# Commerce and Opera at the *Fiera della Sensa*

When, on the feast of Ascension, the doge and his councilors sailed with the Venetian patriarch in the gilded galley known as the Bucintoro to renew Venice’s wedding vows to the Adriatic, they affirmed one of the central tenets of the myth of Venice and its central importance in the rule of the Eastern Mediterranean. The celebration was rich in symbolism. The party dropped anchor near the church of San Nicolò at the northern end of the Lido. San Nicolò was patron saint of fishermen, and the site linked its rulers with Venice’s working population. The patriarch, who accompanied the party, performed the blessing of the waters and offered the ring to the doge. This act reaffirmed the careful melding of Church and State in Venice. When the doge cast the ring into the sea, his act recalled the Republic’s rule into perpetuity. The sailing of the doge and his retinue, said to date from the visit of Frederick Barbarossa in 1177, can actually be traced to its first observance—7 May 1000. The doge who then blessed the waters was Pietro Orseolo. He used the occasion to announce his view that Venice’s control of the sea could be well served by extending its reach down the Adriatic. Thus, the celebration of Ascenion also recalled the expansion of the lagoon city into a maritime republic.

The *fiera della Sensa*, on the other hand, represented the interests of merchants and traders. A trade fair following Ascension was already well established in the fifteenth century. It took place on the piazza San Marco, against the backdrop of the basilica’s five domes. Iconographical representations show a horseshoe-shaped array of stalls. Admission was from the lower end of the Piazza, near the former church of San Geminiano. The stalls were erected during the week before Ascension. By the eighteenth century the fair was open over a span of more than two weeks, from the evening before the feast until the end of the third weekend following it. Activity paused for the days of Pentecost.

What seems to have brought what later became known as spring opera into the midst of the Ascension fair in the 1720s was an effort by the city to give more substance to the period and thus attract more visitors and thus more shoppers. Venice had been plunged into poverty in recent years by the War of the Spanish Succession (1701-14), in which the Venetian maintained official neutrality, and its aftermath. With the collapse of the duchies of Mantua and Modena, it also had lost some the chief patrons of Venetian opera in the late seventeenth century.

Between 1715 and 1720 the economic desperation of the city fathers was everywhere apparent. In 1715 they changed the rules of public lotto, increased the rate of drawings, and publicized the winning combinations. (Half the proceeds were retained by the government.) In 1717 the quarters under the Procuratia Nuova were newly rented to shop-keepers. (Florian Francesconi opened a still-thriving caffé in one of them.) Shops also sprang up around the base of the Campanile. Barbershops on the Piazza came to number several dozen (their main work was in maintaining wigs). The Piazza became a forum for news, rumor, gossip, and surveillance. The more insecurity increased, the greater the incidence of clandestine activities of many kinds.

Elsewhere in the Veneto there was a long-established link between annual patronal feasts and trade fairs. From the late 1690s there had been a growing symbiosis between provincial trade fairs and the staging of an opera.[[1]](#endnote-1) What might be called trade-fair opera in the provinces might employ apprentice composers and musicians, but the novelty of the venue and the makeshift nature of productions seems not have discouraged audiences. This had potentially negative implications for fully staged operas with professional casts in Venice itself.

Venetian trade and the attraction of the Ascension fair itself were newly threatened in 1720 by the establishment of an Austria free port at Trieste. (On a clear day, the two cities were visible from one another.) By 1730 other free ports would be established on the Adriatic at Iesi and Senigalia. In reality Venice now had a competitor for trade along the sea to which it was, in its own mythology, eternally wed. It was time to obscure this reality with the fantasy world of Venetian ceremony and pomp. Where proofs of substance of Venice’s superiority lacked, claims of historical imperative were easily substituted. Thus began the aggrandizement of the feast of Ascension and its associated trade fair.

Venice had traditionally had three attractions to advertise to visitors: (1) the sailing of the Buscintoro; (2) the Procession of the Magi on the elaborate tower of the civic Orologio and (3) improvised entertainments on the piazza. (These might take the form of puppet shows, improvised skits, or acrobatic displays.) The fact is, though, that in 1720 both the Bucintoro and the Orologio apparatus were in significant states of disrepair. The Bucintoro was barely sea-worthy. The Magi no longer processed. Although both problems would be addressed in coming years, they would not be remedied quickly or at slight expense. The lure that was viable quickly and at no expense to the government was the staging of operas during the Ascension fair.

## Opera at the Ascension Fair (1720-1760)

### 1720-1729: Establishing Spring Opera

When in 1720 San Samuele and San Moisè both announced works for Ascension, the phenomenon was considered a great novelty. On Saturday, 11 May, the papal legate reported to the Vatican that “they opened the fair [on Wednesday]. An infinite concourse of people in masks and foreigners came to enjoy not only the fair itself but also the performance of two operas—*La Griselda* at San Samuele and *Gl’inganni fortunati* at San Moisè.”[[2]](#endnote-2)

This first Ascension period proved to be no less prone to unexpected complications than the autumn and winter periods of theatrical opening. A mere week after these works opened, the legate reported that while the theater productions themselves were well attended, heavy rain had ruined many of the booths erected on the Piazza. He noted the introduction of *fanali* [gas lamps] placed “a certain distance from one another” in the Piazza,[[3]](#endnote-3) another ploy to capture the visitors’ attention.

Since in 1721 the theaters were not opened during the fair, the establishment of a regular season is best dated from 1722. This was the year in which Alvise Mocenigo was elected doge. The “season” was miniscule compared to the well established autumn and winter ones, during which a typical production ran for three weeks and a popular one could continue for a month. The Ascension period was heavily constrained by the contours of the liturgical feasts and civic ceremonies established centuries before. On the day before Ascension (a Wednesday), the doge and his councilors attended Vespers at San Marco. Only after they exited the church were theaters and booths permitted to open. Theaters (and stalls) were closed on the feast itself and also on the two evenings (a Saturday and a Sunday) on which Pentecost was observed. The fair period spanned 14 to17 days, depending on whether Easter (and therefore Ascension, 40 days later) fell earlier or later.[[4]](#endnote-4)

The Ascension-day ceremony (14 May) was once again impeded by bad weather in 1722, but the theaters were to thrive. The Bucintoro sailed as far as “la punta di Sant’Antonio” before a decision was made that it was too windy to sail further out. The ceremony was thus rescheduled for Sunday the 17th, but again it too proved to be stormy. The much delayed *sposalizio* finally took place on Monday the 18th.[[5]](#endnote-5) The bad weather may have benefited theater attendance.

English visitors made up a conspicuous portion of the attendees in the 1720s. English trade was growing by leaps and bounds. The English merchant population in Venice had been expanding since the 1690s but flourished particularly under the Hanoverian kings (form 1714). Joseph Smith, who was destined to remain a force in Venetian life into the 1750s and was the most conspicuous among them, was married to Mrs. [Catherine] Tofts,[[6]](#endnote-6) who had sung on the English stage before her marriage. Period accounts note the long-time presence of Lord Peterborough [Charles Mordaunt], Neil and Robert Brown, and the discredited London impresario Owen [Mc]Swiney. The English merchants had a taste for flamboyant *castrati* (a preference that precipitated celebrated invectives in England). The Grimani theaters (San Giovanni Grisostomo for winter opera, San Samuele for spring opera) were the places they were most likely to be found in Venice.

Ascension opera remained the exclusive preserve of San Samuele from 1722 to 1726, when San Moisè resumed activity. By 1727 San Salvatore [San Luca], which had functioned only as a comedy house since 1700, presented the first of a handful of spring operas. In all three theaters the works given were predominantly revivals, though not necessarily from Venice.Spring productions were often somewhat abridged, since by the modern clock spring opera started much later than autumn or winter opera.[[7]](#endnote-7) Spring works were progressively simpler in character than works given at other times of year. Surviving musical materials are surprisingly few. Spring opera seems not initially to have garnered much prestige, but that appearance may be deceptive. Sublease records for the boxes of King George I at San Samuele show the clientele there in 1725, when Gio. Francesco Brusa’s *L’amor eroico* was the featured work for Ascension, to have been quite meritorious. (Brusa himself failed to attract an enthusiastic following in subsequent years.) On various nights between May 9 (the opening night) and the 27th the occupants of the king’s box included Count Tassis (two performances), the Receiver of Malta [Camillo Pola] (four performances), the San Marco organist Antonio Lotti (two performances), the famous castrato Carlo Broschi *detto* Farinelli (17 May), and the landscape painter Marco Ricci (25 May).[[8]](#endnote-8) The libretto for *L’amor eroico* (based on Pariati’s account of the pursuit of Zenobia by Odeanthus) was dedicated to Edward Cary, the commander of the British Admiralty.

