**Patronage of Venetian Opera**

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**Who was an opera patron?**

Today audience profiles for various kinds of entertainment can be culled from a vast array of seemingly trivial information. Recent litigation has focused intensely on the use of apparent trivia to flesh out profiles of consumers and voters. For the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, in contrast, we have no way to determine who witnessed any opera performance apart from eye-witness accounts. These require various skills and patience in poring through the uncatalogued trivia of archival holdings.

In the view of those who have worked extensively with large quantities of opera libretti (pocket-sized printed texts) in conjunction with surviving music and other kinds of information about opera, the emerging view is that dedicatees offer us the best proxy for who actually witnessed the performance of a specific opera given in Venice. In large measure dedicatees were persons of social, economic, military, or civic importance.

### Seventeenth-century patterns of patronage

Why might this be? Two reasons are apparent. In the early decades of public opera, librettists were often chosen by theater owners. They were generally considered to be much more important to the success of a work than composers, who merely “set the words.” In providing texts and supplying it to the printer, they usually honored their current employer, if they were attached to a court. For example, Adriano Morselli, the resident poet of the Duchy of Mantua, consistently dedicated libretti he wrote to the Duke of Mantua, Ferdinando Carlo Gonzaga. (The last Gonzaga duke, who died in 1708, was the dedicatee of twenty-two operas.) The more august of these dedicatees often gave purses of coins after a first performance to a performer he especially favored.

Alternatively, ambassadors usually held theater boxes on a long-term basis. Yet it is difficult to determine who actually filled them or how often. If, however, a *condottiere* (the leader of a military regiment, often of noble birth) was in town, theaters might enjoy a bonanza of patronage, because they could invite an entire regiment. This was quite a phenomenon in the 1680s, when the Republic of Venice rented troops from certain German principalities to place at the disposal of the Papacy and Austria in their “holy” battle against the Turkish forces that raided Vienna in 1683.

Another constituency for opera “consumption” consisted of those who spent months in Venice negotiating contracts—for royal marriages, for peace treaties, or for other efforts to resolve a long-standing conflict. These became more numerous over time. An apt example is offered by xx {Modena, Parma, Dorothea}. Venetian exemplars, as recalled by important visitors, drove many imitations elsewhere. {Dorothea}

### Changing patterns of patronage n 18th century Europe

The finances of many persons and institutions became precarious in the first years of the eighteenth century. Several duchies also collapsed, leaving the old patronage system in chaos. Dedicatees increasingly became tied to the present. They visited Venice in some cases for commercial reasons, in other cases to settle a long-running dispute. The Venetian nobility had long been enjoined from taking sides in disputes, whether clerical, political, or social.

[The biggest exception was Antonio Ottoboni, the nephew of the late pope Alexander VIII, who ruled for less than two years and died in 1689. When the duchy of Mantua collapsed, the cardinal hoisted a French flag atop the Palazzo della Cancelleria in Rome to signify what he thought of the Austrians. (The French and the Austrians, with their allies, had been at war over the succession to the Spanish throne since 1701, when only lateral descendants survived. The war continued until 1714, when Venice hosted what would be a multi-year legal consideration of how to dispose of the vast possessions of the last duke of Mantua, which died without heirs. (Austria was the winner. Indirectly, the French suffered a painful loss because they had provided the duke with a 30,000-a-year income from 1682 until his death.)]

Operas were funded by the main theatrical “year”, which amounted to a few months in late autumn and early winter. Contracts were drawn up during the previous Lent. Impresarios were responsible for hiring personnel, renting boxes, printing libretti, and selling tickets. They were, in theory, to pay all the performers on the first day of the following Lent. After the Peace of Utrecht (March 1714), cash for such payments became scarce. Venice’s two banking systems—one for current accounts, the other for interest-bearing savings—became completely dysfunctional over the next few years. At the Zecca (mint) funds were deposited for long, indefinite periods at a set rate of return. While that practice continued as before, the current-account (*conto corrente*) facility froze, upsetting many theatrical obligations and a great many other payment systems. The cash promised to performers was unavailable—from 1717 to 1739—unless impresarios could find it outside the banking system.

