



COMMUNICATION: CONFERENCE REPORT

## Women, Opera and the Public Stage in Eighteenth-Century Venice

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The interdisciplinary research project ‘Women, Opera and the Public Stage in Eighteenth-Century Venice’ (WoVen) brings together an international team of researchers dedicated to the question of how women and European opera culture were intertwined in the eighteenth century. The focus is on female singers, librettists and other women involved in performance of the genre, as well as female patrons and audience members. The focus, however, is not only on specific women; the questions are also directed at ‘women’s roles’ in the operatic context in general. Venice lends itself particularly well to this as a focal point, since the character of European operatic culture can be seen in the Serenissima as if under a burning glass. The theme of the first colloquium was ‘Concepts, Sources and Methodologies’.

In her introductory presentation on the project, Melania Bucciarelli (Norges teknisk-naturvitenskapelige universitet) explained the main aims and the four overarching research areas of the project: 1) women’s roles and images of femininity on the Venetian stage, 2) the performance of celebrity there, 3) women’s participation in opera, including the role of female audiences and patrons, and 4) a practice-oriented approach to eighteenth-century female opera performers. While opera is often considered a decidedly ‘feminine’ genre, research has so far been almost exclusively concerned with men in the ranks of composers and librettists of the eighteenth century – and has therefore also predominantly taken them as its starting-point. The project aims to overcome this gap by understanding individual female singers as ‘agents of culture and change’. Despite numerous studies on opera and theatre in eighteenth-century Venice, there is still no comprehensive documentation of the many female opera practitioners who were active in the city and their influence on opera practice both there and throughout Europe. Studies focusing on the construction of femininity in eighteenth-century Italian opera are also lacking, as is information on staging practices and acting on the Venetian stage, including in specific individual theatres. Little is known about the mechanisms of the construction of prominence and celebrity, or about female opera audiences and patrons; further, there is a fundamental lack of methods that can be used to assess the impact that the ‘seen’ and ‘heard’ female body had on stage. Bucciarelli’s final observation concerned the ‘oscillating perception’ between the physical body of the actor/singer and her stage role, which had been emphasized in opera not only by the widespread practice of cross-gender casting but also by the presence of the castrato. This oscillation between performer and role was also important for the construction and performance of celebrity and ‘star status’.

Following on from this, Suzanne Aspden (University of Oxford) illustrated the possibilities of ‘female agency’ in eighteenth-century opera, defining ‘agency’ as an ‘expression of power’. Aspden linked such an individual exertion of influence – or, more pointedly, power – to the example of the divas Francesca Cuzzoni and Faustina Bordoni, who were bitter rivals in London

in the 1720s. When the situation escalated to fisticuffs, on 6 June 1727 during Giovanni Battista Bononcini's opera *Astianatte*, in which the two were on stage simultaneously as Andromaché and Hermione, the conflict spilled over into the sopranos' closed blocks of fans. The performance ended in pandemonium and scandal, but this only added to the glamour of both artists. Such an 'antithetical pairing', deliberately played out beyond the concrete space of the stage, corresponded to the two female (role) types of the saint and the she-devil; however, Aspden also correlated the public staging and performance of artistic-human rivalry with the representation of political blocs and with the juxtaposition of traditional and modern styles.

At the beginning of the section 'Women on the Venetian Stage', Reinhard Strohm (University of Oxford) pointed out the importance of musical sources for the study of female opera singers. The music itself, he said, could be used as a guide to the art of its performers, as it developed through the years and from one place and occasion to another – almost like biographies in musical notes. After an introduction to the musical sources of eighteenth-century Italian opera, Strohm suggested conducting research on the themes of transfer, migration and locality. Without comparative studies of the music sung (and played) in different places it would remain impossible to understand the artistic mentalities involved. Strohm compared the interplay of supply and demand in eighteenth-century Europe with today's forms of cultural globalization. This economic equation had required essential promotional and adaptive skills from travelling *operisti* and often found resonance in the music they sang. Finally, Strohm pointed to the need for a differentiated understanding of performance styles, stage conventions and dramatic roles. It would be worthwhile analysing which women sang originally male roles in Venetian operas (as opposed to plot-relevant travesty roles); this would show what was expected of such singers and to what extent the task was identical to that of a male performer. Large-scale comparisons between scores created specifically for women or for men could reveal gendered attitudes. Recent scholarship has already established that certain styles of dramatic singing were considered more suitable for women than for men.