The presence of British merchants and aristocrats peaked in the later 1720s, when promoters of the Opera of the Nobility came to Venice to scout for singers for their enterprise. Following the ascension of George II (1727) there was a marked upsurge of interest. By the end of the decade, sponsors not only came to Venice in search of new vocal talent but they also left with unique copies of the scores for several important winter operas. The *avvisi* of 1727 note the presence of “*diversi milordi inglese*” among the many foreigners who came to the Ascension fair. In anticipation of their enthusiasm, two theaters presented two works for Ascension.[[9]](#endnote-9) The works themselves began to change character, from predictable (if abbreviated) revivals of winter fare on classical themes to lighter works between suited to interests which were more fleeting. An economic imperative may have taken hold, since comic works required fewer roles, were less dependent on elaborate scenery, and required few *entr’actes*. All the works given for Ascension 1727 were comic works—*L’Innocenza schernita* (Cassani, Albinoni) at San Samuele and Buini’s comic *L’Albumazar* at San Salvatore.[[10]](#endnote-10) We know from other sources that *L’Innocenza* was preceded by *La fama dell’onore*, a parody which may have been originated by a comedy troupe. *L’Albumazar* gave way to *Le frenesie d’amore*, a work which was widely traveled in the smaller theaters of the Veneto. The coincidental interest of the *milordi* in comic works could have played some role in the little noted London trip of San Samuele’s winter comedy troupe (under Giacomo Casanova’s father) to London in 1727. Presumably they left after the start of Lent, since their standing obligations would have kept them in Venice through the end of Carnival.[[11]](#endnote-11)

Concomitant with the introduction there was some increase in trade, but its consequences were not entirely welcome. The steady impoverishment of many shoppers led to the arrival of contraband goods in such numbers that a delegation of Venetian merchants set off for the fair in Brescia (from 10 August, the feast of San Lorenzo) in 1727 to find out whether similar problems were occurring there.[[12]](#endnote-12) Ambassadors to Venice were figuring out that the burgeoning crowds on the Piazza were easily attracted to any ceremony, not exclusively those symbolizing the importance of Venice. The Ascension period became a popular time for investitures (their own), banquets, and private concerts. The French ambassador [Jacques-Vincent Languet, the comte de Gergy] took advantage of the theatrical closure on the feast of Pentecost (1 June 1727) to hold a noble “*veglia*...for the all the foreigners who have come to our fair” in the summer- house of his extensive gardens on the north shore of Canarregio. “Abundant refreshments,” *sinfonie*, and a *ballo* were on offer. Although the fair terminated on Thursday the 5th that year the theaters were permitted to remain open until Sunday the 8th. Corresponding permission to mask (after Vespers) necessarily endured through Sunday. Not until June 14th was the reporter Francesco Alvisi was able to say that “the foreigners who have come to enjoy the pastimes of this Most Serene Republic” were now starting to depart.[[13]](#endnote-13)

The enhancement of the Ascension period with tokens of political prestige reaches new heights in 1729, with the public entry of the new imperial ambassador, Giuseppe Count Bolagnos, on Sunday 15 May. The date fell ten days before the opening of the fair and thus disrupted the normal routine. He presented his credentials to the government on Saturday the 21st. The following day he received the papal legate, Monsignor Claudio Nicola Stampa. Since Ascension fell relatively late in 1729, the opera *Sulpizia fedele* open at San Samuele until the following evening (that is, on the Sunday ahead of Ascension). Before the official opening of the fair on the following Wednesday (the 25th), the legate and the new ambassador participated in Vespers at San Marco and in the ceremony of opening the fair. The fair and the theaters were closed on June 3rd and 4th for Pentecost. Upon reopening on Monday, San Samuele presented the pastoral *Dorinda*. The final day for both activities was 9 June, a Thursday.[[14]](#endnote-14) The *Diario ordinario* noted, in a string of clichés typical of its reprocessed news reports, that the fair, which had been “attended by many foreigners,” had ended “quietly” and “with happiness.”[[15]](#endnote-15)

The highpoint in the celebration of the Ascension in 1729, however, was the launch of a new Bucintoro. A statue of Justice graced its bow as it sailed majestically across the lagoon. Accompanying Justice were a large statue of Mars and two gold lions of St. Mark, rescued from the old Bucintoro before its destruction in 1719. The vessel (still preserved in the Museo Navale in Venice) had two decks and 42 oars, each one to be pulled by four men. A commemorative account of the ship—*La nuova regia sull'acque*—by the sometime librettist Antonio Maria Lucchini was published that year and reprinted numerous times through 1765. The new Bucintoro was to be a popular subject of scene paintings from the 1730s through the 1760s. Several by Canaletto (1732-34) show the vessel moored in front of the Ducal Palace, with the Orologio visible in the background. Various kinds of lesser mortals go about their tasks in nearby gondolas and *peotte*. One by Francesco Guardi (1767) gives a stormier view of the Bucintoro as it is jousted in the waters near the Arsenale.

### 1730-1735: Developing New Directions in Spring Opera

If there was a best-of-breed work in the Ascension repertory, it was provided by Hasse in his *Dalisa* of 1730. Severalfactors contributed to its apparent success. Opening at San Samuele on May 17th, it ran unopposed, because for the first time since 1725 no other theaters opened that spring. The libretto was dedicated to Edward Coke, the earl of Leicester and a director of the Royal Academy of Music in London. The cast featured Faustina Bordoni, whom the composer was engaged to marry on 30 July.[[16]](#endnote-16) It was both Hasse’s first work for Venice and his only premiere there. (The enthusiastic reception accorded *Dalisa* was never to be matched in any of the reruns of his subsequent works, even though he did set a new standard of expectation in the first years of the new decade.[[17]](#endnote-17) )

*Dalisa* represents the convergence of some notable trends. Most important among them were the strengthening of winter opera through the inclusion of home-grown stars now held in international esteem (Bordoni, Nicola Grimaldi, et al.): the preceding autumn and winter seasons at San Samuele’s sister theater, San Giovanni Grisostomo, were possibly the most acclaimed of its entire history. San Samuele’s effort to distinguish spring opera as inherently pastoral in nature had been building in recent years. In contrast to the comic fare offered in 1727-29 at San Moisè and San Salvatore, San Samuele had presented a series of works on Arcadian themes: *Nerina* (1728), *Dorinda* (1729), and now *Dalisa*.[[18]](#endnote-18)

Because *Dalisa* does represent a best case for Ascension opera and because we know that the theater was full every night during its short run, we can readily see that if it was not a financial success, then no spring opera was economically viable. The basic problem was that the costs per production were fixed but there were not enough nights available to recapture the costs of production through ticket sales. In the case of *Dalisa*, lavish rates of pay exacerbated the problem. Bordoni (described in the libret­to as “the new Siren, a Vene­tian mezzo-soprano of noble birth, [and] a true *virtuo­sa* of song”) was paid £5,625 for her two-week engagement in the title role. Antonio Pasi (*Enrico*) received £3,000, Anna Girò (*Edita*) £1,320, and Ange­lo Amorevo­li (*Ottone*) £538. A deficit of £2,000 remained after all other expenses for this lavish production were paid.[[19]](#endnote-19) Despite the work’s popularity, no complete score survives.[[20]](#endnote-20)

In 1732 the Ascension fair cast a backward glance at its liturgical roots. New energy was invested in the ceremonial celebration of First Vespers at San Marco on the eve of the feast and in the involvement of the basilica’s dignitaries in the official opening of the fair. The reporter Girolamo Alvisi observed that when the fair opened there were “foreign visitors of both sexes [and] of rank” on hand. Various public officials, accompanied by the papal legate, gathered in San Marco, where a great part of the [ducal] treasure (the *pala d’oro*) was put on display. Monsignor Diedo officiated at the service, and multiple choirs sang. After the service was completed, the dignitaries retired to the ducal palace. San Samuele and Sant’Angelo opened that night, with productions of *Evaristo* and *Chi no fa no falla* respectively.[[21]](#endnote-21) Despite its august opening, the fair of 1732 was somewhat marred by the death a few days later of Doge Alvise Mocenigo. This precipitated three days of mourning and induced the need to elect a new doge (Carlo Ruzzini).

