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Venice and Opera in the 18th Century*

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Abstract. The author of the article disputes the established opinion according to which the great tradition of 17th century Venetian opera lost its significance in the European musical theater a century later. Emphasis is made of the vanguard role of opera in Venice in the first half of the 18th century, which has been marked by a set of phenomena. They include: the birth of heroic opera, the base of which was the Teatro San Giovanni Crisostomo; the stake on virtuoso singers made by the Teatro San Cassiano; the productions of comic intermezzi initiated by the Teatro Can Cassiano; and the creation of the genre of *opera buffa* with the participation of the great Venetian comic dramatist Carlo Goldoni. A number of reasons that stipulated the leading role of Venice in the history of the development of opera is highlighted. They are connected with the emergence of accessible music theaters, which became magnets for the general public and which provided for a flourishing of the art of the theater; with the creation of a specific artistic milieu that exerted an influence on the art of decoration. A considerable amount of contribution in the creation of the fertile ground for the development of opera in Venice was made by the theatrical element, which determined the ways of living of the city dwellers and the out-of-town visitors during the period of the carnival, as well as the Venetian academies, the walls of which held unfolding disputes about opera. The intensive development of Venetian opera in the 18th century was also enhanced by the preparation of singers who mastered the new style of vocal performance.

Keywords: Venetian opera, Italian opera in Russia, art of the Settecento, opera librettos, accessible musical theaters, comic intermezzo

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Музыкальный театр

Научная статья

Венеция и опера в XVIII веке**

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Аннотация. Автор статьи оспаривает устоявшееся мнение, согласно которому великая традиция венецианской оперы XVII века утратила своё значение в европейском музыкальном театре столетие спустя. Подчёркивается авангардная роль оперы Венеции в первой половине XVIII века, обозначенная рядом явлений. К ним относятся: рождение героической оперы, плацдармом которой стал театр Сан Джованни Кризостомо; ставка на певцов-виртуозов, сделанная театром Сан Кассьяно; постановки комических интермеццо, инициированные театром Сан Кассьяно; создание жанра оперы *buffa* с участием великого венецианского комедиографа Карло Гольдони. Выделяется ряд причин, обусловивших ведущую роль Венеции в истории развития оперы. Они связываются с возникновением общедоступных музыкальных театров, ставших магнитом для широкой публики и обеспечивших расцвет театрального дела; с созданием специфической художественной среды, оказавшей влияние на декорационное искусство. Свой вклад в подготовку плодородной почвы для развития оперы в Венеции внесли театральность, определявшая образ жизни горожан и приезжих в период карнавала, а также венецианские академии, в стенах которых разворачивались диспуты об опере. Интенсивному развитию венецианского театра в XVIII веке способствовала и подготовка певцов, осваивавших новый стиль вокального исполнительства.

Ключевые слова: венецианская опера, итальянская опера в России, искусство сеттеченто, оперные либретто, общедоступный музыкальный театр, комические интермеццо

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Introduction

It is well-known that Venetian opera played the leading role in 17th century European musical theater. For a long time, the opinion according to which this great tradition lost its significance a century later, having conceded the position of the leader to the Neapolitan opera, was considered to be similarly conventional. This opinion, which hearkened back to the works of authoritative early 20th century scholars — Hermann Kretschmar and Hermann Abert, is presently in need of revision. Research works of the latest decades, as well as the sources that have become accessible, have made us evaluate anew what happened with the Venetian tradition during an era that may legitimately be called the golden age of Italian opera.

It is the main lines of such a reevaluation is what there is an urge to trace in this article. A small review published on March 15, 1729 in the newspaper *Sankt-Peterburgskie vedomosti* [*St. Petersburg News*] may be considered to be a point of departure for this: “From Venice on February 19. The musical singing production with the title of *The Recognized Semiramis*, which is demonstrated at the San Crisostomo, is confirmed by everybody. Praise is also bestowed on the comedy *Stregoneria* [*Sorcery. — I. S.*], which shall be performed at the San Samuele comic theater 16 evenings later.” [1, p. 112] This article became one of the very first reviews of the opera that reached Russia. The preserved published libretto makes it possible to establish precisely, what kind of “singing play” was

being discussed. It was Nicolo Porpora’s opera *Semiramide Reconsciuta* set to Pietro Metastasio’s libretto.¹

