI: A-R

This brief sketch of the different performing situations of the oratorio suggests a significant institutional bifurcation of purposes. The *ospedali*, while being in one sense pedagogical institutions, were prompted by their growing following among the nobility to subscribe to “high church” standards. They catered for the patrons of the same social standing as did the early opera theatres. Appearances mattered. Proprieties were to be observed. The Oratory and its private imitators were, it appears, better aligned with the Counter-Reformation dictate to make texts comprehensible and performances uncluttered. The *ospedali* were hardly insensitive to the expression of texts, but they achieved expression in a different way—through carefully articulated ornamentation and highly colored instrumentation. It is, nonetheless, instructive that surviving commentaries, which overwhelmingly served the higher echelons of society, take the *ospedali* model as the standard by which expression was to be judged. According to some commentaries, especially those in *Pallade veneta*,<sup>6</sup> it was music in the *ospedali* which reached the pinnacle of personal expression—over the offerings of churches and princely palaces, academies, oratories, and (especially) theaters.

### 1.3. Passion Oratorios at San Marco

Among the relatively few Venetian oratorios of the time which are survived by a score, almost all come from the *ospedali*. Thus the subject of “low church” devotional oratorios seems destined to remain impenetrable. To give some sense of other alternatives to *ospedali* oratorios, however, we can turn to a third model of Venetian oratorios—remnants of the Passions given at San Marco in the last years of the *maestro di cappella* Giovanni Rovetta (c. 1600-1668).

It appears that the Passion tradition which flourished in Saxony in the declining years of the court *Kapellmeister* Heinrich Schütz (1585-1672) was cross-fertilized with Venetian passions of the same period. It is, at present, impossible to assign chronological priority; the recorded dates and the musical styles are strikingly similar: both Schütz at the Saxon court and Rovetta at San Marco set some elements of passion oratorios in the 1660s.<sup>7</sup> Some possible avenues of reciprocity can be imagined. The peripatetic Pallavicino shuttled between Venice (or Padua) and Dresden from 1667 until his death at the start of 1688 and could well have carried music to and fro, but he never worked at San Marco and is unlikely to have had a hand in the surviving exemplars from either venue. Both composers may have been indebted to practices that reached back to Monteverdi’s time, although no references to or exemplars of such works by Monteverdi are known.

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Editions, Inc., 2002).

<sup>6</sup> E. Selfridge-Field, Eleanor. *Pallade veneta: Writings on Music in Venetian Society, 1650-1750*. Venice: Fondazione Levi, 1985.

<sup>7</sup> See E. Selfridge-Field, “Rovetta’s Music for Holy Week,” *La Basilica di San Marco nell’età moderna*, ed. Francesco Passadore e Franco Rossi (Venice: Fondazione Levi, 1998), pp. 401-441.

However, Schütz had studied with Monteverdi during his second trip to Venice (1628/29).<sup>8</sup> Xx Rovetta had served as assistant *maestro* under Monteverdi from 1626 to 1643. When Schütz returned to Venice in 1648xx he undoubtedly would have had contact with Rovetta, who had succeeded to the position of *maestro di cappella* upon Monteverdi's death. While it is possible that Pallavicino acquired some of his musical ideas of Dresden, it is far from certain that what he acquired there was entirely Saxon.<sup>9</sup> Rovetta's appointment as *maestro di cappella* at San Marco (1644, succeeding Monteverdi) continued until his own death in 1668, just a year after Pallavicino's first opera was performed in Venice.

While no passion oratorios are known to have been performed elsewhere in Venice, it appears from surviving *turbae* in the Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana in Venice that such works were given at San Marco during Holy Week from the 1660s (if not earlier). Palm Sunday seems to have been the chief day for their performance.<sup>10</sup> The Lamentations of Jeremiah were regularly performed, with harpsichord<sup>11</sup>, on the Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday of Holy Week. Apart from these *turbae*, the few works that survive from the seventeenth century come entirely from the *ospedali*.