We hear nothing more of the Ascension fair until 1735, when the construction of booths on the Piazza and opera rehearsals at San Samuele had both begun by 11 May. The fair opened on the following Wednesday (the 18th). The doge, foreign ministers, and Signorìa processed through the “gran Piazza” to enter the church for “solemn” Vespers. San Samuele’s offering that evening was *Griselda,* the subject of a later memoir (by its librettist, Carlo Goldoni) containing indifferent comments on the work’s composer, Antonio Vivaldi.[[22]](#endnote-22) *Griselda* was greeted with “universal appreciation” by the “throngs of ladies and gentlemen from foreign cities” who were currently enjoying the fair.[[23]](#endnote-23) However, when the Goldoni text was revived in the autumn, the work was performed without music by the house troupe of San Samuele (as was usual there in the autumn).

Although some accounts portray the mood as having been more somber than in earlier years, the number of supernumerary events accruing to the Ascension period continued to increase. Among them there were now annual contests of cannon-ball shooters (*bombardieri*) from throughout the Veneto. Although they honored their patron saint (Santa Barbara) on her feast day (4 December), they also regularly held a competition at the Lido on the day after Pentecost (a Monday). Prizes were given to the teams who could shoot the furthest. On the appointed day in 1735 (June 2) the *bombardieri* gathered as usual at the Lido, but additionally, on Sunday the 5th they sailed in richly decorated *peotte* to the island of Torcello to venerate the body of Santa Barbara and to attend a “great mass and Vespers, both sung to music, in the church of the nuns at San Giovanni,” where they were hosted lavishly.

The subculture that underlay Goldoni’s satires on the foibles of a growing *bourgeoisie* as they were expressed at Ascension was already foreshadowed at San Samuele in Antonio Gori’s comic intermezzi called *Gl’ovi in puntiglio*. It was given at the theater[[24]](#endnote-24) in the winter of 1735. In it the haughty Vaneglia (who styles herself “Junfrà Fràol”) rants (in German) against the inadvisability of women’s bringing dowries to their marriages only to be ordered about by their husbands. In the second intermezzo, Vaneglia—an aggressive Ascension shopper—requires that her porcelain come from China, her crystal from England, and her cloth from Bohemia.[[25]](#endnote-25) (Her tastes may not accurately represent what was actually available at the Ascension fair; numerous strictures prevented the sale of goods from outside the Veneto.) Her opposite number, Cinnabro, dresses, acts, and speaks in the French style. The (lost) musical setting of Gori’s work is attributed to Giacomo Maccari.

### 1736-1742: Controlling Spring Opera

Under the doge Alvise Pisani (1735-41), the character of the fair itself began to change. The legate’s records report on the customary things: “foreigners of quality” in town for the fair; the singing of first Vespers “in the pontifical manner” by multiple choirs; and the attendance at that service of the legate and the Imperial ambassador. A change in tone can be noted in the staging of a serious work, *La generosità politica* (Goldoni; Gio. Maria Marchi), at San Samuele during the fair. The Bucintoro sailed as usual to the Lido on Ascension [10th May]. Lotti’s newly written madrigal “Spirto di Dio ch’essendo il mondo” was first sung on the return trip. The customary banquet took place afterwards in the ducal palace.[[26]](#endnote-26)

The reporter Sebastiano Trebbi noted in his *avviso* of 26 May 1736 that “jewels, silver, mirrors and other goods” had been sold at phenomenal prices during the recent fair and that “many well satisfied foreigners are now departing.” The fair had ended on the 24th, but the account of another reporter, Pietro Donado, on June 2nd notes that the opera at San Samuele continued until the 27th, when “closing night” events (similar to the galas given in theaters on the last night of Carnival) had taken place. San Samuele hosted a “great banquet,” then a *festa di ballo* that lasted until daybreak. The theater glittered inside with candles and was abundantly full of refreshments of every kind. It was filled with nobles, both Venetian and foreign.[[27]](#endnote-27) One might almost suspect that Goldoni was prompted to provide a work that was out-of-character both for himself and for the season in the hope of emulating Carnival’s bipolar combination of glitter and *gravitas*.

The price of goods may have been augmented indirectly by the imposition of new tariffs. A universal jubilee managed to interpose itself in the Ascension period. Jubilees normally required public piety and the closure of theaters, but the one of 1736 had a curiously commercial thrust. The government mandated that all merchandise brought into the fair would be taxed one ducat upon entry and that any item taken away would incur a separate half-ducat duty.[[28]](#endnote-28) Although it was undoubtedly a scheme to raise revenue, it may also have been designed to discourage contraband and shoddy goods. Three months later, on 27 August, new pontifical and imperial tariffs were announced for all goods arriving from Naples. This tax was to be enforced for four years.[[29]](#endnote-29)

The new image of the Ascension fair—tonier clientele, pricier goods—brought a wave of distinguished visitors to Venice in 1737, when Ascension did not fall until May 30th. On the 28th a delegation of 54 Bavarians, including the prince-Elector [Karl Albrecht] and his wife, arrived in Venice. Contrary to the earlier practice of renting a palazzo, the electoral couple and their entourage stayed in a public hotel—the Lion Bianco. The prince of Wales (Frederick Louis, the son of George II), disguised as the “Count of Albania,” arrived on the 28th. He heard an oratorio at the Ospedale degl’Incurabili [probably on June 2nd], and on his last night in Venice (9 June) a *festa di ballo* in his honor was held in the Ca’ Gradenigo.[[30]](#endnote-30) The Bavarians seem to have been more interested in the fair and the opera at San Samuele (Galuppi’s *Alvilda[[31]](#endnote-31)*) than in the chaste entertainments of the *ospedali*.

Somewhat ahead of Ascension, on April 20th 1738, Charles-Fran­çois, Count of Froullay, made the most extravagant public entry that had ever been seen in Venice. As part of the celebration, a great machine was erected over the Grand Canal in front of the French embassy.[[32]](#endnote-32) This may have contributed to the fever pitch of the Ascension fair, which was a big draw because of the pending visit of princess Anna Maria Amalie, the Saxon fiancée of Charles of Bourbon, the king the Two Sicilies. Trebbi tells us that when Lampugnani’s *Angelica* opened at San Samuele (May 11th), a large audience of Neapolitan nobles was in attendance. Their representatives, such as Abbot Castro Monte (the Neapolitan ambassador to Venice), and well-wishers, such as the princess of Modena, were also present.

The grand progresses that were made, sometimes over months, when a royal bride ceremonially made her way (with a large entourage) to her future husband’s principality, is well illustrated by that of the 14-year-old princess, the eldest daughter of the duke of Saxony. Her exact itinerary would have amounted, even by the standards of today, to a whirlwind glimpse of the Veneto. A great throng of nobles assembled in Venice, after seeing the “grand function” of [Venice’s] wedding the sea and the fair itself, in order to depart *en masse* for Palma Nuova (the border crossing from imperial lands into the Venetian Republic) in order to accompany the prospective bride, who was en route from Dresden. She was expected at Palma Nuova on May 30th with her brother, the royal prince Friedrich Christian. She reached Treviso on May 31st, toured the Grand Canal at noon on the 1st of June, and was safely delivered to Padua that evening. There she “said her devotions at the chapel of San Antonio” and took in the opera[[33]](#endnote-33), various *feste di ballo*, and “some royal entertainments” over the coming days. She passed through Rovigo on the 4th and arrived in Ferrara on the 5th, just in time to observe the feast of Corpus Domini. Much of the planning for this festive progress seems to have been organized by Alvise Mocenigo, who was then an extraordinary ambassador to the princess.[[34]](#endnote-34)

The mid-years 1738-1740 marked simultaneously the princess’s whirlwind progress towards Naples and her brother’s slow retreat from Naples to Dresden by way of a five-month sojourn Venice. To offset the growing prestige of Naples among visitors to Venice, the French ambassador de Froullay gave a spectacular banquet on the Sunday of Pentecost 1739. At a horse-shoe-shaped table he seated 56 guests (a significantly higher number than the traditional 40). The occasion ostensibly celebrated the marriage of Filippo, the royal infante of Spain, to the eldest princess of the French court.[[35]](#endnote-35) On the remaining days of the fair, Cardena’s *Creusa* was performed at San Samuele.

