Dancing Statues and the Myth of Venice: Ancient Sculpture on the Opera Stage
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Among the many artworks immortalized by the poems in Giambattista Marino’s La galeria (1620) is one describing a statue of the famed Theban musician Amphyon who built the walls of Thebes merely by animating stones with his lyre.

Amphyon in Marble
That Theban Musician
whose sweet song
gave life to stones,
Now I am an image carved in stone.
But even though stone, I live, I breathe,
and from time to time
thus, I sing silently.
Now hand must surrender praise to your hand,
illustrious maker and ruler,
because, your scalpel [chisel] knows better
than my lyre how to animate stone.¹

Although Amphyon was able to build an entire city with his lyre, his gifts as a statue are equally if not more impressive. Endowed by the poet Marino with a remarkable self-awareness, the statue of Amphyon acknowledges the fact that the sculptor who created him had a greater power to animate with his chisel than he once had had with his lyre. In this elegant evocation of the paragone of the arts, we find the most masterful musician championing the superiority of sculpture over his own medium. Nevertheless, the poet does not deem Amphyon entirely bereft of musical talent. By imagining that his statue has the power to sing – albeit silently – Marino acknowledges the latent performative potential of the mythic musician locked inside marble.² In fact, Marino seems to suggest that were the sculpted Amphyon to come to life, he would express himself not in ordinary speech, but rather in a manner appropriate to a heightened theatrical universe, one in which even the effigies of musicians retain all their abilities.³

A similar notion about the inner life of statues may well have inspired a slightly different intersection between singing and the plastic arts. The final scene in Bissari’s libretto for Francesco Cavalli’s opera La Torilda (Venice, 1648) features another legendary musician, Arion, whose singing summoned forth a mythical dolphin to
save him from drowning. The scene is set in a loggia near a marina, and one decorated with statues. Arion appears riding the dolphin, singing praises to the goddess Venus, and of love’s power to set stones afire. Whereas Marino’s Amphyon had readily acknowledged the sculptor’s superior generative power, in the opera La Torilda it is the singer who performs the magic: the statues in the loggia are brought to life by Arion’s song, and the work concludes with a ballo delle statue—a dance or ballet of the statues. Thus, in an operatic realm in which everyday speech is elevated to song, statues do not demonstrate their lifelike tendencies merely by coming to life; they express their inherent theatricality through the most sophisticated language of the body—dance.

The use of dancing statues in La Torilda was by no means unique. In fact, the seemingly illogical affinities between theatre, music, and the plastic arts celebrated in Marino’s poem became an integral part of the aesthetic framework of Baroque opera and were particularly relevant in seventeenth-century Italy, when sung drama became one of the most eloquent means of giving voice to the heroes and heroines of ancient myth and history. This fanciful notion about the potential life of statues so firmly captured the imaginations of librettists and choreographers that the ballo...
delle statue would become a standard trope in Venetian opera. Between the opening of the first public opera theatre in Venice in 1637 and the end of the Republic in the late eighteenth century, over twenty operas featured dancing statues, sculptors, or antiquities.\(^6\) This convention travelled to France where it was fully exploited, most memorably in Jean Philippe Rameau’s opera *Pigmalion* (1748).\(^7\) Perhaps the most compelling evidence of the popularity of the ballo delle statue comes from the text that codified the Italian tradition of theatrical dance *Nuova e curiosa scuola de’ balli teatrali* by the Venetian Gregorio Lambranzi.\(^8\) Published in Nuremberg in 1716, Lambranzi’s treatise included an elaborate dance for statues, to which he devotes no fewer than six plates (plate 1).\(^9\) In addition, he described and illustrated another ballet which features dancers sculpting a statue, and in which statues also appear as part of the stage set (plate 2).\(^10\) The kinesthetic potential of sculpture is prominently displayed on the
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volume’s title page, which features Mercury and Minerva hovering at Lambranzi’s side: Minerva holds a page of Beauchamps-Feuillet notation and the mischievous Scaramouche dances beneath them, flanked by a chorus of provocatively clad statues that seem poised to descend from their pedestals and commence a ballo (plate 3). The engraving thus acknowledges the debt of modern theatrical dance to the humanist tradition: for if the pagan gods might applaud the tools of the contemporary choreographer, then the dances of the ancients – represented by the moving statues – must truly live again on the stage.

