Poppea), and a single juxtaposition of two unrelated tonal realms a fundamental conflict of personalities (Seneca and Nerone in *Poppea*).

Given a chance to speak for themselves, to instruct us in their ways, seventeenth-century operas appear less archaic, less distant than, until recently, we have been led to believe. Not only were they made of the conventional units that have continued to shape opera to our own time, but they appealed to audiences in ways that remain essential to operatic experience. Their plots, however apparently exotic and gratuitously intricate, confronted fundamental realities, universal human passions—love, jealousy, ambition. They dealt with social issues and moral dilemmas—honor, fidelity, deception. Self-conscious from the beginning, the art that combined drama and music continued to make the most of its inherent implausibility by testing it constantly against a standard of verisimilitude. Even as it created depths of mimetic chiaroscuro, drawing an audience into the reality of its fictional pathos, it inevitably found moments in which to reinvoke disbelief: the singer directly addressing the audience, the text directly addressing the art, the topical allusion to life outside the theater. Perhaps the most obvious legacy of Venetian opera to modern practice is the phenomenon of the prima donna, the star singer who comes to outshine all else, who makes of the composer's art a vehicle for herself. But that perversion of original values, too, was part of the very vitality of the art, part of its dynamic rapport with its audience.

In witnessing the development of opera on the Venetian stage, we recognize an art we already know. Opera in seventeenth-century Venice is the art of opera itself.

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Far recitare un'opera a Venezia: Origins and Sources

> This night, having . . . taken our places before, we went to the Opera where comedies and other plays are represented in recitative music by the most excellent musicians vocal and instrumental, with a variety of scenes painted and contrived with no less art of perspective, and machines for flying in the aire, and other wonderful motions; taken together it is one of the most magnificent and expensive diversions the wit of men can invent. . . . This held us by the eyes and ears till two in the morning.
>
> John Evelyn, *Diary*

The experience that so delighted the English visitor to Venice in 1645—and for which he purchased tickets in advance—was a type of entertainment that had been established in that city for only eight seasons, since 1637: public commercial opera.[1] The history of its origins in Venice is the story of the beginning of the art as we still know it.

Opera is a mixed theatrical genre, a combination of drama, music, and scenic spectacle, and the balance of those constituent elements has always been a source of its vitality. That same balance is also the source of its problems as an art, raising aesthetic dilemmas that have challenged every generation since its creation. Nevertheless, whatever its uneasy sense of itself as a genre, opera has survived because it is essentially a popular art, because it has managed for nearly four centuries to pack houses, to marshal all its contributing forces to entertain audiences from a broad range of society. With all its expensive magnificence, its fantastic illusion of sound and sight, its glitter of talent and temperament, opera is public spectacle.

Opera has been spectacular from its beginning—but it has not always been public. The birthdate of opera is traditionally set at about 1600, its birthplace Florence. But the art that was created in Florence at the turn of the seventeenth century is in many ways unlike the sung drama we have come to recognize as

1. *Memoires of John Evelyn*, ed. W. Bray (London, 1819), 1: 191. The opera was *Ercole in Lidia* (Bisaccioni / Rovetta), performed in 1645; according to Evelyn, the performance took place during Ascension week. But see ch. 3, n. 101 below.

opera. Indeed, in many respects the earliest operas—from Mantua and Rome as well as Florence—were more closely linked to the past than to the future. They manifest a closer kinship with such theatrical predecessors as humanist plays with music or the intermedi of the sixteenth-century courts than with the subsequent development of the genre. What we regard as opera was fundamentally an urban development, created with the tastes of a large, cosmopolitan, and varied audience in mind.[2]

The first operas, *Dafne*, *Euridice*, *Orfeo*, *Arianna*, like the intermedi before them, were courtly entertainments; the earliest of them, *Dafne*, even shared its subject matter and poet with an intermedio of 1589.[3] They were commissioned and created to celebrate specific political or social occasions, and were performed before an invited patrician audience. Productions enjoyed the relatively unrestricted budget of aristocratic patronage, and the music and poetry were subject only to the patrons' taste and the exigencies and decorum of the occasion.[4] The collaborators in these productions—poets, composers, scene and costume designers—were essentially servants of the court, and their works were conceived as celebration. Verbally and visually, iconographic conceit and allegorical allusion extolled a ruling dynasty—Medici, Gonzaga, or Barberini—besides marking the specific occasion.[5] The splendor and lavishness of the productions reflected further glory on the ruler, brightening his image at home and abroad.