## 2. New Sources for the Venetian Oratorio

Venice was a hub of news-exchange between land and sea, and between the West and the East. Many of the weekly news-sheets generally categorized as *avvisi* or *gazette*, which were produced throughout Europe, were sent to Venice for forwarding. Their items were scrutinized and recompiled in many locales. News traveled easily but not always with integrity. Venetian history is particularly well served by *avvisi* because multiple providers of local dispatches operated there and because news from Venice in reports compiled elsewhere was more likely to be from first-hand accounts.

*Avvisi* found much of their readership among diplomats, court secretaries, and religious authorities. They were sold on six-month subscriptions, and the readership must have been known to the writers, since the number of subscribers was, by modern standards, relatively small. *Avvisi* were sometimes collected in printed anthologies and issued by the month (e.g., *Pallade veneta*), by the week (e.g., *Bologna*), or even semi-weekly (e.g., the *Diario ordinario*). The writers of *avvisi* were never credited when reports were recycled, although the original dispatches were signed. *Pallade veneta* was one of the few collections to provide accounts

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<sup>8</sup> He had studied organ and counterpoint with Giovanni Gabrieli on his first (1609-1611).

<sup>9</sup> In fact his tenure in Dresden must be the principal reason for the survival there of significant quantities of Venetian sacred music (not only by himself but also by Legrenzi and others). See E. Selfridge-Field, introduction to the facsimile of Carlo Pallavicino's *Messalina* (Drammaturgia Musicale Veneta, viii), Milan: Ricordi, 2002.

<sup>10</sup> In contrast to Good Friday, when the doge was required to make a ceremonial visit to the convent of San Zaccaria.

<sup>11</sup> Documents in the series I-Vas Procuratia de Supra, Terminazioni, consistently refer to the use of the *spinetta* for "the lessons of Holy Week." This substitute for the organ could have been prompted by logistics. It could also have been suggested by etymology: A *spinetta* (plucked by "thorns") recalled the crown of the Crucifixion.

that were vivid; most were perfunctory in nature. It is also one of the few with a known author (Francesco Coli). *Pallade veneta* commented often on the individuality of the occasion, on the freshness of the expression, on the unmarred purity of the voices, and on the affective use of musical language.

The “purity of the voices” was a commonplace characterization of the *figlie di coro* of the Venetian *ospedali* in periodical literature.<sup>12</sup> The *topos* of female virtue is highly evident in *Pallade veneta*, in which commentaries on music tend to be longer than they are in weekly news-sheets. The audience for oratorios in the conservatories consisted of the nobility, whose ranks were augmented in the eighteenth century by wealthy merchants. Quite often the patrons for whom an oratorio was said to have been performed for was a young royal (frequently female) from a neighboring duchy. This association is aligned with the stereotypical view that that women were more concerned with spiritual affairs, men with worldly affairs.

In parallel with surviving libretti, documentary accounts of the oratorio wither in the 1720s. Interest in the genre was revived in the middle decades of the century, from the late 1740s up to roughly 1780. *Avvisi*, however, were largely superseded by twice-weekly printed newspapers (from 1760 in Venice) which catered for a *bourgeoise* readership and therefore took little interest in oratorios. References appear more abundantly in private diaries and chronicles.

Although oratorios are mentioned infrequently in periodical literature, my own investigation of them (extending currently to sixteen series) has been such that reports on approximately 50 Venetian oratorios given through 1750 have been culled. A number of the works described seem to be survived neither by a score nor by a libretto. The new information they provide brings perspective both to aspects of their performance, to the reception of works, and to the regard in which particular composers and institutions were held in general.

Collectively, reports on oratorios in *avvisi* show how misleading statistics based only on surviving libretti can be. Yet it is difficult to offer a corrected version of Table 1 for various reasons. First, works are often unclearly identified in documentary accounts. Second, documentary accounts often report on the same work over and over, in response to multiple performances and revivals. This phenomenon demonstrates that not all oratorio “productions” are represented by surviving libretti, nor did all oratorios had printed libretti for their first performances. Like operas, oratorios were sometimes revived under new names. Therefore, trend lines based on printed libretti are inevitably a bit misleading—but not easily correctable.

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<sup>12</sup> Further on the background of this periodical, see E. Selfridge-Field, *PALLADE VENETA*, Chs 1-3.