The theater enjoyed great success primarily because of the phenomenal assemblage of performers. The part of the *primo uomo* was performed by the celebrated castrato Nicolò Grimaldi (1768–1845), one of Handel’s favorite singers. He was already close to the end of his career, but still astounded his audiences with his outstanding dramatic mastery. The part of the *prima donna* was sung by the popular soprano singer Lucia Facchinelli, who frequently performed together with Grimaldi. But the chief singer in the cast, of course, turned out to be Carlo Broschi, the legendary Farinelli (1705–1782), who at that time was at the prime of his fame. The libretto also mentions the famous artists-decorators Giuseppe and Domenico Valeriani, who created the stage settings for the performance. 13 years later, Giuseppe Valeriani would become the court artist of Russian Empress Elizaveta Petrovna and would decorate a large quantity of interiors in the Winter Palace. However, not a word was mentioned about the singers, the composer and the librettists, nor about the decorators in the St. Petersburg article. And still, this brief and unemotional review presents in itself an interesting historical document and provides the impulse for a discussion of the essence of Venetian opera and its specific features, about what place in the history of musical theater it assumed in the 18th century.

The anonymous St. Petersburg-based correspondent mentioned two Venetian

¹ See: Sartori C. *I libretti italiani a stampa dalle origini al 1800. Catalogo analitico con 16 indici. 6 vol.* Cuneo, 1990–1994. Vol. 5. P. 180.

theaters — San Giovanni Crisostomo and San Samuele. Both of them belonged to the distinguished Venetian Grimani family.² The first, Teatro San Giovanni Crisostomo, beginning with 1678, the year it was opened, and up to the middle of the 18th century, was the largest and most splendid theater in Venice. The magnificent building, which was described with enthusiasm by the French newspaper *Mercure Galant* (*Galant Mercury*) in 1683, possessed five tiers, on which 184 loges were situated, and a enormous stage (almost 26 meters deep and about 19.3 meters wide).³ The second, Teatro San Samuele, was opened almost a quarter of a century prior to that, in 1655. Unlike the Teatro San Giovanni Crisostomo, here in the 18th century operas and dramatic comedies were staged, one of which — *Stregoneria* (*Sorcery*) — was mentioned in the St. Petersburg review.

Two out of the five Venetian theaters that in 1729 presented theatrical performances were mentioned, — a fact meriting attention. No other European city at that time possessed such a great quantity of theaters. Just as it was before, in the 17th century, the city on the Lagoon remained the primary recipient of opera productions. In the 1720s about 18–20 new compositions were staged there annually — a number incredible even for a contemporary megapolis. It did not fit in any way the perception of a loss by Venetian opera of its crucial positions. But did Venice preserve its leadership in the ideal and artistic spheres?

Venetian opera reigned supreme on European stages up to the end of the 17th century. At the turn of the new century the state of affairs changed. Musical tragicomedies with fanciful plots and luxuriant decorations and stage effects started to be perceived as old-fashioned, and it no longer suited either the experts, who were turned off by its baroque “mannerism” and pomposity, or the public, who was expecting something novel — not only new compositions, but also new theatrical ideas. The latter could be drawn from French classical dramaturgy, which set the style in European dramatic theater, it was possible to lend an ear to the criticism of Venetian opera on the part of the intellectuals and literati from Rome, who joined together towards the close of the 17th century into the academy “Arcadia,” or it was possible to suggest one’s own solutions.

What was the path that Venice chose? The crisis that its opera tradition went through at the turn of the centuries revealed a special quality that, in all likelihood, determined its role in the musical theater of the first half of the 17th century — namely, its vanguard character. I wish to enumerate all the new aspects that Venetian opera offered, which at that time held the status of experiments — at times, more successful, and at other times, less so, — and in what in many ways determined the paths of development of the operatic art of the Settecento.

² According to the Venetian tradition, the theaters were always named after the names of the church parishes in which they were situated.

³ See: Termini O. A. *Carlo Francesco Pollarolo: His Life, Time and Music with Emphasis on the Opéras. PhD thesis.* Un. of Southern California, 1970. P. 242.