Usually these works were produced only once, though court chroniclers were charged with preserving them for posterity through detailed descriptions that appeared in print. We learn a great deal about Peri's *Euridice* and Caccini's *Il rapimento di Cefalo* from the account by Michelangelo Buonarroti the Younger, a Medici courtier who was a poet and dramatist in his own right as well as the first editor of his famous grand-uncle's poetry.[6] And Monteverdi's *Arianna* is brought to life through the chronicle of the Mantuan court reporter

2. See Lorenzo Bianconi's eloquent treatment of the distinction between courtly and public opera in *Il seicento* (1982), translated as *Music in the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge, 1987), 163–66. All citations are to the English edition.

3. The third of the five intermedi for *La pellegrina* celebrated Apollo's victory over the serpent Python. The text was by Ottavio Rinuccini: librettist not only of *Dafne* but of *Euridice* and *Arianna* as well. The relationship between the two treatments of Apollo's victory is discussed in Barbara Russano Hanning, "Glorious Apollo: Poetic and Political Themes in the First Opera," *Renaissance Quarterly* 32 (1979): 485–513. On these intermedi in general, see Nino Pirrotta and Elena Povoledo, *Li due Orfei* (1969, 1975), translated as *Music and Theatre from Poliziano to Monteverdi* (Cambridge, 1982), 212–36. All citations are to the English edition.

4. Although *Orfeo* (Striggio/Monteverdi) was not written for a specific political occasion, but as a carnival performance under the auspices of a Mantuan academy, it shares most of the distinctive features of the other works.

5. For Medici iconography in the first Florentine operas, see Hanning, "Glorious Apollo."

6. *Descrizione delle felicissime Nozze della Cristianissima Maesta di Madama Maria Medici Regina di Francia e di Navarra* (Florence: Marescotti, 1600), partly transcribed in Angelo Solerti, *Gli albori del melodramma* (Milan, Palermo, and Naples, 1904), 2: 113. See L. Rossi, "Michelangelo Buonarroti, il Giovane," *DBI* 15 (Rome, 1972): 178–81.

Federico Follino.[7] The early Florentine and Mantuan operas find analogues in Barberini Rome, where for more than a decade operatic entertainments enhanced the image of the papal court. They also find an echo later in the Paris of Louis XIV, where each one of Lully's and Quinault's *tragédies lyriques* began and ended with an encomium to *le roi soleil*.

This kind of opera, "performed in the palaces of great princes and other secular or ecclesiastic lords" ("fatta ne' palazzi de' principi grandi, e d'altri signori secolari o ecclesiastici"), was the first and most praiseworthy of the three categories of musical spectacle distinguished by the Jesuit Giovan Domenico Ottonelli in his moralizing treatise *Della Cristiana moderatione del teatro* (1652).[8] This category he labeled the princely. The second category, the academic, linked to the first and of nearly equal status, was the kind "put on sometimes by certain gentlemen or talented citizens or learned academicians" ("che rappresentano tal volta alcuni gentiluomini o cittadini virtuosi o accademici eruditi").

Opera in Venice, however, was of an entirely different order. Ottonelli called it "mercenaria." Musically and conceptually, of course, this "mercenary" opera was indebted to the earlier models produced at Florence, Mantua, and Rome. The idea of wholly sung drama would have been unthinkable without the first experiments of Rinuccini, Peri, and Caccini. Nevertheless, opera in Venice was more profoundly affected by other factors. Above all, it responded to the unique sociopolitical structure of the Republic and its distinctive urban fabric. Opera as we know it, as an art appealing to a broad audience, had its origins in this special environment. Venice nurtured opera's development in a variety of ways and for a variety of reasons.

Venetian Foundations

The Most Serene Republic of St. Mark had long enjoyed a distinctive reputation as a haven of freedom and stability, a state with its own special position in the world and in history. What modern historians have come to know as the "myth of Venice" played a role not only in preparing the ground for the establishment and subsequent flourishing of opera there, but also in the actual substance and message of what was mounted on stage.