In the remainder of this essay, I explore the dancing statues of Venetian public opera in the context of another uniquely Venetian phenomenon: the collection of antique statues given to the city of Venice by the Grimani family, usually referred to as the Statuario Pubblico or the Public Statuary. The use of the word ‘public’ to describe both enterprises is by no means accidental. Both commercial opera and the Public Statuary transformed cultural events that had so often been confined to noble households or royal courts and systematically made them accessible to a wider population. Both were sought after and described by Venetian tourists in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; both opera and the Public Statuary used myth and history as a vehicle for self-expression; and both earned prestige for the patrician families whose generous support of the arts expressed patriotic devotion to the Republic. Indeed, it is not coincidental that the Grimani family, which had donated a substantial portion of their massive
collection of antiquities to the city of Venice in the late sixteenth century, would play a fundamental role in the Venetian opera industry throughout the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. In a city in which art collecting went hand in hand with the patronage of opera, both private and public collections were part of the theatri mundi, providing creative stimulus for this new dramatic genre that so skilfully represented Venice to the world.

Numerous stories might be told about the close relationship between opera and art collecting in the seventeenth century. I will focus on several different ways in which the Venetian Public Statuary could have inspired the operatic imagination: first, as a repertory of historical and mythological characters; second, as an integral element of stage design and essential props which created the aura of the antique; finally, as latent dancers with the unexpected power to come to life and dance the myth of Venice.

**Venice’s Public Statuary and the Grimani Family**

For patrician families in early modern Venice, collecting antiquities was an essential means of demonstrating social status and erudition, as well as providing an appropriate conduit for artistic self-expression. However, the idea that a collection might do more than provide fulfilment for individual collectors or glorify the name of a single family was exploited to the fullest by the Grimani. The story of the gathering and donation of their collection to the Venetian Republic is now well known, but worth recounting in brief. When the Patriarch of Aquilea, Cardinal Domenico Grimani (1461–1523) discovered a number of valuable artefacts during the construction of his palace on the Quirinale in Rome in the early sixteenth century, he found a hobby that quickly turned into a second career as a collector of rare books, gems, and statues. Grimani seems to have come to the conclusion that art was a commodity which should be supported by the nobility but shared with the state. The Cardinal therefore left all his statues and paintings to the Venetian Republic in his will with the proviso that they be prominently displayed in the Ducal Palace. That the Republic chose only to keep the statues indicates the value it placed on them as living symbols of Venice’s mythic past.

This tradition of viewing art collecting as a service to the state was carried on by Domenico’s nephews, in particular Cardinal Giovanni Grimani (1506–93), who was also Patriarch of Aquilea. Cardinal Giovanni inherited his uncle’s interest in, and knowledge about antiquities, acquiring his own impressive collection through his extensive travels and prestigious political connections. As a result of his efforts, the Grimani collection became so large that Domenico’s nephews were obliged to renovate the family Palazzo at Santa Maria Formosa to house them all, enhancing the building with classicizing decorations designed to show the collection to its best advantage. In 1586, towards the end of his long life, Giovanni Grimani offered to donate his entire collection to the Serenissima. This, however, was dependent on the condition that the Republic designate an appropriate public space in which to exhibit both his own collection and the one previously donated by his uncle. The Senate accepted Grimani’s offer and chose the Antisala of the Biblioteca Marciana, originally designed by Jacopo Sansovino (1486–1570), as an appropriate venue because it would allow the Grimani antiquities to share the spotlight with the Republic’s treasured collection of books and manuscripts. The project to modify Sansovino’s library to house this vast collection was undertaken by Vincenzo Scamozzi (1548–1616), who as a theatre designer, certainly knew best how to exhibit the collection. The remodelling was not finished until 1596, three years after Grimani’s death, when the major pieces of the collection were moved from the Grimani Palazzo at Santa
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Maria Formosa to the Biblioteca Marciana. The Public Statuary remained on exhibition until the end of the Republic, and today forms part of the Museo Archeologico.