Unlike his sister *en route* to Naples, Friedrich Christian’s return trip through the Veneto in 1739-40 was a leisurely affair that bracketed not only Carnival but Lent and the start of Ascension as well. Much of his delegation reached Venice in December 1739. A spate of works was given for the enjoyment of his entourage. Venice bustled with parties, balls, and a full run of miscellaneous entertainments. The winter of 1740 was a stellar one for opera productions but it cannot be taken as representative of either the state of Venice or of its theaters. The 1740 season marked the “last hurrah” of the *drama per musica*. It also marked one of last uses of the Venetian stage to mark the rites of passage of European nobility, because theater managers had long realized that their works needed broad appeal in order to stay in production for more than a day or two. The Venetian nobility liked to attend on first nights and last nights, but they usually left the rest of the schedule unfettered by their presence. Because the prince’s stay continued well into Lent, unusually elaborate performances of a quasi-theatrical nature were given in three of the *ospedali*. Anyone encountering a list of the many works given for the enjoyment of the prince’s party but nothing for the surrounding years might believe that opera in Venice had changed little over the previous thirty or forty years. This belief would be completely mistaken. Venice managed to stage, one last time, the image of its might together with some frivolities that had been cultivated in better times. Yet the formulas followed were all retrospective. They were what visitors expected, but not what they would otherwise have found.

This time it proved to be the culture, rather than the revered visitor, that was exhausted. Ascension 1740 was a lackluster affair, bereft of the attention of anyone and without resources to sustain itself. As it turned out, the winter seasons of 1741, 1742, and 1743 were equally grim. Count [Otto Ferdinand] Traun wrote to Prince Pio of Savoy in Milan of Ascension in 1740 that

the usual function of the Wedding to the Sea, a less grand affair than in previous years, occurred on Thursday, though after the visit of the Royal Prince of Poland people expected something more magnificent. One can see that people are torn to bits from so much spending, and, that while not fully understanding how critical their situation is, they are advised not to squander their money, for they may need it for future emergencies. The cost of living keeps rising; there is little grain in storage, and an extravagant [agricultural] season threatens scarcity even in the current year, for there is fear of hunger. This is already the case in parts of the Venetian dominion, for in Dalmatian areas [of the Republic] many petitions for charitable assistance have been received this week. The misery is so great that people are obliged to boil straw and eat it as a salad, from which people are dying….[[36]](#endnote-36)

Venice was never again to muster the same sustained enthusiasm it had unleashed on the prince’s visit, at least not until much later times, when the motives and cultural meaning were entirely different.

### 1743-51: The Challenge of *Opera Buffa*

Over the 1720s and 30s spring opera had had a subtle effect on the distribution of operas from season to season. The success of spring opera depended partly on the presence of those who sailed up the Adriatic and had some interest in the fair. By the same token, this audience was more generously endowed with merchants than winter ones. However, winter audiences were falling off. The winter repertory was degenerating into endless trails of texts (often by Metastasio) reset by local and little known composers, since the best regarded singers and composers were finding more attractive opportunities elsewhere. Theater impresarii were hard-pressed to fund productions. Overall, the increased activity in the spring came at the expense of the winter. The autumn season (which, like spring, appealed to more modest tastes than the traditionally lavish productions of Carnival) continued to hold its own.

It might seem that these factors would have paved the road to success for spring opera, but that was hardly the case. By the 1740s the Council of Ten had become nervous about the Ascension opera. In the absence of a frontal attack, it made various lateral rulings. At the end of the 1741 Ascension period, for example, it announced that masking and public celebrations of feasts should cease whenever the selection of a patriarch was in progress.[[37]](#endnote-37) This was just the first of a series of edicts that interfered in some way with the already slim chances of impresarii to cover their expenses.

The fair of 1743 got off to a bad start because of exceptionally cold, stormy weather. Between the weather and fear of a contagion spreading in the south of Italy, attendance was sparse.[[38]](#endnote-38) Ironically, it was the same spring season that saw the most profound change of repertory. What brought about this striking change was the Venetian theater-going public’s first exposure to Neapolitan *opera buffa*. It came to them via Gaetano Latilla’s *La finta cameriera*, which was staged not at San Samuele (where comic works with music were anathema) but at Sant’Angelo, which had not previously participated in spring opera. *La finta cameriera* featured a Neapolitan cast and therein could be found much of its novelty. In contrast to the satirical works of Bolognese and Venetian origin that had dotted the spring calendar for almost two decades, the Neapolitan work was so funny in performance that audiences were “splitting their sides” with laughter, according to one account. The acting of Francesco Baglione, the mainstay of the cast who portrayed the ostensible heroine, was stellar. The cast had had ample opportunity to fine-tune their interactions, too, because *La finta cameriera* had first been produced six years earlier in Naples.

It is ironic that it took a Neapolitan work performed by a Neapolitan cast to rekindle the interest of Venetians in their own theater. Sant’Angelo’s hosting of it had its own ironies. The theater was suffering from loss of interest in its winter fare and was to turn to a steady diet of prose comedy in 1748, when it hired Goldoni. So while rescuing Venetian opera in general from the threat of extinction, *La finta cameriera* failed to revive Sant’Angelo’s reputation as an opera house. At San Samuele, meanwhile, the dignified *Ezio* (by Lampugnani, on Metastasio’s text) was well received[[39]](#endnote-39) but proved no match for the instant legends generated by *La finta cameriera.*

There was, however, a strenuous reaction against comic opera, particularly Neapolitan comic opera, in the ranks of the clergy, nobility, and well-educated cittadini. It took the form of studied indifference. Reporters of the time (several of whom are known to have been in minor orders) damned comic opera with faint praise. Now that the theatrical repertory was muddied by so much non-classical trivia, the compilation of collective chronologies of theatrical works stopped in its tracks.[[40]](#endnote-40) As a span of time, Ascension became symbolic of this radical change of taste and a flashpoint for diatribes against the incivilities of public behavior. Expressions of indignation were not reserved for the theater alone. They sometimes focused on the hollowness of the government’s own example. An anonymous “Pallade Veneta” correspondent reported in 1747:

This week has been the most joyous one of the year in this locale....It included the opening of the renowned Fiera della Sensa….The patricians, [middle-class] citizens, and foreigners came in not insignificant numbers to turn the passageways of the Piazza into a theater of marvels and to mask, which [they are] permitted [to do] for the 15 days of the fair. Such honest and noble entertainments keep [their] boredom at bay.

The most specious among all the entertainments was that of Thursday in which the ducal entourage sailed in the royal [*sic*] Bucintoro to the Lido. [They were] served by happy acclamations by innumerable masked observers and by very loud voices full of furor, since the act of perpetual dominion over the Adriatic of Neptune provides them with the solemn wedding to the Sea, [which] turns the waves [into] subjects of the Venetian throne.[[41]](#endnote-41)

A clear expression of the perceived artificiality of the Wedding of Venice to the Sea had occurred in a *drama giocoso*, *Lo scialaquatore alla fiera*,[[42]](#endnote-42) given at San Cassiano in October 1745. (It had first been given in Florence the preceding autumn.) The opening scene featured “a piazza in Venice [with] a view of shops displaying their goods.” Neither Venetian ceremony nor the cherished Venetian past nor the *drama per musica* itselfwas sacrosanct in comic opera. Operas on themes from the Crusades were satirized in the pastiche version of *Armida al campo* given at Sant’Angelo during Ascension 1746. In it, as in many works of the late seventeenth century, a carriage was “pulled by dragons.” “Horses, camels, and elephants” appeared in Geoffrey’s camp at the end of the work. Serious themes were regarded as silly precisely because they were intended to be taken seriously. At San Moisè *La semplice spiritosa*[[43]](#endnote-43) opened in the autumn of 1748 with a depiction of the “mysterious pomp” with which Venice was wedded to the Adriatic on the feast of Ascension.

By 1749 reports in “Pallade Veneta” carried only perfunctory comments on “honest entertainments” for the fair and gave citations for works at Sant’Angelo (*L’Arcadia sul Brenta*), San Cassiano (*Tra due litiganti il terzo gode*), and San Samuele (*Leucippo*). All three theaters were said to be full of spectators every night.[[44]](#endnote-44) Yet all cannot have been well with spring opera. In 1750, the billing of Terradellas’s *Imeneo in Atene* (on a text derived from Silvio Stampiglia) as a *componimento drammatico* suggests lack of authorization to stage the work at San Samuele. The locution *componimento drammatico* usually suggests (in the context of Venetian opera) a concert performance. At San Moisè the public production of *Il paese della Cuccagna* (by Goldoni and Galuppi) was deferred until December.[[45]](#endnote-45) It could have been given privately in the spring, since it was already prepared.