The paper by Francesca Menchelli-Buttini (Conservatorio di Musica di Benevento Nicola Sala) was dedicated to the role of the famous contralto Vittoria Tesi (La Fiorentina) on Venetian stages. Tesi had not only international stage experience but also a high-ranking network of patrons and sponsors, and she was known for her outstanding performance in travesty roles. In her approach to sources, gender representation and matters of methodology, Menchelli-Buttini emphasized the source value of scores that featured Tesi as a protagonist. She noted the need to examine the textual as well as the musical dimension of these scores, in order to determine the extent to which the singer was able to develop or present individual strengths in these roles. Of interest too in this regard is the recurrence of plot elements such as the dream or the hallucination. Menchelli-Buttini stressed the value of an interdisciplinary approach to such elements that focuses on the interaction of music and dramatic performance; the close and complex contacts between melodrama, theatre and literary genres in the eighteenth century need to be considered. In fact, the question of how verbal and musical figurations can conjure up specific visual images in the minds of the audience was discussed extensively in the literature of the time. It is obvious that specific singers' acting ability and the distinctiveness of their voice would have had an additional supporting effect.

Giada Roberta Viviani (Università di Genova) discussed the research project 'La Drammaturgia Musicale a Venezia (1678–1792)', based at the Fondazione Levi in Venice, which aims to track variations and innovations within musical dramaturgy in Venice over the last century of the Republic's existence. The time frame of the investigation coincides with a critical phase in the history of the Serenissima. At one end there was the Morean War (1684–1699), the last victorious campaign of the Serenissima, which, paradoxically, undermined its socioeconomic fabric; at the other end, there was the Treaty of Campoformio (1797), which spelled the end of the Republic. These events coincided with significant changes in the dramaturgy and morphology of the musical work. With the French occupation and the collapse of the Republic, an increasing rate of experimentation

within works for Venetian stages can be observed. This was certainly also a result of mutations that had evolved over decades, but could be seen as a pivotal point between the period of the 'dramma per musica' of the eighteenth century and the 'opera rossiniana' or 'melodramma' of the nineteenth century. In addition to the music drama on which the WoVen project focuses, attention is also being given to other forms of musical dramaturgy that were practised in Venice, with which the music drama interacted or in which the audience participated.

In the first lecture of the section 'Staging Celebrity', Margaret Butler (University of Wisconsin-Madison) devoted herself to the concept and historical figure of the diva in the second half of the eighteenth century. She noted how the opera seria of these decades and its female singers have long been marginalized in the history of Italian opera. Drawing on a wide range of sources, Butler explored the implications of Venice for the careers, musical style as well as historiographical position of some of the leading prima donnas of the period. She advocated a new understanding of these women of star status and of the central role of Venice in their careers and in the construction of their contemporary and historical identities. Butler picked out the soprano Caterina Gabrielli, considered the first modern opera star, as an example of Venetian celebrity culture. Drawing on the often-contradictory roles of female singers that can be seen in their biographies, and the images which have been handed down through historical reception and become entrenched within the culture of memory, Butler argued for a more flexible and nuanced perspective on the diva as a category.

Christine Jeanneret (Københavns Universitet) then drew attention to questions of the physical stage presence and dramatic expressiveness of female opera singers of the eighteenth century. She thus raised awareness of a category of artistic skills that is often neglected within opera research in favour of the musical perspective. In this context Jeanneret also considered the common emphasis on the attractiveness or perceived attractiveness of these singers, noting that in some cases, astonishingly, it was their ugliness that was remarked on. She also pointed to librettos now located in England as valuable sources, as they often contained additional explanations on performance practice, knowledge of which was assumed in the Venetian equivalents and was thus missing.