7. *Compendio delle sontuose feste fatte l'anno MDCVIII nella città di Mantova* (Mantua: Osanna, 1608); see Solerti, *Gli albori*, 2: 145–46. *Orfeo*, not being politically inspired, was not accompanied by such a description.

8. The topic is treated in book 4, n. 3 of Ottonelli's treatise: "Delle commedie cantate a nostro tempo, e di quante sorti, e di che qualità si rappresentino." The relevant passages, as cited in Ferdinando Taviani, *La commedia dell'arte e la società barocca: La fascinazione del teatro* (Rome, 1969), 509–13, are given in Appendix II.3 below. See also Lorenzo Bianconi and Thomas Walker, "Dalla 'Finta pazza' alla 'Veramonda': Storie di Febiarmonici," *RIM* 10 (1975): 406–10.

Unique among the Italian states, Venice could not boast a Roman foundation. Rather, it owed its origins, as a haven for those fleeing the invading barbarians, to the fall of the Roman empire. Claiming to have been founded on the day of the Annunciation, 25 March 421 (according to the dominant legend), Venice promulgated itself as the first republic of the new Christian era, and therefore as the only legitimate successor to fallen pagan Rome. The greatness of the Venetian state was to be seen in its longevity and its political continuity; by the seventeenth century it had already lasted longer than ancient Rome. On a more practical level, the famed stability of Venice was said to depend on two special factors: its site and its constitution. The governmental structure of the Republic was celebrated for being a *regimen temperatum*, a perfectly balanced state. Venice, according to its own myth, had realized the classical ideal of mixed government. The Doge represented the monarchical component, the Senate the aristocratic, and the Maggior Consiglio the democratic. As a constitutional oligarchy, Venice concentrated political power in a relatively restricted patriciate; within the nobility, however, that power was distributed in a way that precluded any individual or clan from assuming an undue share. This harmony of power was the prerogative of perhaps 2 percent of the population. That the disenfranchised majority seemed content, that patrician Venice suffered no serious internal dissension, appeared only to confirm its privileged state of grace. And that sanctified state was further manifest in the very image of this splendid city, founded miraculously upon the waters; unwalled, yet unconquered for more than a millennium. The physical city itself stood as proof of its uniqueness.[9]

The Venetian ruling class, although restricted and hereditary, was actually more open than that of other states. It comprised a large number of families of equal rank—equal in theory, that is, if not in practice. What especially distinguished the Venetian nobility was its active and privileged involvement in commerce. The ruling patrician was also a merchant of Venice, and his economic enterprise extended beyond investments in trade and banking to include all the arts—and so, eventually, opera. The Tron, Vendramin, Grimani, Giustiniani, and Contarini were among the leading families of the Venetian patriciate, and they were the most important backers of opera in Venice. Beyond the obvious desire to enhance family prestige, their interest in the art was largely commercial; they invested in opera houses primarily for financial gain, and the

9. For literature on the myth of Venice, see Ellen Rosand, "Music in the Myth of Venice," *Renaissance Quarterly* 30 (1977): 511–37, n. 1; and, more recently, David Rosand, " 'Venetia figurata': The Iconography of a Myth," in *Interpretazioni veneziane: Studi di storia dell'arte in onore di Michelangelo Muraro*, ed. David Rosand (Venice, 1984), 177–96, and James S. Grubb, "When Myths Lose Power: Four Decades of Venetian Historiography," *Journal of Modern History* 58 (1986): 43–94.

profit motive could not help but affect the product. Expenditures were carefully limited, imposing strictures on librettists, composers, and scene designers. The spectacle of the courts could hardly be indulged. In Venice, opera was a business.[10]

Venice had its own traditions of elaborate public pageantry, its own expanding calendar of annual politico-religious festivals: the Marriage to the Sea celebrated on Ascension Day, victory at Lepanto on the Feast of Sta. Giustina, and the Feast of St. Mark, to name only a few. It celebrated special occasions as well, its ducal coronations and royal visits. And all of these celebrations involved elaborate entertainments featuring music, spectacle, processions, and theatrical presentations.[11] But opera did not emerge in Venice from such a background of occasional or ceremonial spectacle; it had different progenitors. Its roots were, and remained, in the carnival season, with its established tradition of theatrical performances by troupes of itinerant players, performances for which tickets were sold.[12] These activities became especially intense after the crisis of the Interdict (1605–7), when, with the expulsion of the Jesuits from Venice, the *comici*, who had been excluded by them, returned to the city with impunity.[13]