Much of what we know about the condition and arrangement of this collection in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is the result not only of travellers’ reports, but also of surviving contemporary catalogues. Of particular value is the visual inventory begun under the supervision of the Bibliotecario Lorenzo Tiepolo in 1736 and carried out by the library’s Custode Antonio Maria Zanetti in collaboration with his younger brother Girolamo Zanetti and an older cousin of the same name. In addition, Antonio and his cousin produced an elaborate publication, a set of two folio volumes of exceptionally high quality that included full-page engravings of the statues, carefully ordered by subject, identified by name, with each one dedicated to one or another important individual. While this was the first systematic attempt to reproduce and circulate the images from the Venetian Public Statuary, the practice of doing so was by no means new. Perhaps the most notable example was the set of engravings commissioned in the seventeenth century by the Roman collector Vincenzo Giustiniani to make a record of his own elaborate collection of statuary, not to mention the famous drawings of sculpture included in his contemporary Cassiano dal Pozzo’s ‘Paper Museum’. The engravings for the Giustiniani collection have been singled out by Elizabeth Cropper as examples of what she describes as the ‘Pygmalion effect’: the statues seem literally to be animated through the power of the engraving.
Notably, many of the drawings and engravings of the Public Statuary completed by the Zanetti also show a tendency to heighten the dramatic personalities of the sculptures, magnifying those details (props, headdresses, or costumes) that identify the statue, and posing them in lifelike positions – perhaps an expression of the family’s considerable experience of Venetian opera production.²⁴ Their engraving of the satyr Silenus (plate 4) shows the arms and legs in a balletic pose that seems antithetical to the marble statue that it presumably represents.

From the outset, the display of ancient artefacts in an official public space perfectly captured the character of Venetian sensibility. As Marilyn Perry says: ‘All of the circumstances surrounding the establishment of the museum were uniquely or essentially Venetian – the love of public display, the enthusiasm to glorify the state, the patrician involvement in political life, and of course the underlying but crucial expectation of stability.’²⁵ That antiquities would serve this purpose so well is by no means surprising. As Patricia Fortini Brown has emphasized, an important element in Venice’s self-representation was the desire to stress the Republic’s links to great civilizations of antiquity – in particular to the splendours of Ancient Rome – as a way of compensating for the inelegant facts surrounding the city’s own birth on sand pilings in the Adriatic. This goal was well served by adopting and displaying historical narratives and objects from past civilizations.²⁶ Venice was particularly adept at exploiting every available artefact and symbol – Eastern and Western, Pagan and Christian – to create what we have come to call the myth of Venice.²⁷ Debra Pincus uses the word ‘stage manage’ to describe Venice’s presentation of herself to the world, and indeed the Public Statuary became a kind of theatre, presenting a dynamic, expansive ancient universe in which Roman and Greek villains and heroes, pagan gods, gladiators, satyrs, and other enticing figures from the past lived together in apparent harmony.

The Museum as Theatre

There can be little question that the problem of managing the collection on stage was of utmost concern to Vincenzo Scamozzi, who devoted considerable attention to finding the best way to display so large a number of antiquities in a limited amount of space. This may well have come naturally to an architect so experienced in stage design; Scamozzi seems to have worked assiduously to create a classicizing framework that would transport the viewer back to the appropriate moment in the past. Marilyn Perry describes in detail the classical precedents that Scamozzi used to create the desired effect:

Scamozzi’s solution for converting the Antisala into a Statuario was to adopt a simple classical formula and then adapt it for the maximum display of the ancient marbles. On the end walls, on either side of the doors, he constructed niches to accommodate four of the larger statues; these niches were enclosed in tabernacles formed by engaged ionic columns supporting triangular pediments, and further bracketed by Corinthian pilasters, which rose to the ceiling. Similar ionic tabernacles, alternating triangular and segmental pediments, framed each of the windows, and were separated in turn by Corinthian pilasters. The bases of the pilasters were extended into the room to serve as appropriate bases for small statues, and two moldings – one at the level of the tabernacles and a second at the height of the doors – were added as suitable sites for statuettes and smaller busts.²⁸
The care with which Scamozzi used classical elements in housing these objects also tells us something about their special importance in expressing Venice’s unique brand of humanism.\(^2\) The numerous classical texts made accessible by the busy Venetian printing presses may have provided one path to the ancient world, yet they did not supply the visual stimuli so necessary to the theatrical imagination. As Paula Findlen has noted ‘humanism was structured around the objects that served as the basis for most intellectual and cultural activities’, which actually had a more immediate, visceral, impact on viewers and owners than classical texts.\(^3\) With their associated narratives, moral virtues and failings, the statuary was thus at the centre of the same eclectic humanistic urge that underlies so much of seventeenth-century opera. While a private collection could serve variously as a ‘theatre of the mind’ or demonstrate the erudition and taste of individual patrons, the Grimani collection in its new home assumed an unprecedented public role as a collection of antiquities intended for the benefit and pleasure of Venetians and visitors. The Public Statuary became a museum in the original sense of the word, a space consecrated to the muses. The theatrical potential of the collection was recognized soon after it was established; the 1601 dedication of Pietro Maria Contarini’s *Compendio Universale di Republica* repeatedly refers to the statuary as a *teatro* that renders the Republic more celebrated and glorious.\(^3\)

Carefully placed in niches and arranged into logical groupings, the statues thus provided more than a hint of the sensory stimulus that would become the norm in the Venetian opera house.

The sense of theatre is also evident in contemporary descriptions of the Statuary, such as the one provided in the early seventeenth century by the English traveller Thomas Coryate. Recounting his experience in the Marciana, Coryate names the statues of over a dozen heroes and villains of Ancient Rome, noting their missing limbs and torsos and occasionally mentioning salient details about their histories. Thus, we have ‘Julius Caesar in alabaster, but little more than his head’ while Cleopatra, also in alabaster is included twice – one with ‘only her head with a black vaile around it’, while a second Cleopatra has ‘stumpes without any hands and serpent by her, and which she stung her selfe to death’. Coryate also describes the pagan gods and goddesses with their appropriate props and attributes: the naked Venus, a winged Cupid with a dolphin, Bacchus with grapes, a Jupiter with an eagle, and another Jupiter ‘in the forme of a swanne, wantonly conversing and dallying with Leda’.\(^3\)

Particularly interesting is the way Coryate combines his descriptions of the physical appearance of the statues with details of their histories, personalities, and accomplishments, calling forth dynamic and coherent dramatic narratives for each figure. Coryate is scarcely concerned about the fragmentary nature of the artefacts. By reminding the reader of the narratives with which they are associated and making the reader aware of the contrast between the surviving bits and the parts that are missing, Coryate actually initiates the process of bringing the sculpture to life. This is precisely the phenomenon that Leonard Barkan has observed in the Renaissance recovery of antiquities.\(^3\) Barkan also astutely notes that the logical next step in restoring life to ancient sculpture is to give them voice. ‘In an effort both to make these enigmatic works live and to fix a particular identity upon them, Renaissance viewers responded not only by describing the works in their own voices, but also by giving the objects voices of their own.’\(^3\) Opera, arguably, was the ideal medium to accomplish this task.
The Grimani and their Statues on the Operatic Stage

Some forty years after the installation of the Grimani’s gift at the Biblioteca San Marco, the next generation of the Grimani family found themselves deeply involved in the business of opera. Over the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, they came to own five different theatres. The younger Giovanni Grimani (1603–63) and his brother Antonio Grimani (1605–59) became first the proprietors of SS. Giovanni e Paolo, in 1639, followed by the Teatro S. Samuele in 1655. Antonio’s sons, Giovanni Carlo (1648–1714) and Vincenzo (1652–1710) took over the opera business in 1668, and in 1678 would go on to establish the Teatro S. Giovanni Grisostomo, Venice’s most luxurious opera house. After the death of Giovanni Carlo, his son Michele (1696–1775) carried on the family business, opening up the Teatro S. Benedetto in 1755.

