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*Song and Season: Science, Culture, and Theatrical Time in
Early Modern Venice (The Calendar of Venetian Opera)*
(review)

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Eleanor Selfridge-Field. *Song and Season: Science, Culture, and Theatrical Time in Early Modern Venice (The Calendar of Venetian Opera)*.

Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007. 394 pp. index. illus. tpls. bibl. \$60. ISBN: 978-0-8047-5765-2.

When cheese went accidentally moldy, gorgonzola and stilton were born; when Fleming inadvertently left a Petri dish of bacteria by a window, he discovered the effect of penicillin; and while trying to simply “produce a template for [Venetian] theatrical seasons [where] to place any undated work in its appropriate position on a chronological continuum” (15), Selfridge-Field assembled the materials for this book, a necessary tool for any scholar of Venetian theatrical matters, but also of Venetian cultural and religious events of any kind for which dating is of importance. Her original plan failed for three reasons: the number of coexisting ways to mark time (which became part 1 of this book, “Marking Time”), the variability and ever-changing definition of theatrical seasons (part 2, “Using Time”), and the differences among systems of reporting dates (part 3, “Telling Time”).

Part 1 of the book explains the extremely complex system of keeping time in Venice, from the different types of year — the “Venetian” one starting on 1 March and the “papal” one starting on 1 January — to the hour and its subdivisions. Each

calendar — Christian, liturgical, ducal, accounting, and academic — had its own set of feasts and celebrations, each involving social dictates or constraints. Selfridge-Field systematizes all such markers, both the fixed and the variable ones. She then examines what Venetians valued in terms of tracking time, and how they did it with civic clocks, hourglasses, and bell-ringing with its surreally complex patterns.

Part 2 tackles the theatrical seasons as they developed, and places them in the context of Venetian society — with gambling, the compulsory wearing of masks, government constraints, the Carnival as a state of mind, and so on — culminating in chapter 5 in a model of the year as subdivided into both theatrical periods and non-theatrical ones, which forms the basis for all subsequent discussions. She then explores the preferred repertoire and periods of performance for the many theaters of Venice and the relationship between *dramma per musica* and *commedia*.

Part 3 attempts to reconcile the differing ways in which each cataloguer (“eagle”) and weekly dispatcher (“mole”) reported the works performed in Venice. Chapter 10 ends with an explanation of the goal of her *New Chronology*, which seeks to recognize and correct old and new misinterpretations and errors in the listing of works performed in early modern Venice. Selfridge-Field provides a description of each chronology, account, newsheet, journal, and other source, with its shortcomings, particular aim, and level of accuracy. Most revealing are the examples in chapter 11.8 on the reconciliation of reported dates from disparate sources such as libretti, printers, and censors’ *licenze*. In the final page she mentions two crucial points, the switch in theater main fare from new works to repertoire ones, as well as the relevance of cultural anchors for theater works, but does not develop them.

This book will be of use to any person trying to make sense of events in Venetian life, especially if connected to the theater, and to those perusing *A New Chronology of Venetian Opera*. But the book is difficult to read and not only because of the technicalities of the subject matter. There are many repetitions and the topics are not always presented in a consequential manner. In addition, there are many typographical errors and some garbled sentences, such as, “At no time of year during was music lacking in Venetian ceremonial and religious life.” (195), as well as a few factual errors: for example, on 241 she promises to examine three venues, Paris, Dresden, and Vienna, for the years 1660–1760, but she never does get to the last one. On 249 there are quite a few errors regarding Rossini: *L’italiana in Algeri* is not a one-act *farsa*, *Sigismondo* opened at La Fenice on 26 December 1814, although she states that no opera by him was seen in Venice between 1813 and 1819, and so on. The illustrations are of very poor quality, and the charts and tables are reproductions of originals, presumably in color, virtually impossible to read in black-and-white, especially those in chapter 6 and the table on 231, where it is impossible to tell the difference between the cells referring to *opera buffa* and those referring to *Dramma per musica*. All in all, this is a book that presents an enormous amount of original and necessary information, much of which, however, is not well served by being put into a narrative form. I can only imagine how

unbelievably complicated it must have been to untangle this Venetian puzzle, and any historian of Venetian theater will need to make use of it. Let's hope Stanford University Press will find a better way to reproduce illustrations and will hire a more attentive proofer for *A New Chronology*.

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