These changes ushered in a wholesale change in commerce. New sources of revenue were urgently sought. The Venetian Republic would face no new maritime battles for the rest of the century, although upheaval abroad would be frequent. The Procuratia Vecchia rented ground-floor premises under under its offices to lure merchants, who established shops catering for visitors. The establishment of spring opera (1720), although involving only two or three of the city’s six theaters, attempted to expand the market for opera. Spring opera was *not* a continuation of autumn and winter models. It was an independent “season” (of two+ weeks) starting from the Eve of the feast of Ascension that spawned its own social profile favoring shorter, lighter works than those intended for long winter nights.

As performers fled Venice, the government introduced a lottery (1715) designed to benefit both itself and a few lucky winners. Based on French models, it drew the interest of many withering enterprises. Quarterly at first, the intervals between drawings became shorter and shorter, the winnings less and less unpredictable. By the 1720s, the winning numbers were reported in manuscript weekly news-sheets. ==

The best proxies for patronage of Venetian opera are the dedicatees of printed libretti. <a few stats> Up to the 1720s (when public opera had existed for almost a century) the steps in mounting an opera production were (a) for a theater owner to contract with his preferred librettist and singers and then (b) to select a composer. This is a simplified model, because on any given scheme, variations and elaborations were likely to occur.

Over time the impresario took over the role of the theater owner. Impresari were often more practical. It was they who hired supernumeraries—set designers, orchestral musicians, and *ballerini*. Box rents were collected for the owner. Attendees also needed tickets to enter the theater. (Those without access to leased boxes were required to rent *scagni* [folding seats], which were set up on the parterre (today’s “orchestra” seats but at that time the section for ordinary viewers). Those who attended on the first night of a new production had to pay double the ticket price, probably to offset the costs of selectively interpolated elements (*balli*, battle warriors, wind sections added to string fare, comic intermezzi) in opening performances. Evidences of the non-continuous nature of the corresponding performers and the absence of most such elements from manuscripts of the operas themselves underscore this point. The final night of the winter season (a Monday, because by dusk on Tuesday the theater was ordered shut for Lent) had a format all its own: only the first act of the opera was performed. It gave way to a banquet and a ball that could last until daybreak. Theaters were then closed until the following autumn openings, generally the following November.

Modern attendees come in small groups, but opera audiences of the seventeenth century often consisted of a few large groups led by a duke, a condottiere, or other dignitary. If the dedicatee was a military or naval figure, his entire regiment or fleet might accompany him. If the dedicatee was a duke or a prince, a large family retinue would be in attendance. These practices died back in the eighteenth century, when their decreasing frequency led to significant changes. Fewer and fewer operas had dedicatees, but dedicatees had been an important financial engine for theatrical finance. Without them, libretti came increasingly to be recycled from a previous generation. By the 1730s scores too became pastiches—amalgamations of generic fragments proclaiming love, expressing rage, or projecting similes likening an important feature of the situation to an outdoor phenomenon—a running stream, a cooing dove, or a chattering magpie. Moral conflicts posed by seventeenth-century operas were replaced by emotional juxtapositions and ironic outcomes.

The most important aspect of these shifting characteristics is that while the text, the choice of a theater owner or manager, of a work was its core in the seventeenth century, audience preferences played an increasing influential role in the eighteenth-century evolution of the repertory. What was lost in the process was a tight coupling between the historical or mythological figure portrayed in the text and the living patron, who usually left generous gifts for the principal figures of the performance.

Libretti survive for almost every work in the repertory, but musical scores survive at a much lower rate. Brief mention in manuscript weekly news-sheets indicate that the dedicatees named in libretti were present in Venice for at least one performance of a pertinent work roughly ninety-five per cent of the time. As patrons of notable social, military, or political standing, declined, opera performances were otherwise attended by nobles, merchants, and ambassadorial staffs, all of whom paid for the privilege.

Venetian theaters were “public” insofar as they were not maintained by a court, but the large entourages of the seventeenth century must sometimes have given the impression of a court theater. Most attendees occupied boxes leased by the year. Tickets for a folding seat on the parterre were sold at the door.