In a practice-oriented approach, Deda Cristina Colonna (Schola Cantorum Basiliensis) highlighted the artistic processes that must be implemented today in the staging of baroque operas. She stressed the need to look for actions implied by the libretto, not just relying on the spoken word, in order to be able to grasp characters fully and in the context of the play. She emphasized too the influence of the audience on the individual performance as well as the role of spatial conditions and financial resources in each individual production. This catalogue of personnel, spatial and temporal factors must be taken into account not only in modern staging of baroque operatic works, but also when considering a wide range of questions about historical performance practice and historical impact. As an example, Colonna mentioned that performance often took place in front of a visible audience in baroque theatres, where the auditorium was not in darkness. This influenced the connection between the singers and the audience, in the sense of an open 'stage-audience relationship', in a way that is hardly reproducible today with the existence of the 'fourth wall'. Colonna made specific reference to several projects that she has directed, including Vivaldi's *Ottone in Villa* (Innsbruck Festival of Early Music, 2010; Copenhagen Opera Festival, 2014) and *Il Giustino* (Naestved Early Music Festival, 2018).

Opera houses as centres of communication were the focus of the lecture by Tatiana Korneeva (Università Ca' Foscari di Venezia). Korneeva noted that producers and consumers of opera were in a reciprocal relationship: the expectations and values of the audience contributed to the shaping of the operas, which in turn played an important role in the social and political changes of the time. To explore further questions of the specifically female role in these communication processes within the WoVen project, Korneeva presented a variety of approaches and sources. These included considering the selection and role of female dedicatees or patrons by studying librettos and the contracts for the awarding of opera boxes. The 'horizon of expectation' of female audiences could be made tangible in diaries and correspondence. Korneeva suggested it would be rewarding to

consider how opera makers dealt with this expectation, which included the role of female members of the audience as opera critics. Further, she pondered the influence of visual representations of opera heroines and their impact on debates about femininity in the eighteenth century as encountered in contemporary writings, literature, plays and iconographic sources. In this context, an analysis of the representation of femininity on stage as a whole, especially within opera buffa, is also worth undertaking

In the concluding lecture, Britta Kägler (Universität Passau) examined how specialized studies of individual female opera actors can illuminate the processes involved in international exchange, whether personal or cultural. She illustrated Bavarian-Italian networks in Venice using the example of two specific women: the Bavarian Electress Therese Kunigunde and the soprano Rosa Maria Schwarzmann. Therese Kunigunde lived in Venetian exile for almost ten years, from 1705 to 1715, during which period she was documented as an opera-goer and patron. From the perspective of female artists, Kägler looked into the role of Venice as a place of qualification, as a springboard or as a place of firm establishment and lasting success. She presented a detailed study of Schwarzmann (later Pasquali/La Bavarese/Rosa Bavarese), one of the first German singers to become a prima donna. Schwarzmann came from Munich and first succeeded on the operatic stage there. She was one of the few singers who were able to travel to Venice on a princely scholarship to study the 'Italian style' that had become fashionable throughout Europe. Her career path can be traced through archival documents from the Venetian Teatro San Giovanni Grisostomo, in sketches by Anton Maria Zanetti now held by the Fondazione Giorgio Cini and through dedications in librettos. Her case reveals in exemplary fashion the female career strategies that could be pursued not just within the world of Venetian opera, but also within European operatic culture as a whole.

**Britta Kägler** studied history, literature and political science at the Katholische Universität Eichstätt-Ingolstadt, the Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München and Georgetown University in Washington, DC. As a postdoctoral researcher, she worked for several years on an interdisciplinary project on the mobility of musicians in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and has since enjoyed working at the interface between musicology and history. In 2017 she took up a professorship in early modern history at the Norges teknisk-naturvitenskapelige universitet in Trondheim. Since 2020 she has been Professorin für Bayerische Landesgeschichte und europäische Regionalgeschichte at the Universität Passau.

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