

# 17th century venetian opera

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Lauren Rader MusicHistory I November 19, 2010 17th Century Opera in Venice Between 1637 and 1678, in nine different theaters, Venetian audiences saw more than 150 operas. The creation of public opera houses sparked the interest of the people of the time because of social and philosophical changes that were happening in the Republican state of Venice. Opera was not only interesting to the elite. It had now made its way to a public audience. The primary audience was the crowd of Venetians and tourists that came for the carnival season in Venice.

Opera succeeded as a public art form for many reasons: because of its exquisite musicality, it was highly successful and it became a way to produce revenue. Ellen Rosand says that three conditions existed for opera to be a permanent establishment in the Venetian culture: there was regular demand during the carnival season, dependable financial backing, and a broad predictable audience. An important group involved with the financial backing and librettos written for the opera houses were the Accademia degli Incogniti, translating to "The Academy of Unknowns". This was a secret society of noblemen, founded by Giovanni Francesco Loredano. One reason opera was such a success during this time was due to this libertine group. Even though their ideas were bold and they said heretical things, without their financial backing, their librettos may have never made it to the opera houses if they hadn't been in Venice at that time. Also, women were expected to exhibit certain social and moral standards during this time, and this was often the theme of many librettos written by the Accademia degli Incogniti from 1637-1678.

The librettos were themed around virtues where a protagonist exemplified an act of goodness in her role. Another important factor about Venetian opera was that before the San Cassiano opera house, operas had been written for private courts of the wealthy aristocrats only. Public opera houses marked a new form of social event, entertainment, and source of revenue for musicians, writers/poets, and wealthy benefactors. Venice was a republican state and the government was considerably more open to new ideas and conventions than the rest of Italy, cities like Florence and Rome. Venice was a state with its own special position in the world and history that integrated freedom and stability. The great myth of Venice was that it was an undefeated state. The people claimed that the city was founded on the day of Annunciation on March 25, 421.

Since that time no one had defeated Venice, and by the 17th Century it had lasted longer than ancient Rome. Scholars believe that this was because of its republican constitution allowing the noblemen to share the power and divide it among themselves. The wealthy were about 5% of the population, but the common people were pleased with this way of government and lived happily without too much complaint. [1] Venice's government was more relaxed and open, and that had much to do with what was allowed and not allowed in the public opera houses of the time. Another fact that is important to note is that the ruling patricians (noblemen) were involved in commerce and the arts—eventually opera. According to Edward Muir, “ At the end of the sixteenth century, the camerata theorists under Medici patronage invented the form of musical drama now called “ opera” for performance in the courtly environment of the Grand Duchy of Tuscany” (Muir 331). The

opening of the Teatro San Cassiano marked the first public opera house for a paying audience.

There was a divided relationship between patrician youth and the elderly patrician office holders. While the youth were licentious, the older generation had an impulse for social control. [2] The old law passed by the Council of Ten prohibited theatrical performances that were for carnivals and weddings, especially banning comedies. The Accademia degli Incogniti probably retrieved some of their ideas from the Compagnie della Calza, a club of young nobles “ known for their hedonism and pushing the limits of their elders” (Muir 334), created at the end of the 16th century. The Compagnie protected their identity through a code of silence. They used surnames, much like the Accademia degli Incogniti would do a century and a half later. Nonetheless, secret organizations were a way to avoid public persecution and harassment, while still speaking out on controversial issues.

A young playwright, Ruzante, played characters that made fun of and criticized the upper class. To this end, Ruzante wrote a play where one critic complained that he exceeded the boundaries of taste: “ completely lascivious, with very dirty words, and God was blasphemed by all of them, and [the audience] shrieked at them”(Muir 334). This relationship between cutting edge and tradition continued to be a prevalent issue into the time of Venetian opera in the 1600s. A distinguishing feature of new theaters was “ the inclusion of several floors of boxes that provided elevated, separated, and private spaces from with paying customers, apparently patricians and distinguished foreigners could watch performances” (Muir 335). From his book, “ The Short, Lascivious Lives of Two Venetian Theaters”. Eugene <https://assignbuster.com/17th-century-venetian-opera/>

Johnson, talks about box seats creating a feeling of premier social space that was private but at the same time public. Yet, Venetians soon started to use these box seats as modern day motel rooms; “ the box itself became a stage for imagination and metaphor for the libertine style”(Muir 335).