### 3. The Oratorio in the *Ospedali*

The Venetian Republic prided itself on its political virtue, the bulwark of which was its role in the recapture of the Holy Land during the Crusades. In the seventeenth century “amazons” [female warriors] became the symbols of Venetian dedication to the cause of conquering heathenism (i.e., holding the Turks at bay as they penetrated the Hungarian plains and threatened Vienna). The all-female Venetian *ospedali* had been cultivating choruses and training girls to become organists for decades when the Holy League was formed in 1683. The League’s image of omnipotence seemed to be translated in the conservatories into newly forceful methods of musical expression. These included *trille*, *gorgie*, and “*dolci manieri*” in the vocabulary of *Pallade veneta*. Performances were noted for their musical acrobatics and for their ability thereby to better convey the meaning of texts.

The carefully cultivated “sweet manner[ism]s” of singing in the *ospedali* were invested in a population trained exclusively by opera composers. Legrenzi, Pallavicino, and Pollarolo, all *maestri di coro* in conservatories (Legrenzi at the Mendicanti, the other two in succession at the Incurabili) —were all greatly praised as composers for the theater. Pollarolo apparently recruited opera singers to give instruction to the most gifted of his students. The most striking expression of the perceived value of a musical novice’s entry into an *ospedale* (regarded as a life-time commitment) is this account from January 1698, in which an apt young pupil renounces a possible stage career in order to become a *figlia* at the Incurabili:

Una famiglia Civilissima di Candia che già tempo si riconosce in questa Dominante nominata Pignatelli [one of the first families to buy nobility; see Setton], ebbero una figlia di bellissima aspetto dottata di spirito sublime pervenuta all’ età delli 15 anni sempre protteta dall’ Eccellentissimo Casa Cornaro del Signor Cardinale gli à fatto apprendere diverse carrieri [?] e finalmente inclinando alla musica, che oggidi è divenuto nel Mondo tanto famigliare, si è nel corso d’ otto mesi d’ essercitio perfetionata in modo tale che il famoso Polarollo suo maestro è rimesso confuso, ma quel più importante parecchia il Matteucci, et ogni altro Musico di supremo grido, e già questi con grosse offerte, havesse grandi ai Genitori per ottenerla sono state vane, poiche [2r] improvvisamente hà la stessa figura supplicato con Genitori l’ Eccellentissima Casa Cornaro loro benefattrice collocarla nelle Vergine del Pio Luogo dell’ Incurabili per dovere recitare nel Divino Teatro la seconda 7na di Quaresima, dichiarando la figlia di volere servire Dio, e star rinchiusa più tosto, che esporsi sù li Teatri per rendere ingnominoso verso il Cielo, et il Mondo il nome del proprio Genitore.<sup>13</sup>

Oratorios were most frequently given in the *ospedali* during Advent and Lent, with the possibility of some activity (greatly increased after 1750) around the feast of Assumption (15 August). Within a particular institution, oratorios were often repeated on the same day of the week during the religious season of the first performance. The most popular ones were also revived at intervals that could span many years. Before 1700, the Incurabili was the steadiest of the four institutions in its commitment to oratorios for both Advent and Lent. A representative commentary, from Lent 1683, relates that

<sup>13</sup> M [see List of Abbreviations at end of article] 475 (=12119), entry of 25 Genaro 1698.

Si cominciò Venerdì della scorsa settimana un Oratorio alli Incurabili come anco Martedì un altro alli Mendicanti quali doveranno ogni settimana seguirar sino à quadragesima dove concorsano molti Cavalieri e Dame come pure infinità di Popolo.<sup>14</sup>

The oratorio sometimes seems to have been served as an alternative attraction for those suffering from “opera withdrawal,” since theaters were always closed during the latter half of Advent and all of Lent; the first part of Advent was somewhat negotiable. Theaters were also closed for a significant number of feasts that punctuated legitimate periods of opening. One such period was that of 1-3 January. Oratorios could be performed during these interstices. One example comes from the start of 1709, when the young king of Denmark, who was to be much feted during a winter stay, was taken to an oratorio at the Pietà:

Arrivato Sabato scorso la Maestà del Rè di Danimarca sotto il nome di Conte di Oldemburgo, passò con tutt’ il suo seguito . . . nella sera dal primo dell’ Anno fù recitato un Suntuoso Oratorio in Musica alla presenza di Sua Maestà nella Chiesa della Pietà nella quale non entrarono, che Cavalieri e Dame, e fra le sedie di queste vi n’era una distinta tutta d’oro, che Sua Maestà fece portar via, [e pure venne altra eguale à quella . . . et] in quella sera [giovedì] si riaprirono i Teatri dell’ Opere, e Comedie, si come del Ridotto, che erano stati serrati durante li detti 3 giorni.<sup>15</sup>

The king’s request that the gaudily dressed woman be led away is characteristic of the tone of many documentary accounts regarding the ospedali, but it may represent an apochryphal nod to the sumptuary laws of the Republic, rather than to the king’s personal moral code. Government agents were quick to report inappropriate dress in churches at any time of year. Venetians conformed to the strict mandates, but foreigners were inclined to flout them.

A similar involvement with the oratorio occurred during the visit of the Electoral Prince of Saxony (August the Strong) in 1712:

Và continuando la sua permanenza in questa Dominante il Principe Elettorale di Sassonia che viene servito, e divertito dagli avisati Nobili con le Veglie, avendoli pure fatto fare un’ Oratorio in Musica dalle Figlie di questo Ospitale della Pietà.<sup>16</sup>

The only new oratorio listed for 1712 was Gasparini’s *Moisè liberato dal Nilo*, but there is no way to determine whether this was the work the prince heard.

A popular hour for an oratorio to begin, particular on a Sunday, was “dopo pranzo.” By Venetian reckoning this meant roughly two hours after noon, which was also the approximate time at which Vespers began. The Venetian day was of slightly variable length, since its point of initiation was calibrated with sunset.

<sup>14</sup> M 460 (=12104), entry of 13 Febraro 1683 [N.S.]. No libretto titles for either institution from an appropriate date are known.

<sup>15</sup> M 485 (=12129), entry of 5 Gennaro 1708 More Veneto. The work cannot be clearly identified. No new oratorios are recorded for 1709, and for 1708 Gasparini’s *Dominicae nativitatìs praeludium* seems inappropriate for the date and circumstances. Characteristically, pastoral cantatas were performed during the days approaching Twelfth Night (Epiphany).

<sup>16</sup> M 488 (=12132), entry of 27. Febraro 1711 M.V.

Sunset occurred later (in absolute terms) during Lent than it did during Advent (which straddled the winter solstice), but how much later depend on how late Easter fell. By (fixed) modern reckoning, the time of noon was slightly variable. During Advent the starting time would have been between about 14:00 (2:00). At the start of an early Lent it would have been around 14:30. At the end of a late Lent it would have been around 15:00. (No minutes were in use in Venetian time-keeping until c. 1760.)<sup>17</sup>

Documentary references are more likely to identify the general subject of a work than to identify it by a formal title. For example, a documentary reference to *La vita e morte di Santa Teresa* (Incurabili, 1677) appears to correspond to the Arnolds' listing for a *Fuga nella nascita, vita, e morte di Santa Teresa*. But the libretto known to the Arnolds was from 1687, some ten years later than the earliest reference to the work in *avvisi*. This oratorio was set by Carlo Pallavicino, the *maestro di coro* at the Incurabili, on a text by Francesco Maria Piccioli.<sup>18</sup> It was found to be “highly satisfactory” when it was first given (on 14 December 1677).<sup>19</sup>

*Santa Teresa* was dedicated to the duke of Radzivil, a Lithuanian who was to seek asylum in Venice itwo years later. He was the most distinguished visitor in Venice in December 1677, a “coincidence” which is characteristic of both opoera and oratorio dedicatees.

When one examines dozens of reports of eye-witness accounts of music in the *ospedali*, it becomes clear that the oratorio was not the genre of choice for all visitors. Some (in particular Saxon royals) preferred to attend Vespers and Compline, which might include psalms and instrumental works—even during times of year when oratorios were customary.