**Periods of patronage**

Patronage was strongly influenced by the vicissitudes of political and economic life throughout Europe. In the seventeenth century, dedicatees were frequently drawn to Venice for political formalities or negotiations. Their motives included petitioning the doge or a government body, presenting credentials for diplomatic recognition, negotiating marriage contracts among parties from disparate political realms (i.e., between a German and an Italian court), or furthering a diplomatic initiative. Venice’s general stance of political neutrality in intra-European wars made it a much cherished host. It enjoyed one of the highest levels of trust on the Continent.

Venice was, however, endlessly bogged down in wars “against the Turks,” a catch-all designation for non-Christians. To judge from the texts of operas performed in Venice, the category subsumed not only Turkey and the Middle East but also North Africa. Many of the early dedicatees of Venetian operas were Venetians or were allied with the Republic in these endeavors. By profession, many of were co-owners of theaters.

1. 1637-1659: Public opera was first given in Venice in 1637, but performances were irregular. Some theaters were ephemeral. The advent of so-called “public” opera had been preceded by at least 150 years of occasional works in which music might be used in conjunction with a dramatic recitation. What the term “public” implied was that those of substance could pay to enter, while previously such performances were given for invited audiences only. We adopt Paola Besutti’s term “impresarial” opera.
2. 1660-1701: A predictable pattern of performances began to emerge in the 1660s, by which time there were usually four theaters in operation during the winter months. The settlement in 1669 of the War in Candia (in which Venice lost the island of Crete) reduced the popularity of a central motive for early opera--the praise of political glory. The lull was short-lived. In the later 1670s two new theaters were opened, bringing the functional total to six. The formation of the Holy League (involving the Empire, the Papacy, and the Venetian Republic) in 1683 brought a new surge of political pride to the fore. Opera productions briefly became more dazzling than ever.
3. 1701-1714: The War of the Spanish Succession altered every aspect of Venetian opera. It impoverished theaters, kept performers and potential patrons stranded in distant locations, and inadvertently stimulated the formation of many new performing venues across the Continent. The political allegiances that could be so clearly read from patronage in the seventeenth century were in many cases dissolved. Operas were less often dedicated, and individual allegiances could change from day to day.
4. 1715-1742: The years 1715-1720 were marked by a vortex of economic erosion. Large numbers of musicians began to leave Venice for opportunities in Great Britain and the Low Countries. Although prominent patrons remained scarce, the growing popularity of Handelian opera in London prompted many English noblemen to visit Venice in the 1720s, mainly for the purpose of identifying more singers to lure to their capital. The rise of Austria, particularly from 1720, also led to a steady trickle of young performers to Vienna, Prague, and, by the 1730s, St. Petersburg. The residues of Venetian opera were spreading across the whole of Europe.
5. 1743-1760: By 1740 Naples was the largest city in Europe. Its tastes were radically different from those in Venice, but it was an irrepressible force in cultural life everywhere. The advent of Neapolitan *opera buffa* in Venice in 1743 generated a tidal wave of new loyalties—not among the nobility, who continued to support the *dramma per musica* until the collapse of the Republic (1797), but among the growing ranks of merchants, traders, and a middle-class *intelligentsia* the new genre was so popular that it soon became the dominant form of stage entertainment. Its sudden rise also brought on a rapid decline in funding for serious opera. Only the new Teatro San Benedetto was committed to it.
6. It was not secure for long, however, before Goldonian comedy (which could be staged with or without music) rose to prominence (late 1740s). The polemics it generated overwrote a century of absolutist fidelity to celebrations of power. The individual now took center stage.

**The Patronage Database (Elijah: This is for you only)**

The master database from which these materials came contains about 40 fields. The ones initially intended for inclusion here are, **by column:**

**A: Key record**, which indicates year and chronological position with year (among other operas given in Venice).

**B: Work title**

**C: Theater**

**D, E, F, G, H:** bibliographical concordances with various catalogues; exclude for now.

## Creator group

**I: Composer.**  Generally, the work-composer ratio was one composer to one to one. A banking crisis in Venice in 1717 caused many improvisions on this practice. Over time, the impact of pastiches was considered convenient to fill an unexpected hole in a schedule. Some arias, or one or more acts might be blended with older material. In the case of multiple authors, the acts for which each was responsible is indicated in Roman numbers (in parentheses).