The Ascension season went ahead in 1751, but the inclusion at San Moisè of a “Czech dance” in *La pastorella al soglio* (music by Latilla on a text by Pagani-Cesa) was censored promptly by the Council of Ten, who ruled forthwith that theaters would not be permitted to open for Ascension 1752.[[46]](#endnote-46) For that season the reporters Parabò and Conti noted in a joint *avviso* that preparations for the sale of “expensive goods” by local merchants were being counterbalanced by “honest entertainments for the nobles” in preparation at Sant’Angelo, San Moisè, and San Samuele.[[47]](#endnote-47) Here the construction of the tense is definitely cautious. In sum, the execution of plans to stage operas at Ascension could not be consistently assumed after 1748.

### 1752-1760 and Beyond: The Challenges of Prose Comedy

Venice experienced several crises almost simultaneously in the mid-to-late 1740s. It was plagued by a surfeit of rules and regulations which had progressively less force. Many had to do with attempts to control public behavior, to control the circulation of non-Venetian currency, to protect the Republic from epidemics spread throughout the Balkans and the Austrian empire, and to ward off the appearance of goods recycled from trade fares outside the Republic. Under doge Francesco Loredan (1752-62) there was some minor restoration of balance and a reluctant acceptance of a changing society in which titles of nobility mattered less than before. However, a few stalwart families of the nobility launched the Teatro di San Benedetto as a new home for serious opera at the end of 1755. San Benedetto functioned only in the winter and staged only *drammi per musica*. The new house would have far less impact on the overall direction of Venetian theater than Goldoni’s growing reputation as a comic dramatist. This reputation was built on genial satires (some of them reclothed from generic *scenarii*  long in circulation among comedy troupes) on Venetian manners and mores.

When he passed from Sant’Angelo (1748-52) to San Salvatore (1752-1762), Goldoni was destined to become a participant in the colorful pamphlet wars, launched by his Sant’Angelo successor, Pietro Chiari, in 1756. The rise of a prosperous middle class, to whom Goldoni’s works so much appealed, conincided with less desirable changes in the theatrical experience. The entryways and near environs of theaters became common venues for crime. Theft was rife throughout the city, particularly during Carnival, when nights were long. In 1752, for instance, the senator Maurizio Cavalli was relieved of a gold watch as he left the Teatro San Samuele.[[48]](#endnote-48) (Country life was not necessarily safer. In the waning decades of the eighteenth century, gangs of armed robbers occasionally made surprise appearances at country villas and demanded that all valuables be loaded into their coaches.)

Against the rising tide of comedy (both in prose and with music) and theatrical invective, San Samuele tried once more to rise above the fray by interposing a new kind of spectacle. It fitted out its stages in 1753 with sets made entirely of Murano crystal. The theater earned some extra revenue by charging admission to daytime spectators who wished to admire the glitter. In contrast, San Cassiano appeared to sink below the tide. It set aside two boxes to serve as in-house casinos in 1752.[[49]](#endnote-49) Over time, in-house casinos became a staple of theaters throughout Italy. A famous example would be the Teatro alla Scala in Milan (1778).

## Other Correlates of the Ascension Fair

### Alternative Musical Entertainments

The decline of manuscript news networks and the indifference of reporters to the *opera buffa* leaves as the only consistent source of theatrical news for the 1750s and beyond the *ex post facto* chronology of the nobleman Pietro Gradenigo. His “daybook” (a ledger in which he entered notices as he encountered them) began in 1748 and continued into 1777. Despite some flaws of detail, Gradenigo’s Notatorio is valuable for the general sense of Venetian life it conveys.

Apart from the scant offerings of San Benedetto, the genres of greatest interest to the nobility were the oratorio and other fare for noble audiences. Among the events Gradenigo mentions for Ascension 1754, for example, is a performance at the Incurabili (27 May) of the intermezzo *Accide*, set to music by Marc’Antonio Tiepolo as an entertainment for the noblewomen of the city. In contrast to the Sunday afternoon performances of oratorios during Advent and Lent, this work lasted until three hours after sunset. A private concert of vocal and instrumental music given on one of the first nights in June by the *figliole* of the Pietà.[[50]](#endnote-50)

The performance of works with a moral perspective (not necessarily derived from Biblical literature) grew in religious institutions in the 1740s and 50s. Following the example of *Accide* (a work so popular it was repeated several times over the coming years), the doge permitted the “cameriste e signore” in the Ca’ di Dio to perform Goldoni’s *La sposa persiana* in May 1755. At the Mendicanti, the *figlie* gave a repeat performance of the oratorio they had given during Holy Week 1755.[[51]](#endnote-51)

The *academia de’ suoni* (*academia filarmonica*) was another alternative to spring opera. Its opening concert seems to have fallen around Ascension. The practice of convening instrumental academies reached back to gatherings in the home of Alberto Gozzi (a wealthy merchant who collected musical instruments) in 1680s and continued through the ensembles convened by the Marcellos in a palazzo on the Fondamenta Nuove in the first decades of the eighteenth century.[[52]](#endnote-52) What was new in the 1750s was the openness of the enterprise—publicity before and after events, invitations to an anonymous public, and the promotion of virtuoso performance. (The earlier model, on which there is scant information, had focused on the novelty of unusual instruments as physical and scientific objects more than on the playing of them other than for the purpose of demonstration.) According to Gradenigo, such academies were to take place every Wednesday during the *staggione estiva*. In 1755, he reports, Bortolo [Bartolomeo] Nazari, the “painter and portraitist of rank,” hosted such an event in his house on the “Fondamenta SS. Giovanni e Paolo” [i.e., behind the Mendicanti and near the Ospedaletto] “with good intentions and a noble concourse” on 26 May. The performance, which included the “incomparable” playing of his son [the violinist Antonio], was financed by “interested parties and dilettantes”.[[53]](#endnote-53) Similar reports issue from successive years. Like spring opera at San Sameule, spring philharmonic gatherings in the Nazari household seem to have held special appeal to English gentlemen. In one of his works (private collection in the UK) gentlemen [probably English] are shown around a clavichord. Sir John Grey, British resident in Venice (1744-53), was involved in securing the passage of at least one of Nazari’s to England.[[54]](#endnote-54) In all events, the character of an *accademia filarmonica* can be differentiated from the *academie letterarie* held by noblemen on Monday afternoons during Lent. Since the 1726 *cittadini* had also been welcomed at public academies (such as the Albrizziana), which from the late 1730s held its most noted assemblies in the late spring.[[55]](#endnote-55)

### The Rise of Musical Commerce

Such gatherings as these stimulated an increased interest in learning to play and in owning musical instruments. Herein lay an important stimulus to the local manufacture and trade of musical instruments. By 1760 instruments were advertised at the Ascension fair by the bookseller Paolo Colombani, who had given display space to “two very beautiful wind instruments—an oboe made of ebony, decorated with gold and silver filigree, and a choir-flute of mock tortoise with wind holes and keys of ivory made in England by an Excellent Maker.”[[56]](#endnote-56) In the caffé of Girolamo Nazion (“at the sign of the Guardian Angel under the offices of the Procuratie”) a “*clavicembalo* by \_\_\_\_\_ Celestini” was on offer. The instrument was said (no doubt apocryphally) to have been decorated by Paolo Veronese and Giacomo Palma the Elder.[[57]](#endnote-57)

The sale of musical goods rapidly became a year-round phenomenon. In the autumn of 1760 Pietro Guarneri established a shop for the sale of bowed string instruments in the parish of Sant’Angelo Raffaele. The Friulano violinist Santo Serafin had a similar shop in the Campo dei SS. Apostoli.[[58]](#endnote-58) A well-known market for wind instruments—oboes, flutes [recorders], bassoons, and cross-flutes—was operated by Domenico Perosa at San Basso.[[59]](#endnote-59) In December Florian (the caffé owner) acted as an agent for the sale of a violoncello by an anonymous owner.[[60]](#endnote-60)