The *ospedali* were supported, partially and indirectly, by the Venetian government but only on an *ad hoc* basis. When funds were meager in the *ospedali*, a religious indulgence might focus attention on gifts to the institutions. In the eighteenth century the government publicized the fact that the meat from the bulls slaughtered in festivities held during the last days of Carnival was donated to the *ospedali*.<sup>20</sup>

The *ospedali* were mentioned in many wills and sometimes received large bequests upon the death of one of their governors.

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<sup>17</sup> Venetian time-keeping is discussed in Chapter 2 of my forthcoming book, *The Calendar of Venetian Opera* (Stanford University Press, c. 2005) and in my article on “Cultural Hours” forthcoming in *Studi veneti*. It is also described briefly in *Pallade veneta*, pp. 53ff.

<sup>18</sup> Piccioli was best known for the texts of operas given at the Contarini villa, Piazzola.

<sup>19</sup> I-MOas, *Avvisi da Venezia*, B. 5217, item of 18 December 1677: “Martedì fà a sentire un’Oratorio recitato in Musica dalle figlie dell’Hospital dell’Incurabili rappresentate *La Vita, e morte di Santa Teresa*, restandone molto sodisfatto.” On the Duke of Radzivil, see I-Rvat, *Archivio Segreto, Nunziatura di Venezia*, xx, f. 911 and yy, f. 877.

<sup>20</sup> The timing was impractical, given the proscription of meat-eating during the 40 days of Lent.

As eleemosinary institutions, the *ospedali* were grateful recipients of private gifts, but these could be given to individual *figlie*, to collections or them, or to the institution as a whole. Patrons of renown often give jewels and coins to their favorite performers in operas, and gifts given to the *figlie* were usually just as worldly. Although the Venetian government issued frequent proclamations on behalf of the gold ducat, monetary gifts were frequently offered in the currency of the giver.

The most highly regarded composer of oratorios in the later decades of the seventeenth century was Carlo Pallavicino, who was *maestro di coro* at the Incurabili from 1674 until his death in 1688, and by modern standards for “performing arts organizations” Pallavicino would be considered to have been an excellent “fund raiser”. The following series of references to his oratorio *Il trionfo dell’innocenza*, based on a text by Piccioli, carries through from its premiere in December 1686 to late February 1687 and documents its phenomenal popularity.

7 December 1686:

Mercordi doppo pranzo si gode bensi un divertimento Speciale nella Chiesa dè gl’Incurabili con un’ Oratorio cantato da quelle Figlie intitolato *il Trionfo dell’Innocenza*, opera della penna erudita del Signor Pallavicino, che cantata poi dalle suoi Angeliche di quelle Figlie ne riportò un’ appaluso grandissimo. La Chiesa, che è ben grande, e capace, era ripiena di Nobiltà, e damme, et il concorso fù tale, che chi tardi ad andarvi non hebbe luogo. Durò il spatio di 3 hore, e si crede che sarà replicato, mentre che la hanno di sentirlo di nuovo hà fatto maggiore in chi una volta l’ha goduto.<sup>21</sup>

1 February 1687:

Hieri fù [l’Elettore di Baviera] alla Chiesa degl’Incurabili à sentire l’Oratorio replicato per la 3:za volta da quelle figlie, e vi fù pure il *Serenissimo* di Mantova, *Principe*, e *Principessa* di Barait con molti altri soggetti di gran conditione, et il concorso fù tale, che ancor che la Chiesa sia molto capace, non puotero molti havervi l’ingresso.<sup>22</sup>

1 February 1687 (another account):

Tutti questi *Principi* furono all’Oratorio, si cantò dalle Putte dell’Hospitale degl’Incurabili, e dicesi, che *Sua Altezza Elettorale* mandasse poi per Regalo alle medesime 50 Cechini. [The princes would have been those of Barait, Baden, Savoy, Bavaria, Mantua, etc.]<sup>23</sup>

1 February 1687 (another account):

Ieri *Sua Altezza Elettorale* fù ad un *trattenimento* spirituale nella Chiesa delli Incurabili, dove quelle figliuole [sic] replicarono l’oratorio recitatovi la settimana addietro, con esservi stato gran concorso di questi altri *Principi*, e *Cavalieri* forestieri.<sup>24</sup>

8 February 1687:

<sup>21</sup> I-MOas, Avvisi, B. 5220, entry of 7 Xbre [Dicembre] 1686.