The Birth of New Genres

The first thing we should do justice to is the *birth of heroic opera in Venice*.⁴ At present, it is difficult to evaluate the level of risk taken by the creators of a new genre. The names of the innovators of that period are known at the present time only to opera historians, but their role turned out to be decisive. They are the Northern Italian librettists Domenico David, Girolamo Frigimelica Roberti, Francesco Silvani, Antonio Salvi, Agostino Piovene and, finally, Apostolo Zeno, who possessed the reputation of being the Italian Corneille. The main foothold of the first reform of theater in the history of musical theater turned out to be the Teatro San Giovanni Crisostomo, about which the report at the *Sankt-Peterburgskie vedomosti* was published. Here for the first time the public was offered an opera in which the action was fully concentrated on a serious dramatic storyline. There were no farcical scenes meant to entertain the audience, as they did in the old Venetian tragicomedies, no stage miracles,

illusions or fantastic transformations. A small cohort of poets began writing librettos in the image and semblance of Corneille's and Racine's plays, [2, p. 201–216]⁵ or, even to a greater extreme — in the manner of the ancient Greek tragedies.

Frigimelica Roberti (1653–1732), a Paduan count, labeled his five libretto, created in the 1690, straight ahead as tragedies, even though they all had happy outcomes. In full correspondence with Aristotle's poetics, he considered tragedy to be the highest genre of the art of poetry, and its aim — to bring people pleasure by means of commiseration.⁶ The poet insisted on observing Aristotle's unities, which were perceived by him — in blatant contradiction with the strongly enrooted practice of opera — as the natural and reasonable rules for leading theatrical action. He never tired of turning to this question, time and again, in the introductions to his “musical tragedies,” diplomatically expressing the hope that his ideas would find resonance particularly in Venice, where, unlike all of Italy, “good taste” reigned in dramatic poetry.⁷

⁴ The term “heroic opera” used to indicate the genre of serious opera that appeared in the early 18th century was applied by Pietro Weiss in a chapter meant for the first volume of the six-volume *History of Italian Opera* — a project carried out under the guidance of Giorgio Pestelli and Lorenzo Bianconi. Three of the volumes (4–6) were published in 1987–1988 in Italian (published by the EDT/Musica publishing house), and subsequently translated into German (published by Laaber), French (published by Margada) and English (published by the University of Chicago Press); Volumes 1–3 have remained unpublished up to now. The chapter written by Weiss was published as a separate edition in 2013: Weiss P. *L'opera italiana nel '700*. A cura di R. Mellace. Roma: Astrolabio, 2013. The term “Venetian heroic opera” was brought in the first volume of his monograph devoted to eighteenth-century Italian opera, for the identification of the genre that preceded the Neapolitan opera seria and had significant differences: Lutsker P. V., Susidko I. P. *Ital'yanskaya opera XVIII veka. Chast' 1. Pod znakom Arkadii [Italian Opera of the 18th Century. Part. 1. Under the Sign of Arcadia]*. Moscow: State Institute for Art Studies, 1998. 440 p.

⁵ Gloria Staffieri, while labeling the operas composed in Venice on heroic historical subject matter as “reformatory,” marks the change of dramaturgical trends in Northern Italian librettos: instead of Spanish tragicomedy, the norms of Classicist tragedy become relevant. [2, p. 201–216]

⁶ The introduction to *Otton*. See: Leich K. Girolamo Frigimelika-Robertis Libretti: (1694–1708). *Schriften zur Musik*. Vol. 26. München-Salzburg, 1972, pp. 20–21.

⁷ Introduction to *Irena* (1694). See: Ibid. P. 28.

The librettos of Venetian heroic operas carried such a measure of austere heroism and moral pathos, they overwhelmed the audiences by their sharp dramatic situations so much, that even today they baffle anybody who is used to perceiving the 18th century as the age of gallant manners and refined, gracious art. It is not by chance that in music, as well, the large-scale heroic arias, which were sung especially expressively by the most prominent singers of that time, the famous Francesco Gasparini (1668–1727), and the lamenting pathetic solos received a new sweep of energy. If we allow ourselves a somewhat free comparison with contemporary cinema, the Venetian heroic operas may be likened to historical thriller films, in which the amorous collision merely accentuates the main drama, which at times is very bloody and by no means always leads to a happy outcome. The motive of intense expectation generating fear, — one of the crucial motives in contemporary thrillers — is also masterfully turned to advantage by the Venetian librettists. In one case, there are two lovers in prison waiting for their execution, who agree about their mutual suicide (*Irena* by Frigimelica Roberti); in another case, the heroine pining in confinement is brought in a dish covered with a cloth that she is afraid to uncover, fearing to see there the head of her decapitated husband (*Lucio Vero* by Apostolo Zeno); in a third case, there is a prostrate monk, compelled to observe how his daughter was turned to a slave, does not bear the shame anymore and drinks poison (*Bajazet* by Agostino Piovene).