**J: Librettist(s):** usually only one, but many libretti were revised from an earlier work. Previously used texts were reset to suit young composers.

## Patronage group

**K: Dedicatee(s):** usually only one, but occasionally a couple or several members of a family.

**L: Political allegiance**. This is subject to much interpretation. Libretti can give five or six titles for the same person. I have usually chosen that one that is most easily decoded and/or seems most significant. What makes this so complicated, especially after 1701, is that political boundaries and alliances kept changing.

**M: Dedicatee’s habitual locale**. Where they usually lived, although this can be uncertain. Married women and couples are especially difficult subjects for location, because they had multiple loyalties. The continuing demise of duchies and principalities in the eighteenth century, when heirs were sometimes unavailable was a cause for anxiety that has many echoes in opera of the 1730s and 1740s. Some dedicatees of little note today were newly transplanted by an unexpected inheritance, or, conversely, newly relocated by the loss of one.

## Dating group

**Date fields:**

This database has many of them, because references to time employ multiple hierarchies of variable granularity.

**R: Sorting date.** This is what I used for the chronological sequence. Most dates (perhaps about 80%) are exact.

**S: Source/level of confidence**: indicates whether the sorting date is exact, approximate (might be up to a week off), or speculative (“speculative” means many constraints are known but the work cannot be pinned down to something as finite as a week). For the first years, though, only secondary sources are available, so a sorting date ending in “00” means the year is ostensibly correct but nothing further is known.

**N, O, P: Finite modern dates (year, month, day).** Tableau was not able to parse my sorting dates appropriately, so I separated them out for easy rearrangement.

## Performing materials

Fields for surviving scores, arias, and other fragments are currently suppressed. We use RISM sigla to identify holding libraries but do not give shelfmarks, which can change from time to time. RISM’s own online source database gives up-to-the-minute information, as additions are made frequently. Start at <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_RISM_abbreviations>. These materials are unpublished. Very few operas were published in their entirety until after the middle of the nineteenth century.

## Associated works

Two categories of associated works have been compiled but are not currently offered. These are prologues and comic intermezzi. Prologues were lavish stagings involving gods who were typically seen on machines. They were used up to 1700, but they were more highly evolved in the mid-century than its later decades. Comic intermezzi were frequently used at San Cassiano and Sant’Angelo after 1700. In both cases performers were usually not members of the cast. Prologues were lavishly presented and could include up to ten performers and several instruments. They great out of appearances of gods in court wedding festivals.

Intermezzo performers circulated all over Italy and sometimes abroad presenting a repertory of short pieces in which a male and a female antagonized one another, often with a focus on such oppositions as age and youth, wealth, and poverty, etc. Musically, the work were simple and required only harpsichord accompaniment. Very little of their music survives. Intermezzi were often changed week by week, while operas typically ran for three weeks.

**Other hidden fields:** lots more concerning surviving musical sources. In a back-handed way these relate to patronage too. Someone took the performing materials somewhere, and one can find long chains of more or less consecutive works that migrated to Paris, London, or elsewhere. For future consideration.

Time has a lot more structures, too. (z) Seasons are useful mainly in conjunction with “periods”, which were marked by feast days, some of which were moveable. This ties in with patronage too, because some patrons always came in the same phase of the year (probably because the government’s calendar was largely regulated by feasts).

## Parsing by external events

Some events had grave implications for opera performance. A notable one was the start of the War of the Spanish Succession, which occurred between Work Nos. 283 and 284. The main opponents were the French court and the more diffuse imperial court network that included Austria, Spain, parts of the Netherlands, and an accumulating array (from 1723) of eastern European lands including Moravia and Bohemia. The conversion of the Saxon court to Catholicism (1697) became increasingly significant for opera (and comedy) in the 1730s, when favored entertainments increasingly took place in Poland and Russia.

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