The importance of the Grimani’s participation in the Venetian commercial opera cannot be overestimated. Indeed, they were not passive owners of their theatres, but became deeply involved in many aspects of opera production – choosing singers, librettists, and composers, and certainly approving the subjects for libretti – even during the period in which they employed the impresario Marco Faustini as manager. The Grimani association with opera was in many respects analogous to their commitment to collecting art and antiquities. Theirs was an activity inspired by a deep passion for the arts, family pride, and a desire to serve the Republic. Opera may have been a commercial business in Venice – a veritable industry, as it is frequently called – but it was perpetually unprofitable, earning the family far more in prestige than in wealth.

Opera also allowed the Grimani brothers to create a theatrical universe that – perhaps naturally – reflected the family’s obsession with antiquities and the past. Giovanni and Antonio Grimani, it must be recalled, grew up among the splendours of the family Palazzo at Santa Maria Formosa, which even after the establishment of the Public Statuary still housed a substantial number of antiquities. As Irene Favaretto observes, the collection reflected a ‘love of antiquities and art not only of a single individual, but of an entire family, a love that developed in time over generations’. In fact, much of the fame that the family would achieve in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries came from their association with opera, and is reflected in the numerous printed libretti that prominently featured the Grimani name.

On the surface, the relationship between the Public Statuary and the opera industry is apparent first of all in the shared repertory of characters drawn from myth and history. Not surprisingly, the majority of the famous Romans and pagan gods included in the collection and named by Coryate appeared at one or another time on the Venetian operatic stage. Figures such as Cupid, Hercules, and Venus (an important symbol of Venice) had played a vital role in opera since its inception in the Northern Italian courts. But it was not until the opening of the Venetian public theatres that the epics of Virgil and Homer and pivotal events from Roman history were creatively adapted by librettists and composers. Beginning with Nero in Monteverdi’s L’incoronazione di Poppea (1643), Venetian opera would feature a veritable parade of famous and infamous Romans who had flourished between the early years of the Republic and the fall of the Empire. The glories of the Roman Republic and the dangers of the Empire provided an infinitely flexible set of narratives with which to portray Venice’s unique political wisdom: the heroes of Republican Rome were worthy role models, while the less-than-flattering portrayals of the Julio-Claudian emperors, for example, could demonstrate not only Venice’s equality but even superiority to its ancient rival. The Grimani family was certainly well aware of the power of these figures to engage Venice’s political ideology. While the repertory is littered with operas based on Roman topics, the first few seasons of the luxurious Teatro S. Giovanni Grisostomo highlighted the careers of several figures.
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well known from the Statuary: Il Nerone (1679) and Il Vespasiano (1680), both with librettos by Giulio Cesare Corradi and music by Carlo Pallavicino; and Massimo Puppieno (1685) with libretto by Aurelio Aureli and music by Carlo Pallavicino.42

But the point is not merely that statuary and opera shared a repertory of emblematic heroes and heroines. The surviving engravings of the sets designed by the incomparable Giacomo Torelli demonstrate the vital role that statuary played in the Venetian theatrical imagination in the earliest decades of Venetian opera.43 Torelli, who also drew up the plans for the Teatro Novissimo, worked on several productions at the teatro SS. Giovanni e Paolo before leaving for Paris in 1645, and was particularly renowned for his remarkable stage machinery and scenic effects, which set the standard for operatic spectacle in the seventeenth century. Statues, in fact, feature prominently in Torelli’s designs as well as those by many subsequent Italian stage designers. It is as if the ancient world could not be staged without also presenting the ruins and artefacts of antiquity. Since, like the Grimani the most erudite and sophisticated nobles packed their houses with ancient statues and relics, such props were likewise deemed necessary to decorate the palaces occupied by the monarchs and nobles who populated the operatic stage.