Crossroads of east and west, Venice was a port city characterized by a lively cosmopolitan and even exotic atmosphere. Its carnival celebrations earned in-

10. For three contrasting models of opera patronage in the seventeenth century, in Rome, Venice, and Reggio Emilia, see Lorenzo Bianconi and Thomas Walker, "Production, Consumption, and Political Function of Seventeenth-Century Opera," *Early Music History* 4 (1984): 209–96.

11. Perhaps no series of events could match those mounted by the Serenissima in honor of the visit of Henry III in 1574. For a documentary history of that visit, see Pier de Nolhac and Angelo Solerti, *Il viaggio in Italia di Enrico III re di Francia e le feste a Venezia, Ferrara, Mantova e Torino* (Turin, 1890); also Angelo Solerti, "Le rappresentazioni musicali di Venezia dal 1571 al 1605," *RMI* 9 (1902): 554–58; and Margaret Gilmore, "Monteverdi and Dramatic Music in Venice, 1595–1637" (MS).

12. A vivid picture of the flourishing theatrical life of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Venice is provided by Maria Teresa Muraro, "La festa a Venezia e le sue manifestazioni rappresentative: Le compagnie della Calza e le *momarie*," in *Storia della cultura veneta dal primo quattrocento al concilio di Trento*, 3.3 (Vicenza, 1983): 315–42; see also Elena Povoledo, "Scène et mise en scène à Venise: De la décadence des compagnies de la Calza jusqu'à la représentation de *L'Andromeda* au Théâtre de San Cassian (1637)," in *Renaissance, Maniérisme, Baroque*, Actes du XI[e] Stage International de Tours (Paris, 1972), 87–99. For a concise discussion of the traditional Venetian carnival activities, see Edward Muir, *Civic Ritual in Renaissance Venice* (Princeton, 1981), 156–81; and, more recently, with emphasis on its sociological implications, Peter Burke, *The Historical Anthropology of Early Modern Italy* (Cambridge, 1987), ch. 13, "The Carnival of Venice."

13. The return in full force of the comedy troupes in 1607, just after the Interdict, is documented in the diary of Gerolamo Priuli, who reports the presence of three different companies of actors at the same time (quoted in Nicola Mangini, *I teatri di Venezia* [Milan, 1974], 34). See also Mangini's discussion of the relationship of the *comici* and *teatri stabili*, 33–35; and Pompeo Molmenti, "Venezia alla metà del secolo XVII descritta da due contemporanei," in *Curiosità di storia veneziana* (Bologna, 1920), 313, 317. By the late 1620s the actors were performing at the same theaters that would soon host operatic entertainments: S. Cassiano, S. Moisè, S. Salvatore, and SS. Giovanni e Paolo. See Elena Povoledo, "Una rappresentazione accademica a Venezia nel 1634," in *Studi sul teatro veneto fra rinascimento ed età barocca*, ed. Maria Teresa Muraro (Florence, 1971), 119–69; also Mangini, *I teatri di Venezia*, ch. 2, "Il seicento."

ternational renown and made the city, long a necessary stop for travelers, a special attraction for tourists. The population of the city, which hovered around 50,000 during most of the seventeenth century, swelled to nearly twice that number each year for the approximately six to ten weeks of Carnival (from 26 December, the Feast of St. Stephen, to Shrove Tuesday).[14] That season of liberation, of the dropping of social barriers and distinctions, was celebrated by fireworks, ballets, masquerades, bull chases, fights. Much of the excitement was provided by the dramatic entertainments performed throughout the city, indoors and out, by resident groups as well as visitors, bands of *comici dell'arte* who arrived in Venice in time for Carnival and dispersed when it was over. Just such a group, a traveling company of musicians, headed by Benedetto Ferrari and Francesco Manelli, brought opera to the lagoon for the first time. It was during the carnival season of 1637 that opera in Venice began.