The box seats were called *plachi*. The Jesuits complained almost immediately that these “ wicked acts...creating scandal” in the *plachi* were immoral and provided another reason to promote their anti-theater cause. There is no real evidence of these scandalous acts taking place, but accounts say that boxes read on the floor “ *per le donne*”. During these obscene comedies, obscene acts were taking place at the same time on the other side of the thin wooden box seats; for Venetian theater was full of scandal. In 1606, Antonio Persis wrote in defense of the papal cause, criticizing the Venetians for their “ addiction to avarice and luxuria” (Rosand 412). He said that the theaters were *luxaria*, and because of his account, the Jesuits destroyed the theaters in Venice. On the other hand, the Jesuits were then banned from Venice in late 1606 by the Interdict crisis, which opened up the opportunity again for seasonal comic theater.

Even before opera, Venetians held a long standing tradition for carnivals, comedies, courtesans, and scandal. However, the politics in Venice “ remained simply conservative and committed to republicanism” (Muir 337). Although, opera was comic and touched on social context of men and women, “[it] had the capacity to engage current political affairs and debates” (Romano 402). In Purciello’s thesis from Princeton University, he talks about opera standing in contrast with the religious and economic ambiguity “ amidst the spectacle and festivities of the carnival season.

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Venice was a port center where “ people from the four corners of the world convened. This mix of cultures produced a rather exotic atmosphere: a combination of Christian and pagan religious histories. All sorts of audiences, rich and poor, swarmed to public opera houses to experience spectacle, music, and drama.

Venice was a city where commercial business was thriving, which resulted in mass productions of entertainment (Purciello 11). Opera houses repeated operas a season by altering the music of libretti, characters wearing new costumes, and reinforcing popular plot lines. Musicians and talent were not usually local Venetian musicians. They were traveling tour groups, who performed all over Italy and Europe. Yet, the musicians knew the unique character Venice required for its music, and how it differed in performance practice. Venetian opera was centered on spectacle: The use of stage machinery caused an increase in the number and elaborateness of scene change; but this is because there were whole stories told in the sets and the machinery, much of which is lost to the scholar today, who has little ability to reconstruct the stage scenery, and must rely on the libretti and the score” (Thornburn 183). Set design was crucial to the success of an opera.

Part of the carnival atmosphere was seeing something extravagant and out of the ordinary. Venetian opera was the epitome of the kind of luxurious and complex entertainment. Theaters prided themselves and showed off how much money they had by buying costly machinery. One way to move the scenes, backdrops, and other stage devices was to cut holes in the floor and slide the set along the grooves for smooth scene transitions. Before this invention, the operas would use dances to distract the audience from a

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scene change (Thornburn). The man who invented this idea was stage director, Giacomo Torelli: " he cut grooves all the way through the stage from the floor, and wings were mounted on little carriages that ran along the tracks located in the sub-stage area. Wings, back scenes, and borders were then operated by means of a winch system with counter weights.

Thus, with the turning of a central drum beneath the stage, the entire scene changed almost instantaneously" (Thornburn 175). There was a large contrast from the way scenes were changed before Torelli's invention. In the Cambridge Guide to Theatre it says that the scene changes were like " cinema dissolves" and unnecessary shifts between scenes were made for the delight of seeing it happen. Besides the stage machinery's functional use, " in the same way the contemporary action films may have thin plots because the visual technology is so powerful, so these works must have overwhelmed to beauty of line in either the music or the poetry" (Thornburn 176). Starting in 1637 opera houses began to open as large scale venues. The four major theaters open in Venice were the San Cassiano, San Moise, San Salvatore, and Santi Giovanni e Paolo. Most of these opera houses seated anywhere from four to five hundred spectators.

The Teatro Novissimo was " the shortest-lived and most influential theatre in the early years of Venetian commercial opera, opened for the carnival season of 1641" (Thornburn). The Novissimo presented operas from 1641 to 1645. There has been some debate as to when the theater actually stopped presenting operas. Cristoforo Ivanovich claims that there were operas going on until 1646, up until the day the theater was completely demolished. " In spite of its brief life...

