

Artists and the Theatre in Baroque Venice

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Silvia Bracca, *L'occhio e l'orecchio. Immagini per il dramma per musica nella Venezia del '600. Incisori, pittori e scenografi all'Opera con un repertorio dei libretti illustrati stampati in Laguna tra il 1637 e il 1719* (Festina Lente. Indagini d'arte e cultura, 4), Treviso, Zel Edizioni, 2014, 426 pp., 256 b. & w. ills., €30.

The authentic expression of Baroque culture, 'dramma per musica' was born in Florence in 1600 as a form of

courtly entertainment and gained a widespread following in Venice from 1637, which soon became its adopted home. Numerous musical, literary, technical, artistic and editorial factors contributed to the excellence of the performances, that already in 1645 the famous English writer and diarist John Evelyn described as 'one of the most magnificent and expensive diversions the wit of man can invent'. With her substantial and detailed book *L'occhio e l'orecchio. Immagini per il dramma per musica nella Venezia del '600* (The eye and the ear. Images for opera seria in Venice in the 1600s), the young art historian Silvia Bracca offers a study of two fundamental aspects of the vibrant theatrical life of the Serenissima, the illustration of opera libretti and the practical side of set-making, up to 1719.

As she argues convincingly in the first two chapters of the book, it was the essentially entrepreneurial nature of Venetian theatre and the healthy competition among those operating in the seventeenth century – as many as nine theatres have been recorded – that determined the development of all the accompanying elements of melo-dramatic productions. Much coveted by early collectors, the libretto would quickly become established as an excellent promotional vehicle and indispensable complement to performances. Convenient and economic because of its typical duodecimo format (roughly 180 x 120 mm), it would customarily boast a copper-engraved title-page in order to attract interest from the public. This ornamental *incipit*, Bracca explains, enjoyed a golden age in the second half of the seventeenth century, and particularly flourished between 1660 and 1680. Measuring no more than a few centimetres, these plates would offer images that essentially fall into three iconographic categories: allegorical illustration, often generic and purely celebratory; explanatory illustration, a sort of summary of the opera's plot; and finally, a 'stage' illustration, which to some extent was a forerunner of theatrical staging, and ultimately became common practice around 1670.

Studies by Bernard Aikema on Pietro Vecchia (Florence, 1990), by Massimo Favilla and Ruggero Rugolo on Antonio Zanchi (*Venezia arti*, 2006) and by Francesca Cocchiara on the Venetian illustrated book of the seventeenth century (Saonara, 2010) are the starting point for the third chapter, which is entirely devoted to the artists involved in producing title-pages for theatrical publishing. Within the period of time under consideration there was a significant number of engravers dedicated to decorating these theatre pamphlets, which were of varying quality. The forefather of the art was undoubtedly Giacomo Pic-



1. Anonymous artist after Antonio Zanchi, Title-page from Giovanni Francesco Busenello, *La Statira principessa di Persia* (Venice, 1655), engraving, 140 x 77 mm (Venice, Private collection).

cini, who in 1648 produced the opening plate for the libretto of *Semiramide in India*, the first ever work to be illustrated. Soon other authors, more or less well-known, established themselves in this field: Giacomo Dolcetta to start with, then Giovanni Merlo, the children Pietro and Elisabetta (Suor Isabella) of Giacomo Piccini, Antonio Bosio, Girolamo Longo, Giacomo Ruffoni, Domenico Rossetti, Matteo Pizzuti, Alessandro Dalla Via and Aniello Portio, and not forgetting the *forestieri* (foreigners), Giovanni Georgi, Martial Desbois and Jean Langlois, that were planted in the Veneto territory. Occasionally, engravers invented title-pages independently. Quite often, however, they made use of models prepared by renowned painters, thereby contributing with these title-pages to the spread of the art of their time. One of the most prolific designers of title-pages was the *tenebroso* Antonio Zanchi, who produced drawings for engravers from 1655 for at least fifteen years, and even worked infrequently as a set designer (fig. 1). Bracca's anthology compiles many renowned masters, such as Pietro Negri, Pietro Liberi and Valentin Lefèvre, and lesser artists, such as Giambattista Lambranzi, Carlo Ludovico Dal Basso and Giovanni Antonio Lazzari. In terms of painter-engravers, we can only be certain that Ludovico David was responsible for *L'Alessandro amante* (1667; compare fig. 2), but there are good reasons to attribute the frontispiece for *La fortezza al Cimento* (1699) to Giuseppe Diamantini and the title-page for *Almansore in Alimena* (1703) to Luca Carlevarij. Many pieces are anonymous or only signed by the engraver. Through often difficult philological research, Bracca was able to make new attributions, adding to works known from previous studies and thus paving the way for further research in this area.