Almost exactly the same company had appeared in Padua the previous year. It returned to Venice in subsequent seasons, along with other similarly constituted groups inspired by its success.[15] These groups were responsible for producing operas of Ottonelli's third and least respectable category, for which the Jesuit reserved most of his admonitory passion: "the mercenary and dramatic musical representations, that is, the ones performed by those mercenary musicians who are professional actors, and who, organized in a company, are directed and governed by one of their own, acting as authority and head of the others" (Appendix II.3b).

Such traveling companies soon yielded to more permanent, locally based troupes and a more stable structure as the impact of the new entertainment made itself felt and began to be exploited by Venetian entrepreneurs. Nevertheless, many of the distinctive qualities of the first operas in Venice, those produced by Ferrari's company, survived. Since opera remained confined to carnival season, its potential audience remained essentially the same: a heterogeneous mix of patricians and *cittadini*, tourists and travelers, Venetians and foreigners, all of whom paid for the privilege of being entertained.[16]

14. On the fluctuating population of Venice, see R. T. Rapp, *Industry and Economic Decline in Seventeenth-Century Venice* (Cambridge, Mass., 1976), 176–77.

15. Such traveling opera companies, most of them from Rome or trained there, had appeared elsewhere in Italy before 1636. See Nino Pirrotta, "*Commedia dell'Arte* and Opera," in *Music and Culture in Italy from the Middle Ages to the Baroque*, henceforth cited as *Essays* (Cambridge, Mass., 1984), 353–54; and id., "Tre capitoli su Cesti," in *La scuola romana* (Siena, 1953), 28–34; also Bianconi and Walker, "Dalla 'Finta pazza,' " 395–405.

16. Although diverse social classes were represented in the audience, the proportion of seats reserved for gondoliers and courtesans has probably been exaggerated; see Bianconi, *Seventeenth Century*, 184. Lower-class opera-goers may have been irrelevant for the economic structure of the theater, as Bianconi claims, but, as I argue below, they had an impact on the aesthetic character of the works that were performed.

Commercial success was of primary concern, and that could be achieved only by creating works with broad audience appeal. Opera in Venice was distinguished from that in Florence and other courts of Italy by the nature of its audience and by its socioeconomic base. Public approbation was important not only to the financial backers; it affected composers, librettists, and scenographers as well. These were independent professionals, who were themselves often involved financially as well as artistically in their own productions. The aim was to turn a profit. The success of an opera depended on its appealing to a large and varied audience; it had to play for a season, to keep the house filled night after night.

Although initiatives of the private sector, the opera houses, like every other Venetian institution, were regulated by the government. An enterprise as public as the theater, attracting crowds of *forestieri* as well as Venetians, obviously required responsible scrutiny. Regulation involved various magistracies, including the *Provveditori di comune* and, more gravely, the Council of Ten; it was designed to ensure the well-being of the public as well as of the state as a whole. Theater buildings were regularly inspected for safety hazards and had to be licensed each season before productions could even be advertised. Opening and closing times, and even the price of librettos sold at the door, were established by government decree.[17]

Monteverdi in the Wings

The Venetian experiment of Ferrari and Manelli took immediate root. Their return with a new production the following season affirmed and confirmed the existence of opera in Venice as a seasonal occurrence. Ferrari and Manelli were not, however, the first composers of opera to reach Venice, though they may have been the first to bring opera to the Venetian stage. Claudio Monteverdi, undoubtedly the most celebrated opera composer of his day, had been living in Venice since 1613, when he assumed the position of *maestro di cappella* at San Marco (fig. 1). Monteverdi was the composer of numerous theatrical entertainments in addition to the two famous Mantuan operas *Orfeo* and *Arianna* of 1607–8. Most recently his "favola pastorale," *Proserpina rapita*, had been performed in Venice, in the Palazzo Mocenigo, in 1630. Yet the seventy-year-old composer remained aloof from the new operatic activities. Perhaps it would have been unseemly for the *maestro di cappella* to express overt interest in the public theater;[18] possibly, too, his advanced age discouraged him from under-

17. See Cristoforo Ivanovich, *Minerva al tavolino* (Venice: Pezzana, 1681), 405–7 (Appendix II.6s).

18. The same factor probably restrained his San Marco colleague, Giovanni Battista Rovettino, from participating in opera. For Monteverdi's reluctance, see Nino Pirrotta, "Early Venetian Libretti at Los Angeles," *Essays*, 321–22.