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the theater was atypical of opera theaters in Venice because it was intended for an audience that was entirely Venetian" (Thornburn 136). In a dissertation by Hugh Thornburn, he says that audience members who regularly attended the Novissimo were academic and aware of their intelligence, and they prided themselves in participating in the opera culture. However, they were not able to pay for their interest, hence the reason for the Teatro Novissimo closing. The Jesuit-driven ban on public theater was removed in 1607, so theatrical activity was increasing by the 1620s. By the 1630s the movement for more opera houses as a form of public entertainment was in full swing. The Venetian carnival season was the most important time of the year in Venice. Opera served as carnival entertainment, "a form of ribald and often satirical comedy performed during the annual season of festive license" (Muir 333).

Spectacle was one attraction the opera house brought to the carnival season. However, there were social issues, involving mixed views on gender and how women fit into the role of opera libretti during the seventeenth century. Once opera theater became accepted as a part of the Venetian carnival season, Gianfrancesco Loredano founded the Accademia degli Incogniti in 1630. This association was made up of men who had liberal ideas, who were either rich aristocrats or scholars. The Accademia "on May 30, 1640 agreed to the concept of a communally owned theater created to express the aesthetics of the Accademia" (Thornburn 134). The Accademia was founded on the principles of a professor who taught at the University of Padua, Cesare Cremonini. Cremonini's influence spread to his students who were in the Accademia degli Incogniti very powerfully.



He taught in a way that adhered to Aristotle's work and he paid little attention to "Christian theological precepts", like the creation of the world and the immortality of the soul. He did not admit that he was a non-believer, but his "somewhat blasphemous views were well known to his Venetian admirers. The members of the Incogniti expressed themselves through novella, poems, letters, and plays. Paolo Fabbri lays claim that the Incognito legacy used "eroticism and travestism in the operas". The Incogniti used opera libretti and their writings as propaganda. The opera audiences were large, so the propaganda could reach many people who came to the carnival season. The Incogniti had a dual identity.

First of all they were patriotic, since they were noble men and leaders of the Republic. In contrast, they also "emphasized a kind of libertismo, a moral freedom that was particularly skeptical of religious authority" (Heller 69). The members of this group had a very keen interest in defining the social structures that supported the stability of Venice; "a critical aspect of this social structure depended on the...position of women": their suppression through marriage, while at the same time the "tolerance of a vibrant sex and pleasure industry". 3] Incogniti writings focused on women and their sexuality. They hypothesized "the female problem" which said that the fundamental problem of love and female morality was that it did not exist unless men were there to silence women and instruct them as how to love them. Cremonini taught that "friendship was something that could be shared by men of similar social and economic class; with women, the focus was on sexual relationships, and only rarely did male writers concern themselves

with friendships between women” (Heller 75). The Incogniti wrote libretti that reflected these claims about women.

For example, in Loredano’s play *La forza d’amore* it was clear that the general attitude towards women was negative and skeptical, much like the way the Incogniti viewed the Catholic Church. The Incogniti wrote about their admiration and physical desire for women, but also criticized the power women had to capture the hearts and souls of men. Conversely, there were women who spoke up against the Accademia. One of these women was Sister Arcangela Tarabotti. She wrote seven manuscripts defending female virtue and chastity, and exchanged letters with Loredano and other members of the Incogniti. She “ exposed many complaints about the Venetian patriarchy and the social system whereby young women were forced to bury themselves in nunneries”(Heller 93). Consequently women were portrayed as venomous, unfaithful, and temptresses who couldn’t be trusted in the operas written by the Accademia degli Incogniti.

During this time of Baroque opera, visual and aural spectacle were expected, and “ emphasis on suspense and exaggeration was an ideal vehicle for the conveyance of cultural messages”(Heller 69). There was a demand for fresh works because the opera was the primary entertainment during the carnival season in Venice. Some common themes for these operas were: two pairs of lovers separated then united at the end; scenes of sleep, laments, nurses and pages who were comic roles; and a clear distinction between recitative and arias (Rosand 415). The genre of Venetian opera was successful because aristocrats in the Republican government were involved in the arts and put forth the money to run opera houses.

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