In the transition to the next chapter, engraving loses the leading role that it had previously enjoyed in the book to that of set design. Drawing on numerous publications on the topic, Bracca manages to outline, with many original contributions, the operational and artistic undertakings of the craftsmen involved in set design, who were almost always assisted by teams of painters and stage technicians. Due to their ephemeral nature, props have almost completely disappeared. Knowledge of stage apparatus is therefore preserved partly through a few preparatory drawings and, most significantly, through engravings. Suites of engravings reproducing theatre sets were quite common at European courts. In Venice, however, the entrepreneurial management of theatres created an obstacle to the production of such suites. Nevertheless, Bracca is able to provide evidence of some rare exceptions. After Giuseppe Alabardi, called Schioppi, who produced an engraving of the backdrop which he created for the tragedy *La Rosilda* in 1625, it was most notably Giacomo Torelli who realized the potential of printmaking: driven by the desire for self-promotion, he managed in 1642 to finance a commemorative *folio*

edition containing the sets designed for the drama *Il Bellerofonte*. The engravings are attributed to Giovanni Georgi, an artist who would be replaced by Marco Boschini two years later, for a similar task relating to the operas *La Venere Gelosa* (fig. 3) and *La Deidamia*. For the rest of the century, apart from the limited employment of Alessandro dalla Via for a couple of plates after Domenico Mauro in 1696, only the work done by Domenico Rossetti and Giacomo Ruffoni stands out, which was a private commission by a Venetian nobleman, the procurator Marco Contarini, who in 1679–80 staged a few performances in the grandiose Piazzola sul



2. Ludovico David, Title-page from Antonio Arcoleo, *Brenno in Efeso* (Venice, 1690), originally etched for *L'Alessandro amante* by Giacinto Andrea Cicognini (Venice, 1667), etching, 134 x 73 mm (Venice, Private collection).



3. Marco Boschini after Giacomo Torelli, *Town Square of Naxos*, Plate for the opera *La Venere Gelosa*, from *Apparati scenici per lo Teatro Novissimo di Venetia* (Venice, 1644), engraving, 242 x 320 mm (formerly London, Bonhams auction house).

Brenta villa under the direction of Francesco Santurini, called Baviera.

In conclusion, Bracca accurately summarizes a very wide-ranging subject, which would, however, have been better divided thematically into two separate publications concerning the illustration of opera libretti and the practical side of set-making. Of particular interest is the section analysing the title-pages. All of these are catalogued in the Appendix, which provides a repertoire of illustrated opera librettos printed in Venice from 1637 to 1719, but fails to provide all the necessary technical and ana-

lytical data. Unhelpfully, Bracca perpetuates Cocchiara's false ascription of painter-engraver status to artists such as Antonio Zanchi, Pietro Negri and Giambattista Lambanzi, who never actually produced engravings, but merely provided preparatory drawings. The presence of a broad range of illustrations is noteworthy, though at times they are inadequate in terms of quality. Despite these issues, *L'occhio e l'orecchio. Immagini per il dramma per musica nella Venezia del '600*, which also includes a detailed index, provides an essential reference for scholars of seventeenth-century Venetian engraving and theatre.