The genre of opera in which the accentuation was made on the dramatic basis was undoubtedly innovative and, in all possibility, particularly because of this the public considered it overly radical. As a creative experiment, it was very

important for the fate of the genre of opera in the 18th century, but as a commercial project, it was not very successful: heroic opera enjoyed a brief period of flourishing at the turn of the centuries and quickly began losing its popularity. It was necessary to come up with another solution, and it was found. Being characteristic for the overall logic of the development of opera, particularly in Venice this solution obtained a broadly expressed form, wherein lies the second most significant merit of musical theater of the city on the Lagoon.

For the first time, *the singer was placed at the central focus of the opera performance*, rather than the decorator, as it had been in the 17th century, and the poet, as it was in Venetian heroic opera. Alfred Einstein in his monograph about Mozart wrote with bitterness that “the greatest celebrity of the 18th century was not Handel or Hasse, Graun or Gluck, but the castrato Carlo Broschi, dubbed Farinelli.” [3, p. 363] Similar thoughts were uttered back in 1706 by authoritative writer, member of the Arcadia Academy Lodovico Muratori. “In our time,” — he wrote in his treatise *Della perfetta poesia italiana* (*About the Perfection of Italian Poetry*), — “it became a regular affair to judge about dramas solely by the music and by the extent of the fame of the singers that perform it.” [4, p. 97] All of these deficiencies appeared, in Muratori’s opinion, as the result of the violation in opera of the main law of the art of drama: “Poetry is presently merely a subsidiary means and a tool for the music, whereas it is called to be the chief aim of the entire composition.” [Ibid.]

Only recently musicologists had accepted and shared such negative evaluations without any reservations, all the more so, because they could hear in them repercussions of Wagner’s thoughts of the correlation between music

and drama, which in themselves are closer to our time. Presently, the vector of perceptions has changed, and we do not expect from the 18th century art of Italian *bel canto* any dramatic verisimilitude, it is perceived by us as an implicit independent value, as the essence of Italian baroque opera. At the same time, if we search for the point of reference not in the theory, but in practice, then the course towards such an understanding of the role of the vocal element in opera was taken in Venice. The first to have made a bid for the virtuoso singers, primarily, the castrati, was the Venetian Teatro San Cassiano, the main competitor of the Teatro San Giovanni Crisostomo. In 1705, the celebrated Nicolò Grimaldi (Nicolini), a legendary figure for musical theater, was employed in the former theater. He enjoyed all-round success in Italy, and his name was connected with the first triumphs in London and the appearance there of a permanent private theater company. In the following year, the Teatro San Cassiano was closed, but once again a singer of the highest rank, Francesco Bernardi (Senesino) was invited to the carnival of 1707. It was particularly these famous castrati, as well as their female partners — the prima donnas Santa Stella, Vanina-Boschi, and Diamante Scarabelli — who provided the Venetian operas with the proper scope. It was primarily their art, and not the mastery of the poet-librettist, that began to determine the success of the opera enterprise and to urge forward the composers' musical fantasies.

The commercial interest that nurtured the development of musical theater in Venice also played a role in what could be called the “reanimation” of the baroque magic opera in the 1710s and 1720s. The decline of the stream of commerce at that time led to irregularities in the work of the main Venetian theaters — the Teatro

San Giovanni Crisostomo and the Teatro San Cassiano, which missed entire seasons. Against the background of the silence of the “bigwigs,” the more modest theaters received their chance — the Teatro San Angelo and the Teatro San Moise. They were not endowed with large amounts of material means, however, they were fortunate with their impresario, who was Antonio Vivaldi (1678–1741). It was particularly he who was able to revive the Venetians' interest in the genre of the magic opera, albeit, not the way it was in the 17th century, where the main role was played by miracles on stage, but a new type, in which the fantastic storyline lay at the basis of an opera with a luxuriant musical “design,” permeated with vocal and instrumental beautifications and sound illusions. It was particularly in this genre that Vivaldi's talent disclosed itself in the brightest and most original way.