<sup>22</sup> I-MOas, Avvisi, B. 5220, entry of primo Febraro 1686 [M.V.]

<sup>23</sup> NV, Segn. 131, f.69v, entry of P:mo Febbraro 1687.

<sup>24</sup> NV, Segn. 131, f.73, P:mo Febbraro 1687 [second author].

Nel solenne Oratorio recitatosi in Musica dalle Vergini degl' Incurabili v'intervenue il Serenissimo Elettorale di Baviera, Duca di Mantova, Bareit, Brandemburgo con la Prencipessa Moglie, Savoia, e molti altri, e Sua Altezza Elettorale lasciò regalo di 50. Ongari alle medesime, come anco tutti gli altri Prencipi contribuirono generosamente, e detta Prencipessa di Bareit vi è ritornata sola, havendo voluto godere il divertimento discorrere con esse Vergini à quali lasciò abbondante elemosina.<sup>25</sup>

15 February 1687:

La Prencipessa di Berait, che nel sentire l'oratorio delle figlie dell'Ospedale delli Incurabili, nè restò molto soddisfatta [f.108] portatasi Giovedì dalle medesime lo vuole nuovamente sentire in privato, e non cessando di comendarle, lasciò loro di Regalo 50 Ungari.<sup>26</sup>

22 February 1687:

Della forestiera ... ci continua ancor le loro dimora li Serenissimi di Baviera, Savoia, e Mantova, e qualch'altro soggetto qualificato. Questi nè correnti giorni quaresimali si sono portati à sentire la musica delle figliuole di questi 4 Ospedali, Mendicanti, Incurabili, Pietà, e Ospedaletto, separatamente però per riguardo dè trattenimenti trà Savoia, e Baviera, con haver lasciato in ogni luogo risconti non ordinarij della loro generosità.<sup>27</sup>

As the Venetian economy declined in the eighteenth century, inflation and floating-rate currency exchanges became increasingly familiar. So it happened that in March 1740 the Saxon Prince [Friedrich Christian] left a gift twice as large as that his father had left almost 30 years earlier. It must be said, however, that he heard a most unusual work, a serenata for the nine muses (*Il coro delle muse*) in which each muse demonstrated a different skill—in the playing of musical instruments. During its performance a simultaneous representation of the work was given on temporary scaffolding built on the side canal of the Pietà and illuminated for the benefit of viewers in gondolas.<sup>28</sup>

Lunedì il Real Principe Elettorale godì un Oratorio musicale recitato dalle Figlie delle Pietà, e lasciò loro 100 ungarì di mancia, e ... preparandosegli altra Opera spirituale sontuosa dalle Figlie Cantanti degl' Incurabili, e dalli 4 Ecc.mi Sig. Deputati una magnifica Regatta.<sup>29</sup>

The prince was treated to similarly ambitious works on the two following Mondays. The works cited below were Carcani's *Concordia di Tempo colla Fama* and Paradies' *Le muse in gara*:

Lunedì [2 Aprile] godè [S.A.R.] poi dalle figlie degli Incurabili una Cantata a 7 voci sopra la Real Progenie Elettorale di Sassonia, e l'indole generosa d'esso Regio Principe, che lasciò 100 zecchini alle medesime...<sup>30</sup>

<sup>25</sup> M 464, (=12108), entry of 8 Febraro 1687.

<sup>26</sup> NV, Segn. 131, ff.107v-108, entry of 15 febraro 1687.

<sup>27</sup> NV, Seg. 131, f. 112, entry of 22 Febraro 1687.

<sup>28</sup> E. Selfridge-Field, *The Calendar of Venetian Opera*, p. 781.

<sup>29</sup> DO No. 3536 (26 Marzo [1740]), p. 9. Although *Il coro delle muse* is attributed to Gennaro d'Alessandro, some of the instrumental pieces are known to be by Vivaldi.

<sup>30</sup> DO No. 3539, p. 10, 2 Aprile [1740].