Gradenigo’s *notatorio* replicates several advertisements placed by music copyists and composers. In one notice the priest Giuseppe Baldan at San Giovanni Grisostomo was recommended as “one of the most exalted copyists of notes to sing and play in musical parts” in August 1760.[[61]](#endnote-61) Ten days later Vivaldi’s nephew, Pietro Mauro, was cited as “the best copyist of notes of music.” His shop was near the Ponte del Lipore at Sant’Agostino.[[62]](#endnote-62) The most distinguished composer after Baldassare Galuppi was now said to be the aging but beloved Hasse, who, though nominally *maestro di cappella* to the king of Poland, mostly resided on the Calle de Morti near SS. Giovanni e Paolo in a house belonging to the Mocenigo family. Should anyone be seeking the services of Angelo Amoreoli, a noted “tenor sought by various foreign princes because of his unusual abilities,” he could be found near San Trovaso.[[63]](#endnote-63)

Musicians were undoubtedly aware of the rapid growth of periodical literature and serial publications, which were to become models for the dissemination of printed music. Among the entrepreneurs an unlikely one was the aging printer Antonio Groppo, the compiler of a still used catalogue of *Tutti li drammi musicali a Venezia* (1745). In collaboration with Giovanni Battista Adami, he brought out in June 1760 a “magnificent” edition of Tasso’s *Gerusalemme liberata* in which each canto was prefaced with a figure depicting “remarkable facts noted in that *canto*.” Hoping for a “grand reception” and “eager to acquaint the public with their idea,” Groppo and Adami were willing to show the individual folios to “virtuosi” [i.e., collectors] for a subscription of 25 *soldi* a week. [[64]](#endnote-64) The *Gazzetta veneta*, first published (from January 1760), appeared twice a week and was available on a semi-annual subscription.[[65]](#endnote-65) Among its resellers were the *caffettiere* Florian and the merchandise vendor Paolo Colombani. Although both are remembered for their non-musical activities, they were general agents for anything salable in the emerging mercantile age.

A novelty of all these initiatives is the anonymity of their intended audiences. Gone were the days when instruments were made, music transcribed, or lessons designed for a specific patron. Makers, copyists, and teachers had heretofore waited to be sought out; now they needed to seek their trade. Merchandise had to be generic in nature. Breadth of appeal seems to have been more important than novelty or uniqueness. In some curious way the new market seemed to reject clarity, identity, and uniqueness. On the stage, *opera buffa* suited the new values. It was fashioned from a pool of roles that represented characters in familiar situations—often, e.g., rich widowers and coquettish serving maids. Like Vaneglia, women were more interested in displaying symbols of wealth and affirming commercial “taste” than in attachment to a specific place, personality, or historical allusion.

### Ascension Spectacle: Restoration and Metamorphosis

Outside all spheres musical, the Ascension fair enjoyed a final push for recognition with the renovation of Venetian time-keeping and its symbols. When in 1752 the Consiglio Minore had authorized a modernization of the bell-ringing schedule of the Campanile (to accommodate a clearer understanding of Earth’s orbit and the ecliptic[[66]](#endnote-66)), it was almost inevitable that the clock and its tower would need attention, too. When the new clock tower was unveiled in 1757, it displayed a modernized “French” mapping of the 24 hours of the day, with the first hour in the position we know today (in contrast to the old “3:30” position in place since the 1490s). Depictions of the sun and the moon as well as the field of stars were removed from the tower’s “celestial” sphere. The culmination of this long-overdue renovation was celebrated on Ascension Day in 1760, when the Magi housed on the third tier of the tower once again processed before the Virgin.[[67]](#endnote-67) While the lore of Ascension had grown in reputation, the Magi had been motionless for the better part of a century. In lieu of its former geocentric symbols, the *orologio* and its revived mechanical Magi now served to attract Ascension visitors to the Piazza on Ascension and throughout the fair. A commemorative coin bearing the image of Doge Loredan was struck just in time for distribution at the 1760 fair.

By 1760 the Ascension fair enjoyed a certain symbiosis with the annual fair at Padua. It began on the fixed feast of San Antonio (13 June). Merchants from the mainland were happy to offer their wares in tandem at each venue, although if Ascension fell late the Venetian fair could be curtailed prematurely. In Padua, spring opera was inclined to be serious but was often less carefully prepared than in Venice. Scandals were not uncommon. In 1760 the featured work in Padua was *Solimano,* set by Baldassare Galuppi on a text by Francesco Migliavacca, court poet of the king of Poland. The production (which opened ahead of the feast) was not well received. An effort to export the score aroused the interest of a customs agent, who, upon opening a chest set to be dispatched from Gambarare (near Mira), found it to be full of “music paper indispensable for the opera at the theater.” He objected not to the “notes of music written on it” but instead to the high “quality of the paper, which is foreign.” It must therefore have evaded taxation upon entry and was now subject to an export fine of 70 *zecchini.*[[68]](#endnote-68)

Gradenigo’s take on the Venetian Ascension fair of 1760 is represented by this summary:

In Venice the fair continues. It lasts for fifteen days, masking is permitted, and so are theatrical performances. There the domestic and foreign populations alike enjoy themselves in an extraordinary manner, while also joining in the great solemnity recognizing a certain ancient victory of the Republic benefiting the papacy such that the debt can never be forgotten or cancelled. Thus it is remembered every year among the Venetian feasts.[[69]](#endnote-69)

Gradenigo was generally sympathetic to imperial and papal interests. Yet his linking of pomp and frivolity with historical obligation is somehow wearying. This weariness reflects the weakening links of the celebration to its purported historical significance as well as other dimensions of growing cultural instability. It is as though too much pomp, in the face of so much frivolity, contradicted all that had been noble and virtuous in the traditional allusion to Venice’s vows to her spouse, the Sea. The associated growth of commercial hype laid out, for better or for worse, the path that mercantile Venice would pursue with gathering momentum over the coming decades.

### Adapting to Theatrical Realities

Recognizing the perennial financial shortfalls of spring opera, the government decreed in 1763 that an impresario wishing to produce operas at Ascension would be required to place a deposit of 2,000 ducats against potential financial obligations. This was in contrast to the 4,000 ducats required for the whole span of autumn and winter.[[70]](#endnote-70) The new rule seemed only to recast the problems. When an impresario named Cristoforo Bernardi contracted for the use of San Giovanni Grisostomo in that year, he borrowed the requisite deposit from Galuppi. Three months later Galuppi complained of his lack of reimbursement to the Council of Ten.[[71]](#endnote-71)

By the 1780s, when tears in the fabric of Venetian society were becoming conspicuous, San Moisè was recommissioned as a theater for the middle class. This left a wide birth for the new Teatro La Fenice, which opened its doors to the tattered remnants of the Venetian nobility with a performance of Giovanni Paisiello’s *I giouchi d’Agrigento*. The doors of the new theater opened on 16 May 1792, the eve of Ascension. The libretto of Alessandro Pepoli was decorated with etchings of the new building. In the presence of this new theater, which was “noble” enough for important visitors but liberal enough in its varied dramaturgical offerings to accommodate a diverse audience, the contributions to autumn and winter fare ceased to play any role in spring opera. Until in 1797 the wrath of Napoleon recast the role of theaters and abolished government strictures on when operas could be performed, La Fenice enjoyed a few golden years of setting the tone for all opera in Venice. It was the last triumph of the Ascension season during the age of the Most Serene Republic.