The third most important invention of the Venetians was the *comic intermezzo*, one of the brightest phenomena of the musical theater of the Settecento. The Venetian intermezzi were the first Italian operas that became familiar to listeners in Russia. They were first shown in the court of Empress Anna Ioannovna in the 1730s. The history of the penetration of this genre into Russia and its perception in the Russian court in the 18th century have been described in detail in a whole set of research works (for example: [5; 6; 7]). In Paris the intermezzi served as a trigger for the “guerre des bouffons.”

The initiator of the appearance of the new genre was the Teatro San Cassiano, wherein in 1706 the intermezzo *Frapolone e Florinetta* was staged. The novelty turned out to be so appealing to the public's taste, that comical scenes in intermissions of serious operas began appearing more and more frequently on stages.

Only two singers participated in them, and the storylines were quite unelaborate: one of the protagonists obtains the love of the other by any means, overcoming resistance, and in the final scene achieves the desired nuptials. In a somewhat naïve way, but in essence, the peculiarities of the intermezzo were explained by Jakob von Staehlin, a scholar and writer, a titular member of the Russian Academy, in his essay about opera (1738), published in the *Prilozheniya k Sankt-Peterburgskim vedomostyam* [Supplement to the St. Petersburg News]: “For those local dwellers... the most perfect opera seemed to be exceedingly important. Something had to be thought out, in order to entertain the audience with a few humorous effects during the serious action itself. It was not permissible to mix them into the opera itself, without reducing its beauty. For this end, a new performance was conceived of, which does not pertain to the opera itself, but is endowed with a merry content and may be divided into two, and sometimes into three segments.” [1, p. 562] Without going into particulars, Staehlin arrived at an absolutely correct conclusion: an intermezzo is a “new performance,” i.e., it is endowed with its own storyline, not intercepting with the main opera in any way.

A large role in the formation of the image of the intermezzo was played by the comedies of Jean-Batiste Molière translated into Italian and well-known in the North of Italy, including Venice. The most popular intermezzi possessed obvious points of intersection with Molière’s plotlines — *Le malade imaginaire*

(*The Imaginary Invalid*), *Les Precieuses ridicules* (*The Affected Ladies*), *L’Avaro* (*The Miser*), *Le bourgeois gentilhomme* (*The Bourgeois Gentleman*), and *Monsieur de Pourceaugnac*. They were all staged in Venice and Florence, and then repeated in many cities and countries, including Russia in the 1730s. In 1733–1735 a theatrical troupe which arrived in St. Petersburg from Dresden showed the intermezzi: *Le malade imaginaire* (*The Imaginary Invalid*), *Le bourgeois gentilhomme* (*The Bourgeois Gentleman*), and *L’Avaro* (*The Miser*).⁸

Finally, the fourth most important discovery by the Venetians in the sphere of musical theater was the **creation of the genre of opera buffa**. There are still many ambiguities in its genesis. The genres of the first half of the century — the comic intermezzi and the Neapolitan musical comedy spoken or sung in the dialect — developed actively until the 1740s. After that, the fashion for intermezzi passed, and during the opera intermissions they were replaced with ballets. At the same time, the Neapolitan comedies shed their regional limitation and started being disseminated in the other Italian regions, as well. Having reached Venice, they comprised the element that provided the impetus for the appearance of *opera buffa*, the genre that during the course of the second half of the century was gaining momentum, outshining on the stage rostrums not only the other varieties of musical comedy, but also *opera seria*. The role of the “architect” of the new genre was played by Carlo Goldoni, the great comedian playwright (1707–1793). His dramaturgical plays,

⁸ See: Peretz V. N. *Ital'yanskije komedii i intermedii, predstavlennye pri dvore imperatritsy Anny Ioannovny v 1733–1735 gg.* [Italian Comedies and Intermezzi Produced at the Court of Empress Anna Ioannovna in 1733–1735]. Petrograd, 1917.

which enjoyed great success in Venice, were rarely staged in other cities. [8] Things stood absolutely differently with the opera librettos, they served as a basis for an immense number of compositions [9, p. 107] that literally captivated all the European musical theaters. (The dissemination of *opera buffas*, which were written primarily on the libretti of Goldoni, became the objects of special research works. [10; 11; 12]) The illuminating and diverse plotlines, the developed and perfectly elaborated intrigue, the distinctly and concisely described characters, at times reminding of the numerous precedents in dramatic comedies, at times absolutely original, — all of this elevated the quality of libretto writing in the *dramma giocoso* to a level that previously was inherent only to serious opera, made it a fact not only of musical theater, but also of literature.

