

The *Vendramin* family as theatre impresarios: economic management and artistic direction

The opening of the first theatre with paid entry in Europe dates back to 1637. The Teatro di San Cassian, owned by the Tron family, reduced to ashes by a violent fire in 1629 and with its reconstruction slowed down by the plague epidemic of the following year, reopened to the public during the carnival of 1637, extending access to all in return for payment for an entry ticket. Starting from this moment, nobles and members of the middle classes, merchants and common people could all enjoy that "rite" that until that moment had been reserved for a restricted élite; so in Venice there began a genuinely entrepreneurial-type management of theatres. In a very short time the rapid development of the theatre scene led to fierce competition between theatres, meaning that a work was repeated on four or five evenings at the most, then the impresario quickly had to move on to staging a new performance in order to maintain the public's interest and participation as much as possible. This tendency involved not only the owners and the impresarios, but also the authors, who strove to seek the public's satisfaction through frantic development of the production and the audience itself, whose every inclination was favoured by this race for success by the composers. However, the competition not only concerned the theatres and their owners in the artistic aspects: in Venice a full-blown *war of the theatre boxes* broke out, a kind of theatre fever mainly affecting the aristocratic class. In the theatres that arose at the initiative of a patrician family, in fact, the boxes were mainly offered on a subscription basis to nobles, for the season or for the entire year, or else they were let out for a single performance, with costs that varied from order to order. Possessing a box became a direct manifestation of power, and the quarrels over renting one, for a single evening or for the whole season, were now endless. At the same time, the cases of insolvency of box hirers also grew, a phenomenon that increasingly often caused problems for the owners too, in turn generating further quarrels. However, income did not come solely from the letting of boxes but also from the sale of tickets, with those for the stalls destined for the middle class, the merchants and the common people being much less expensive. The various books of accounts and the so-called *squarzi degli utili*, literally profit excerpts, that are conserved in the Fund are significant documents precisely because they underline the administrative and economic situation of the Teatro di San Luca in all its facets and evolutions.

In addition to the economic-type documentation, the archive also contains various folders with miscellaneous correspondence between the Vendramin family and the major theatre companies of the 18th and 19th centuries, such as those of Antonio Sacco, Antonio Vitalba and Bellotti-Bon. Also for this reason, the Vendramin Fund is a very important source for the study of the Venetian theatre scene.



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