1. Mercantile fairs were typically initiated by the feast of a patron saint and lasted for roughly two weeks. They were heavily concentrated in the warmer months. For details and dates of provincial fares, see E. Selfridge-Field, *Song and Season: Science, Culture, and Theatrical Time in Early Modern Venice* (Stanford University Press, 2007), Ch. 7. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Rome: Vatican Library [=I-Rvat], Archivio Segreto [=AS], Nunziatura di Venezia [=NV], N.170, Venezia 11 Maggio 1720, ff. 296v-297. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. *Loc. cit.*, Venezia 18 Maggio 1720, ff. 312f. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Dates of Ascension, being dependent on the lunar calendar, ranged over a 35-day period stretching from early May to early June. If Ascension fell late in May, the fair and the theaters opened on the Sunday before Ascension. This was to prevent the last days of the fair from overlapping the fixed feast of San Antonio (13 June), which initiated another fair in Padua. It was increasingly common for Venetian nobles and diplomatic representatives to stay at their villas on the mainland from 13 June until 4 July. For detailed principles, see Ch. 5 o*f Song and Season*. For year-by-year dates of Ascension and other parameters of the theatrical calendar defined by moveable feasts, see Appendix 2 (pp. 649-57) of E. Selfridge-Field, *The New Chronology of Venetian Opera and Related Genres, 1660-1760* (Stanford University Press, 2007). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. I-Rvat, AS, NV, N. 173, Venezia, reports of 16 and 23 Maggio 1722, ff. 209, 225v. Such repositionings of public ceremonies were common. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. She was widely reputed after *c*. 1715 to be mentally unstable. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Opening times were dependent on the setting of the sun as marked by the bells of the Campanile. In June they would have rung after 21:00 (21:15 was the official opening time of some operas given in the mid-nineteenth century in Venice). May was divided into two parts on the bell-ringers’ schedule; performances would have start after 20:00 at the start of the month and a half-hour later towards the end. On the longest winter nights, performance started at about 17:00 on the modern clock. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Colin Timms, “George I’s Venetian palace and theatre boxes in the 1720s,” *Music and Theater: Essays in honour of Winton Dean*, ed. Nigel Fortune (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 127f. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. This means, however, that none of these four works is likely to run for more than one week. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Venice: Archivio di Stato [=I-Vas], Inquisitori di Stato [=IS], Busta 710 (1727-34), (1) Fasc. 1727, reports of Francesco Alvisi for 17 and 24 Maggio 1727. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. It was incidentally in year 1727 that we first find definite evidence for the hiring of instrumentalists to provide *sinfonie* and perhaps other musical numbers in conjunction with the performance of *commedie* in Venetian theaters. This change would have had effect in the autumn and might possibly have been inspired by the “light opera” in gestation in London. The instrumentalists involved appear to have been headed by Giovanni Battista Pescetti (San Samuele) and Salvatore Apolloni (San Salvatore). Cf. *Song and Season*, Ch. 8, and *The New Chronology*, Supplements 3b and 4b. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. NV, N. 180, Venezia 2 Agosto 1727, f. 294. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. I-Vas, IS, Avvisi, B. 709, issues of 24 Maggio, 7 and 14 Giugno 1727. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. NV, N. 180, Venezia 21 Maggio, 28 Maggio, 11 Giugno 1729 (ff. 161f, 172-172v, 184). The repositioning of the fair occurred particularly in years when a later opening date would cause performance to occur on or after 13 June, the feast of San Antonio. He was the patron saint of Padua, where special observances attracted the participation of many Venetian noblemen who had villas nearby. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. *Diario ordinario*, N. 1853, report from Venice for 11 Giugno [1729]. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. The cast also featured Vivaldi’s protégé, Anna Girò. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. By 1732 the composer had agreed to serve as *Kapellmeister* at the Saxon court, and although his *drammi per musica* on texts by Metastasio were favorites for decades, it was only in old age that the two returned to Venice. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. *L’incostanza schernita* (1727) was arguably pastoral but more neutrally developed. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Other expenses were £2,380 for the instrumentalists, £2,888 for the ballet dancers, £1,553 for the engineer, £1,674 for costumes, and £3,720 for the intermezzi (see *The New Chronology*, pp. 422f). Amorevoli was a singer in the ducal chapel. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Nor is there any complete score for any Ascension opera given previously. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. IS, Avvisi, Busta 710, Venetia 24 Maggio 1732 (signed by Girolamo Alvisi). [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. *Griselda* was the only collaboration between Goldoni and Vivaldi and the only work set by Vivaldi to be staged in the Grimani theater. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. IS, Avvisi, Busta 711, reports of 14 and 21 Maggio 1735 (signed by Francesco Donado). [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Intermezzi such as these would have been given between the acts of a prose comedy. The roles would have been taken by members of Gori’s troupe. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. The satisfaction of Vaneglia’s desires can scarcely be imagined in the welter of legislation governing trade. In 1697 the government had ordered that within the Republic wool, cloth, and cotton be purchased only in Venice, though by 1710 the Senate did allow that cloth could be made within the Veneto in the “Dutch and English” manner, not simply in the customary Venetian way. Overall, the spate of regulations drove many artisans away from the city; silk-weavers and coppersmiths went to Friuli, cotton-spinners to Cividale and Tolmezzo, and wrought-iron workers to the Bresciano. That the Ascension fair eventually became an emporium of foreign-made goods is a complete inversion of what the government intended. See Pompeo Molmenti, *Venice: Its Individual Growth from the Earliest Beginnings to the Fall of the Republic* (London: John Murray, 1908), 3/1, pp. 48f; also *A New Chronology of Venetian Opera and Related Genres,* p. 603. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. NV, N. 189, Venezia 12 maggio 1736, ff. 266-266v. Lotti’s madrigal, preserved in the Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana (and several other libraries), became a staple of the Ascension Day ceremony until the end of the Republic. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. IS, Busta 711 (1735-1772), Avvisi, Pacco 1735, entries by date. In this same era the investitures of procurators were also becoming very lavish. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. NV (*loc. cit*.), f. 267. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. *Loc. cit*., ff. 280ff. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. NV, N. 190, Venezia 8 Giugno 1737, f. 273. Venetian overtures to the prince of Wales were not appreciated at Whitehall. Pietro Businello, the Venetian ambassador to London in 1737, was held responsible for being “too friendly to the prince” and was dismissed by the British. For this reason, official Venetian representation at the court of St. James was not resumed until 1744. The Incurabili oratorio cannot be identified (no new works are recorded for the institution between 1733 and 1745), so it was probably a revival. Hasse was then the nominal *maestro di coro*. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. *Alvilda* was the only opera given for that fair. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. IS, Avvisi, Busta 711, 26 Aprile and 3 Maggio 1738 (signed by Sebastiano Trebbi). [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. The work would have been G. F. Brivio’s *Artaserse*, which had opened at the Teatro Obizzi on May 20th. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Trebbi’s lenthy account (Busta 711) is given in the *avviso da Venetia* for 17. Maggio 1738. He tells us in his installment for the following week that the duke and duchess of Modena were richly entertained in *nobile conversazioni*. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. NV, N. 192, Venezia 23 Maggio 1739, f. 209. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. Milan: Archivio di Stato [=I-Mas], Potenze Esteri, Busta 226, Fasc. 1740; letter from Venezia of 28 Maggio 1740 [Pio to Traun]: “...la consueta funzione seguita giovedi passato dello Sposalizio del Mare, la quale però riuscì men grandiosa degl’altri anni, quando tutt’al contrario per la presenza del Real P.pe di Polonia si aspettava più magnifica; ma si vede che la gente è straccia [stracciata] dallo spendere, e che quasi da non inteso presaggio siano avvertiti a non gettar mal a proposito il denaro, di cui si può aver maggior bisogno nelle future Calamità; poi che i viveri van fuor di modo crescendo di prezzo; del formento v’è poca provigione, e la stagione stravagante minaccia scarsa raccolta anche in quest’anno, il che fa temere li crudeli dissaggi della fame, la quale attualmente in qualche luogo del Dominio Veneto si prova, essendo dalla Dalmazia Veneta in questa settima gionte moltissime suppliche, implorando caritatevole assistenza, per che più luoghi trovansi a tal miseria ridotti, che sono obbligfati fin a far bollire il fieno, e mangiarlo per insalata, da che poi la gente si muore, e quì con ogni ossequio mi rassegno.” [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. *New Chronology of Venetian Opera*, p. 477. Francesco Antonio Correr, patriach since 1734, died on 17 May 1741. His successor, Lodovico Foscari, was not elected until 27 November of that year. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. *New Chronology*, p. 487. Contagions had made the Provveditori alla Sanità nervous for centuries: crowds of strangers were generally considered to be inadequately observant of health and sanitation regulations, especially those governing wells. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. Reports of the 1743 fair can be found in I-Vas, Miscellanea di Atti diversi, Busta 58/I, in the *avvisi* of 25 Maggio 1743 by Donado, Desideri, and Aviani. This collection includes news-sheets from various publication series including fragments of “Pallade veneta” not reported in my 1985 book *(Pallade Veneta: Writings in Music in Venetian Society, 1650-1750*). I am indebted to Mario Infelise for calling my attention to these addenda. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. This can be attributed to several factors: (1) the “collectors” [e.g., Apostolo Zeno] for whom such collators as Gio. Carlo Bonlini and Antonio Groppo seem to have written were becoming too poor, too old, or too distant to collect; (2) the nobility in general was in a state of rapid impoverishment that limited the past grandeur of the theatrical experience; and (3) almost none of the serious music-drama performed in Venice rested on new texts. The demise of the great northern Italian courts deprived Italy of young poets and dramatists. Metastasio had such a secure hold on theatrical repertory by the 1740s that few new authors were prepared to expose their work to the public. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. I-Vas, Misc. di Atti diversi, Busta 58/I, “Pallade Veneta” for 6-13 Maggio 1747. “Questa settimana è stata delle più gioconde, che corrono fra l’anno in questa dom.te, dacche ... si e dato principio alla rinomata Fiera della Sensa, e cosi li Patrizj, Cittadini, ed esteri, che non in poco numero sono giunti per doverla, vieranzi [?], e nel passeggio della Piazza sud.ta riddotta in un teatro di meraviglie e nel trattenim.to della maschera permessa p tutti li 15 g.ni della Fiera, cosiche trattenimenti si onesti, e nobili tengono lontano da ciascuno tutte le noie. Il più specioso però trà tutti li trattenimenti fù quella di giovedì in cui la Publica Ducà [?] sopra il Reggio Bucintoro passò al Lido servita da liete acclamazioni di maschere innumerabili, e da lautissime voci di Bronzò infuorati, poiche si servitò l’atto del suo perpetuo dominio sopra l’Adriaco Nettuno, venendo col solenne sponsalizio del Mare suddite al Veneto Trono l’onde.” [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. A pastiche incorporating music by Giuseppe Orlandini and others on a text generally attributed to Ambrosio Borghese. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. Adapted by the Mingotti troupe from Goldoni’s text, with music attributed to Giovanni Fiorini. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. I-Vas, Misc. di Atti diversi, Busta 58/I, “Pallade Veneta” for 10-17 Maggio 1749, f. 2v. [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. *New Chronology*, pp. 534f. [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. *New Chronology*, p. 538. It appears that the basis for their objection was gestural rather than textual. [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. I-Vas, Misc. di Atti diversi, Busta 58/I, *avviso* from Venetia 15. Maggio 1751 (signed “Parabò e Conti”. [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
48. Venice: Biblioteca Civica Correr [=I-Vmc] MSS Gradenigo-Dolfin [=GD], Ser. N. 67, Notatorio II (Ottobre 1751-Genaro 1754 M.V.), f. 9 (entry for 30 Gen.o [1751 M.V.]. [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
49. The government had closed 144 casinos in 1744. [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
50. The concert was for the Rev. Abbot de Scopetini and took place at an undisclosed location. Gradenigo’s focus on church news was strong. In other church news of the same week he noted (2 June) the approval of a redesign of the *cantoria* of the church of Sant’Apollinare, where a new organ was to be installed; also the theft of 1000 ducats and a gold chain from the strong box of the church of the Carmelitani Scalzi (I-Vmc MSS Gradenigo-Dolfin, Notatorio III, May-June 1754, ff. 99v-100v). [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
51. GD, Notatorio III, Maggio 1755, ff. 18v-20. The oratorio was probably Ferdinando Bertoni’s *Cum amore divino*, although he also set a *Modulamina sacra* for the Mendicanti that year. See Denis and Elsie Arnold, *The Oratorio in Venice* (London: Royal Musical Association, 1986), p. 89. [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
52. On Alberto Gozzi, see E. Selfridge-Field, *Pallade Veneta: Writings on Music in Venetian Society (1650-1750)*, Venice: Fondazione Ugo e Olga Levi, 1985, p. 228. On Alessandro Marcello’s instrument collection (1724), see E. Selfridge-Field, “The Invention of the Fortepiano as Intellectual History,” *Early Music* 33/1 (2005) 81-94. [↑](#endnote-ref-52)
53. GD, Notatorio VI, f. 21. One of Nazari’s most famous portraits was of Carlo Broschi detto Farinelli. [↑](#endnote-ref-53)
54. Watson, F. J. B., “The Nazari: A Forgotten Family of Venetian Portrait Painters, [*The Burlington Magazine*](http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublication?journalCode=burlmaga)*,* 91/552 (Mar., 1949), 75-79. [↑](#endnote-ref-54)
55. *New Chronology*, Supplement 7 (pp. 632-39). [↑](#endnote-ref-55)
56. At least six flute-markers were active in London at the time. Colombani was a purveyor of *avvisi* and the new *Gazzetta veneta*. His shop on the Merceria was near the church of San Salvatore (GD, Notatorio VI, f. 5v, entry for 15 Maggio 1760). [↑](#endnote-ref-56)
57. *Op. cit.*, f. 6 (continuing account for 15 Maggio). The Venetian maker Giovanni Celestini (*fl*.1587-1610) is survived by five harpsichords and six polygonal virginals (two mis-identified in instrument catalogues, according to Denzel Wraight, “Two Harpischords by Giovanni Celestini,” *Galpin Society Journal* 46 [1993], 120-136). None of the surviving instruments contains decorative features of note. [↑](#endnote-ref-57)
58. By this time, though, the shop may have been maintained by a descendant, as Serafin is thought to have died in c. 1758. [↑](#endnote-ref-58)
59. GD, Notatorio VI, f. 87v, entry for 28 Ottobre 1760. Perosa repaired flutes for the Pietà and gave instruction on various wind instruments. [↑](#endnote-ref-59)
60. *Op. cit.*, f. 118, entry for 15 Dicembre 1760. [↑](#endnote-ref-60)
61. *Op. cit.*, f. 57, entry for 24 Agosto. [↑](#endnote-ref-61)
62. *Op. cit.*, f. 91v, entry for 3 Settembre 1760. [↑](#endnote-ref-62)
63. Continuation of same entry, ff. 92-92v. [↑](#endnote-ref-63)
64. Only random folios survive to document the publication (*op. cit*., f. 14, week following 2 Giugno 1760). Colombani was quick to counter their offer with a new two-volume edition of Boccaccio’s *Decameron.* It contained a “true portrait of the author from a copper engraving.” A subscription was 24 *lire* (*op. cit.*, f. 96, entry for 25 Luglio 1761). The term was not stated. One unnamed bookseller rented books for 5 *soldi* a day. Sebastiano Coletti was newly commissioned to sell the *Giornale nuovo di commercio*. [↑](#endnote-ref-64)
65. Manuscript *avvisi*, which had been the primary source of news in and out of Venice over the past century, had been compiled weekly and sold on a half-yearly subscription. [↑](#endnote-ref-65)
66. Strictly, the geometric plane containing the orbit of the earth as it travels around the sun. In common parlance it is the apparent path of the sun through the constellations. The “circle” of constellations formed an important iconographical element of the decoration of the tower. [↑](#endnote-ref-66)
67. The liturgical dissonance between the Wise Men of Epiphany and the Risen Christ of the Ascension did not seem to trouble the promoters. The Magi were also to process on other Marian feasts (15 in all). [↑](#endnote-ref-67)
68. GD, Notatorio VI, ff. 14-15v, entry for 5 Giugno 1760. [↑](#endnote-ref-68)
69. *Op. cit.*, f. 5v, entry for 15 Maggio 1760. [↑](#endnote-ref-69)
70. In 1762-63 the Englishman William Stuart (ninth Lord Blantyre) was engaged as impresario at San Samuele for autumn and winter (I-Vas, Capi, Consiglio de Dieci, Notatorio, Busta 53, Fasc. 1763, entries of 2. 8bre. 1763 and 13 marzo 1764). Lord Blantyre was required to deposit 4000 ducats in advance but could only provide 2250 at the outset of his tenure. The remaining 1750 ducats had not yet been presented by the start of Lent, when the season was terminated. Lord Blantyre’s brother John (third earl of Bute) acquired a collection of 1286 Venetian opera libretti in Venice at about the same time as this ill-fated venture. Continued until 1767, it traveled by sea to London where it remained in private hands until the 1960s, when was acquired by the University of California at Los Angeles. The collection is itemized in the *Catalog of Venetian Opera Libretti* by Irene Alm (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992). [↑](#endnote-ref-70)
71. By 8 August the composer had still not been paid for composing the music. The *capi* of the Consiglio dei Dieci ruled on the 13th on Galuppi’s behalf, ordering that Bernardi repay the balance and the other monies due to him (Capi, Consiglio de Dieci, Notatorio, Busta 53, Fasc. 1764, documents of 14 Maggio, 8 Agosto, and 13 Agosto 1764). In the last case, the amount at issue seemed to be 30 *zecchini*. Galuppi claimed that he was normally paid 90 *zecchini* by the Grimani theaters, 80 by San Benedetto, and 60 by the Teatro di Padova.

    9078 words

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