Venice and its Artistic Milieu

Thus, Venice in the 17th century, especially in its first half, played not only a conspicuous role in the development of opera, but was in the vanguard of it. It remains to ask the question — what was it that induced and at the same time presented the possibility of playing this role? Apparently, there are several reasons for this.

The first of them is obvious. The special position of operatic Venice on the Apennine peninsula may be explained by the circumstance that, in principle, is well known, — namely, the appearance of public, i.e., accessible musical theaters. Only half a century prior to that, the famous Russian historian had discerned in this, first of all, a strengthening of democratic tendencies,

which is what transformed opera from a performance for refined aristocrats into a genre that was capable of arousing interest among the general public.⁹ Today it would be more reasonable to see in public operas of that time a manifestation, primarily, not of social concepts, but of commercial interest. Along with the carnivals, opera became the main point of attraction for numerous travelers, thereby bringing in immense monetary means into the city budget. Already in the 1640s, during the first decade of existence of the Venetian opera, the secretary of the papal nuncio wrote, apparently, with a slight bit of envy: “The payment for everybody who wished to attend the performance comprised half a scudo, so almost everybody could afford it; thereby, the money started flowing into Venice.” [13, p. 6] They filled up that financial lacuna that emerged as the result of the weakening of the role of Venice as the largest center for trade. The owners of the theater buildings, the rich merchant families, rented them and in many ways influenced the activities of operatic enterprises. Investments into the opera performances generated competition, and, in its turn, it begot many of the forms of theatrical activities which have continued to exist up to now. Thus, particularly in the city on the Lagoon, back in the 17th century, theatrical seasons were established, and all the other theatrical professions, entrance tickets and the practice of subscriptions to loges were introduced and, of course, the regular opera-going audience was formed. Since the income flow of the theaters was directly dependent on the earnings for the performances, it was necessary to react very keenly and quickly

⁹ See: Konon V. Dzh. *Teatr i simfoniya [Theater and the Symphony]*. Moscow: Muzyka, 1975, pp. 63–64.

to its moods, wishes and tastes, not only present new compositions from one season to the next, which for Italian early opera was common practice, but also to search for and find new theatrical ideas capable of attracting attention and causing discussion about them. All of this provided impulses for experiments, for those Venetian discoveries and inventions which have been elaborated on here earlier.

However, had it based itself solely on commerce, theatrical business could not have thrived so opulently and generated so much impressive artistic results as it occurred in Venice. As it seems, another reason that provided the city on the Lagoon with the leading role in musical theater of the 17th and the 18th centuries was its specific artistic milieu. The Venetian painting of the 16th century, having experienced a magnificent state of efflorescence in the works of Giovanni Bellini, Giorgione, Titian, Veronese and Tintoretto, entered a period of stagnation towards the 17th century. Nonetheless, the energy it had accrued found a peculiar outlet in the development of decorative art. In the history of musical theater, apparently, there was no period when the stage settings of performances were so luxuriant and complex as they were in 17th century Venice. The master who brought it to perfection is considered to be Giacomo Torelli. There was no equal to him in the invention of stage effects, among which special popularity was enjoyed by flights and other aerial effects. Gods and heroes appeared and disappeared in clouds and chariots of fire, monsters and magicians rose from trapdoors and in flashes of lightning “came down below the earth,” enveloped in puffs of smoke. The famous flight of Bellerophon on the Pegasus in Vincenzo Nolfi’s and Francesco P. Saccati’s opera (produced in Venice at the Teatro Santi Giovanni

e Paolo, 1642) reminds us of the no less famous fresco made by Paolo Veronese on the ceiling of the San Sebastiano Church in Venice (1556–1557), where the hero from the Old Testament is depicted on a chariot: the hooves of the rampant horses bridled with great difficulty by the warriors seem to hang over the viewers. Later, Bellerophon would soar on the winged Pegasus on Giovanni Battista Tiepolo’s fresco (on the plafond of the grand hall of the Palazzo Labia, 1747–1750). The aerial effects would also be preserved in the productions of the magic operas in the 1720s, thereby realizing the incessant connection of Venetian decorative art with the illusory effects of baroque painting. However, the role was played not only by such direct parallels. The abundance of masterpiece paintings and their unprecedented concentration within a small space, the inimitable architectural image of the city generated a special degree of artistic perception in everyday life. In such a luxuriant setting, did not seem to be a genre that was separated from the overall Venetian atmosphere, but, on the other hand, presented its brightest expression. [14]

