
INVENTING THE BUSINESS
OF OPERA

The Impresario and His World
in Seventeenth-Century Venice

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INTRODUCTION TO THE BUSINESS OF OPERA IN SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY VENICE: PEOPLE AND FINANCES

Venice has long been famous as the city that nurtured the first public opera theaters. With its famous Carnival, which attracted revelers from all over Europe,¹ and a thriving theatrical tradition, it already had two of the most important ingredients to create this new genre: an audience and theaters. It was also the commercial city par excellence, with many people willing to invest capital in new ventures, and others possessing the legal and financial skills needed to run a complex business in a competitive market. Venetians discovered that producing opera required different procedures than those in place for spoken comedy, and, as we shall see, companies tried various strategies in their efforts to compete successfully in this new entertainment market.

THE CAST OF CHARACTERS

In the chapters that follow we will meet a series of men (and a few women) who came from all walks of life: nobles, citizens (*cittadini*, i.e., the civil servant and professional class), tradesmen, and artisans (see app. 2 on the social classes of Venice). The roles they filled—sometimes more than one at a time, and all vital for the success of the theatrical enterprise—are introduced briefly here:

Theater owner. An absolute necessity, of course, was a place to perform. This might be a purpose-built theater, or even a converted warehouse owned by someone who might, or might not, have an interest in the theater. As we shall see, however, this was the one person almost guaranteed to make a profit on the venture, as long as he succeeded in finding someone to produce plays or operas, and did not suffer the misfortune of a

¹ Carnival is usually described as running from 26 Dec. through the day before Lent, but the opera season often began earlier (see app. 1). During this period certain Venetian laws were relaxed, notably those regarding the wearing of masks in public and those limiting public entertainment. On the role of carnival in Venetian society see Muir, *Civic Ritual*, 156–81. See also Heller, *Emblems of Eloquence*, 6–9. The issue of the scheduling of opera performances in Venice will be addressed in detail in Selfridge-Field, *Calendar of Venetian Opera*. See also Whenham, “Perspectives.”

government-ordered closure of the theaters. His income came in the form of a fixed rent on the building or from the rental of boxes.

Theater renter (tenant). Most of the time, the theater owner chose not to produce comedy or operas himself, but rented the theater to a person or company who took on that responsibility.

Investor. We use this term, in its most general sense, to describe anyone who provides capital for the production. An investor might form part of a company that produced operas, participating to a greater or lesser degree in the management, or might be an outsider. Some investors, particularly those in a company, participated both in any profits and, more often, in the losses from the production. Others, most often external investors, expected to be repaid; that is, their "investment" was actually a sort of loan, although usually without interest.

Guarantor (pieggio). Given the shaky financial status of most theatrical companies, as we shall show, loans and other contracts were often guaranteed by someone outside the production company, a person known in the Venetian business world as a *pieggio*.

Cashier (cassier). Within any production company, one person, the cashier, managed the cash, both receipts and payments.

Impresario. While this term has been defined in many different ways, we use it here to designate the person in charge of the production, who selected the creative team and the performers (unless they were already members of the company), and made the business and artistic decisions (sometimes with the assistance or interference of one or more of the other characters listed above). This person often played simultaneously many of the roles previously described, especially theater renter, investor, and cashier, but could also be a hired professional.²

Protector. Often, a powerful nobleman, without necessarily any legal or financial obligations to the theater or company (although he might be the owner of the theater, when he had rented it out to someone else), would lend his name and prestige to the enterprise. He might write letters on behalf of the impresario, affix his name to legal documents, or otherwise act in situations where a *cittadino* or commoner might be less effective.

Opera production was from its outset a difficult and expensive proposition, with demands and complications that exceeded those of more ordinary business ventures; yet, despite all the inherent drawbacks, a series of new partners and investors—some of them perhaps naive, or at least overly optimistic—presented

2 On the idea of the impresario in eighteenth-century Venice, see Talbot, "Venetian Operatic Contract," esp. 22–23. Talbot's analysis of a 1714 contract for Teatro S. Angelo touches on many of the same issues that will be addressed in this and the following chapters. On an eighteenth-century Florentine impresario, see Holmes, *Opera Observed*. On the role of the impresario in Italian opera in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, see Rosselli, *Opera Industry*.

themselves throughout the mid-seventeenth century, willing to lend a hand in order to promote one of Venice's most attractive and exciting forms of entertainment. As we shall see, owners and renters often developed different solutions to operational problems, even year to year.