Intanto Lunedì sera [9 Aprile] il Real Principe Elettorale godì l'altra esquisita Cantata a sei voci dalle zitelle dè Mendicanti, allusiva alla sua fortunata venuta, e sodisfattissimo, lasciò loro 100 zecchini.<sup>31</sup>

These performances occurred on the last three Mondays of Lent. The work given at the Incurabili was *La concordia di Tempo colla Fama* (music by Giuseppe Carcani); that at the Mendicanti was Domenico Paradies' *Le muse in gara*.

*Pallade veneta* is the only source that makes frequent reference to the outings that the *figlie di coro* made in late summer and early autumn “to sing to the vegetables,” that is, to have musical retreats on the smaller islands of the lagoon and in the countryside of the Veneto. Some typical accounts are these::

Mercordi le figlie cantanti dell'ospital dè Mendicanti: passarono all'aniversario divertimento, che dalla generosità degli *Illustrissimi Governatori* gli' vien concesso, e si portarono nell' Isola da Torcello, dove fecero imobiler quei vegetabili al speccar dè suoi garruli accenti.<sup>32</sup>

Martedì anche le musicali Verginelli del Coro degl' Incurabili passarono al breve, ma sospiritato divertimento della Mira, ove sine que Vegetabili goderono del loro Solazzoso eccheggiare, fra quele sue rurali solitudini.<sup>33</sup>

Martedì li Figlie del coro della Pietà prima di passar all' Annuale divertimento eccheggiarono una Musical Messa in Santa Lucia a vista delli tanti Aspettatori che furono rapiti dalla dolcezza del godimento.<sup>34</sup>

Accounts of what the *figlie* did and how they did it are not above reproach. They did become figures of legend even while they lived. We read, for example, of the participation of the *figlie* of all four *ospedali* in a civic procession to the church of San Rocco for the patronal feast (16 August) in 1723. Accounts of earlier centuries never mention the participation of the *ospedali* feasts. This one (it was one of Venice's several “plague” feasts) required the doge to worship at the church, “dove si sono parimente portati processionalmente con divota, e decorosa forma tutti i Figli, e Figlie di questi Luoghi Pij, oltre il numeroso Popolo.”<sup>35</sup> The church of S. Rocco is quite small, and the *campo* wedged between it, the Scuola di S. Rocco, and the rear of S. Maria de' Frari is hardly large enough to accommodate a typical ducal contingent minus the *ospedali*. Furthermore, the feast of St. Roche had for decades been marked by an exhibition of “antique paintings” in this adjoining space. Any *figli* or *figlie* present in the midst of a “numeroso populo” can only have amounted to a modest number.

<sup>31</sup> DO No. 3543, p. 5, 9 Aprile [1740].

<sup>32</sup> *Pallade Veneta* [week of 9-16 Settembre1702], pp. 241f

<sup>33</sup> *Pallade Veneta*: [week of 16-23 Settembre1702], p. 243.

<sup>34</sup> *Pallade Veneta* [week of 26 Luglio – 2 Agosto1704], p. 255.

<sup>35</sup> NV Segn. 174, f. 336, entry of 21 agosto 1723.

By the middle of the eighteenth century, the outings of the *figliedi coro* had evolved into invitations to spend short periods in residence in countryside estates, together with other invited guests, as well as rides in carriages, private gifts, and other tokens of esteem. Many *figlie* lived a long life and prospered far more than existing accounts suggest. Some left the *ospedali* to marry. Overall, we still know very little about their lives and their music-making. However, what can be gleaned from the *avvisi* definitely whets the appetite for more.

### Library sigla used

AS	Archivio Segreto [in I-Rvat]
I-MOas	Modena: Archivio di Stato
I-Rvat	Rome: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana
I-Vnm	Venice: Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana

### List of bibliographical abbreviations

DO	<i>Diario ordinario</i> , 1716-; printed semi-weekly, listed by issue number
M	“Mercuri da Venezia” [31 bound vols. of MSS in I-Vnm, Cod. It. Cl. VI]
NV	Nunziatura di Venezia [in I-Rvat, Archivio Segreto ]
PV	“Pallade Veneta” [originals in I-Vas, Inquisitori di Stato; Vmc; Vnm]