The condition of opera in Venice was also influenced by the all-pervading theatricality that determined the city dwellers’ and the out-of-town visitors’ ways of living during the times of the carnivals. The three theatrical seasons lasted all together seven or eight months: from St. Stephen’s Day (December 26) to the beginning of Lent (the carnival season), from the Ascension (in May) to June 15 (the spring season), and from September 1 to November 30 (the trade fair season). In Venice, unlike most Italian cities, all that time the regulations of the winter carnival were in effect. On the streets and the plazas improvised scenes were played out, which featured

the participation not of actors but of ordinary Venetians dressed in costumes. This is how a correspondent of the *Sankt-Peterburgskie vedomosti* [*St. Petersburg News*] described this elementally emerging performances: “On the Sankt Marcus Plaza... there is such a multitude of personages in masquerade costumes present, that it becomes difficult to pass by. Harlequins amuse the attending people with incessant harlequin actions. Whosoever boasts of his knowledge of the art of medicine, or searches for a comrade for himself and starts a conflict with him, or attempts to find a hunchback, lame or blind man, whom he promises to heal <...> In other words, masquerades form an incessant comedy, which is pleasant to look at, since its participants have not prepared for their play.” [1, p. 122] The opera performances fit naturally into the motley carnival succession of entertainments, together with more down-to-earth street amusements. In the city, where the love towards diverse theatrical manifestations was so strong, a type of public was formed for which opera became not a passively perceived show, but an actively experienced event.

A contribution of their own in the creation of the fertile soil for the development of opera was also made by the numerous Venetian academies — aristocratic alliances that pursued the most diverse aims, including quite serious ones. Aesthetic debates, literary disputes and musical listening sessions comprised an important part of the academic gatherings. No less attention was paid by the academies to opera. The most authoritative Venetian librettist of the first decades of the 18th century, Apostolo Zeno,

in 1691 established the literary academy *degli Animosi* (*The Ardent*), which gathered together in the house of one of the owners of the Teatro San Giovanni Crisostomo, cardinal, poet and librettist Vincenzo Grimani. Subsequently, in 1698, the academy conjoined with Arcadia. In 1720 particularly in Venice one of the first operatic satires appeared — the famous “Fashionable Theater” by Alessandro Marcello, which presented in a parodic fashion the world of the theater and its characters. Mention must also be made of the fact that the activities of Goldoni the librettist also unfolded themselves in a polemical vein — his “Memoirs” contain numerous pages devoted to opera.

Finally, the most important reason, which stipulated the intensive development of Venetian theater in the 18th theater, was the powerful tradition of the preparation of musicians that formed itself in the North of Italy. It is referred, first all, to the Bolognese vocal school, which brought up many famous singers and which created a new style of vocal performances, in which virtuosic singing organically combined itself with cantilena singing. Female singers were prepared in Venice, as well, among other places, in the four Venetian conservatories. [15]¹⁰ And, of course, performance on string and wind instruments remained on the highest level. Thereby, a huge “market” of professional musicians who competed with each other was formed. The situation of the “competition-based” selection of a theatrical troupe in the 18th century became one of the favorite themes in the parody operas, beginning with the intermezzo *L'impressario delle*

¹⁰ A special scholarly conference devoted to the role of women on the opera stages of Venice was organized on May 11–14, 2022 in Venice.

Canarie (The Impresario from the Canary Islands) (the libretto of which was written by Pietro Metastasio) and up to Mozart's *Der Schauspieldirektor (The Impresario)*.

Conclusion

Thereby, Venice, not only in the 17th, but also in the 18th century, found itself at a point of intersection of several lines of force, as well as cultural and artistic

factors, which is what made it possible for it to become a point of concentration of innovative experiments in the field of musical theater, which have preserved their significance up to the present day. The factual birth of opera as a genre — a definition that generated Ellen Rosand's fundamental monograph devoted to Venetian opera of the Seicento, [16] — may in many ways be extended to the 18th century, as well.

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