VENETIAN THEATERS AND THEIR NOBLE BUILDERS

In Venice most theaters, which were usually known by the name of their parish or a nearby church, were built and owned by a noble family (see table 1.1A). This seems quite logical from our modern viewpoint, given the social makeup of the city, yet many non-noble Venetian businessmen had funds more than adequate to build and operate a theater; they did not, however, possess that certain mystique that came with Venetian nobility. These theaters were strongly identified with their

TABLE 1.1. Ownership of Seventeenth-Century Venetian Theaters

<i>Theater</i>	<i>Date built (or rebuilt)</i>	<i>Owning family</i>
A. Built and owned by patrician families		
S. Cassiano	1580 (1607)	Tron
S. Moisè	1620	Giustinian (Zane from 1628 to 1715)
S. Luca	1622	Vendramin
SS. Giovanni e Paolo	1630s (1639)	Grimani
S. Samuele	1656 ^a	Grimani
S. Angelo	1677	Marcello and Cappello ^b
S. Giovanni Grisostomo	1678	Grimani
B. Built and owned by cittadini		
S. Aponal	before 1635	Zanetta Diamante and Francesco Ceroni
C. Others		
Novissimo	1641	Monastery of SS. Giovanni e Paolo
SS. Apostoli	1649	unknown

For more details, see Mangini, *Teatri di Venezia* and Mancini, Muraro, and Povoledo, *Teatri di Venezia*.

^aThe date for the building of S. Samuele has traditionally been given as 1655, the year cited in Ivanovich's history. In a document of April 1656 (ASV, AN, Atti, b. 6059, f. 29), however, Giovanni Grimani referred to the theater as not yet built.

^bBuilt by impresario Francesco Santurini on property owned by these two families; after the expiration of the seven-year contract, control would revert to the patricians.

proprietors; indeed, they were often referred to by names such as "Teatro Grimani" and "Teatro Vendramin" after the families that owned them: they represented more than a building housed in a certain parish, for they helped to focus attention on the patricians of Venice, and on their contributions to the city.³

The importance of these noble owners to the functioning of the most successful theaters becomes more evident when we look at other theaters (whether for comedy or opera) that operated more sporadically and had origins that are now less clear. Indeed, it is probably no coincidence that the more ephemeral theaters such as I Saloni and SS. Apostoli had no strong connection to noble families (see table 1.1C). As we shall see below, in one of a series of case studies of opera theaters (chap. 4), even an artistically successful theater such as the Novissimo (1640–45), with support from a variety of noblemen, suffered from the lack of a single noble family's backing. Another case study will center on a theater owned by two cittadini, Francesco Ceroni and Zanetta Diamante (see table 1.1B), whose commitment to foster theatrical activity was not sufficient to ensure its long-term success. In Venice, noble ownership and continued success in theatrical ventures often went hand in hand.

One might ask what the noble theater owners stood to gain from their property other than a sense of civic pride or glorification of their family name. Certainly, when they rented their theaters to outside parties, they would have received a specified rental payment for the theater, and, moreover, they would have been insulated from any losses suffered by the impresario.⁴ The census (*decima*) of 1661—a city-wide reporting of income from properties and investments—reveals that most of the noble theater owners were among the wealthy, if not the wealthiest of Venice.⁵ Andrea Vendramin and the brothers Marin and Domenico Zane had nearly equal income from property and leases, just over 5,000 ducats, while Giovanni Grimani declared 2,881 ducats. One thousand ducats of Vendramin's income came from his theater, while Grimani's income from his two theaters amounted only to 450 ducats, at least according to his own estimation.⁶ Carlo Andrea Tron's taxable income, on the other hand—not including the theater—was listed as only 242 ducats.⁷

3 On theaters in Venice, see also Zorzi, *Il teatro e la città*.

4 See Bianconi and Walker, "Production, Consumption."

5 Since Venetian patricians were not permitted to work, and very few of them in the seventeenth century owned businesses, their income was primarily derived from land and some investments. The Republic assessed a tax amounting to 10 percent of the annual income from these sources, based on a declaration made to the Dieci savi sopra le decime in Rialto. Of the approximately 6,000 declarations by Venetians of all classes made for the 1661 *decima* (new, city-wide declarations were usually made only once a century, with modifications submitted as necessary), barely more than 100, nearly all of them patricians, recorded incomes over 2,000 ducats. Of these, only fifty were over 5,000, including six over 10,000 (the highest was Lodovico Vidman, at 13,957 ducats). ASV, DS, bb. 212–28.

6 For Andrea Vendramin, see ASV, DS, b. 220, no. 750; for Marin and Lunardo Zane b. 223, nos. 317, 319; for Giovanni Grimani b. 218, no. 1036.

7 For the Tron family, see ASV, DS, b. 218, no. 793. The Tron family had originally built Teatro S. Cassiano in order to gain a profit; see Johnson, "Short, Lascivious Lives," 952–54.