What is particularly notable, however, is the extent to which the ‘Pgymalion effect’ enlivens the statues depicted in the engravings of stage designs by Torelli and his colleagues.44 The statues of the gods shown in the niches in the representation of the Elysian Fields in the opera Venere Gelosa (1642), for example, are nearly as lifelike as the singers shown at centre stage: with their elaborate arm gestures, bent knees, and varied positioning of the feet they seem about to jump off their pedestals and begin to dance (plate 5).45 A similar effect can be seen in the figures decorating the upper reaches of the Temple of Jove in Marco Boschini’s engraving of the opera Bellerofonte (1642).46 Indeed, the engraver seems to have gone to considerable lengths to present the statues in the most diverse possible poses – altering the positions of arms and legs so that they appear to be already dancing (plate 6).

As we noted at the outset, however, sculpture was not merely used to provide props. Recalling Lambranzi (plate 2), we can observe that the very process of creating a statue could be conceived of in choreographic terms. A review published in the Mercure Galant by Saint-Didier in August of 1677 provides a vivid description of a ballo featuring stonemasons sculpting a statue of Nicomedes in Il Nicomele in Bitinia (Venice, 1677).
The first act finished with a ballet of stonecutters. They each held their hammers and chisels, and made their movements in rhythm around a statue of Nicomede, which they seemed to complete while dancing; but all of this in a manner so well planned that one could see nothing more precise.47

The opera Venceslao (Venice, 1703) features a dance with Polish sculptors building a tomb,48 while the operatic treatment of Ovid’s tale of Iphis’ metamorphosis from female to male, Iphide Greca (Venice, 1671), includes a dance for sculptors, painters, and courtiers.49 In this case, Iphis’ acquisition of male attributes seems to have been associated with increased artistic potency.

The choreographer’s vision of a statue that comes to life is perhaps the ultimate realization of the lifelike tendencies that we have observed in the engravings. In the artists’ rendering they seem full of life, ready to breathe and move, testifying to the temptation for librettists, composers, and choreographers to challenge the strictures of verisimilitude and bring these inert figures to life. While the entire genre of opera may be inherently unrealistic, the dances in Venetian opera, usually placed at the ends of Acts I and II, tended to push beyond the imaginative plane of the drama, and thus were endowed with a licence to transcend the special reality of the sung drama in suggestive ways.50 Indeed, the exotic (foreigners Turks, Armenians, or Moors) or creatures (satyrs, animals, infernal spirits) that danced outside the plot between the acts arguably stretched the viewer’s sense of reality far more than a singing protagonist.

But the animated statues played a special role in Venetian opera. As relics of the ancient world and simulacra of dead heroes or gods, they could invoke the supernatural, or even the presence of those who had died. For example, the final scene of Act I from the 1670 revival of Pietro Andrea Ziani’s Antigona delusa di Alceste, an opera based loosely on Euripides Alcestis, is set in a forest where some statues are placed around the ruins of an ancient castle. During the ballo, satyrs appear and lure...
the statues from their pedestals to join in the dance.51 The statues apparently had no difficulty performing the lively movements that one might associate with their satyr companions. The bass line that survives from the opera, in the 12/8 metre typical of a gigue, suggests that this was in fact a quite lively and energetic dance (plate 7).52 But while the ballo functioned primarily as an interlude between the acts, it also provided a subtle comment on the principal plot of the opera. Admeto (Admetus), doomed to death, is saved by his wife Alceste (Alcestis) who dies in his place and is brought back from the underworld by Ercole (Heracles). The first act features the singing statue of Apollo, while virtually all of the characters fall in love with portraits of absent lovers at some point in the opera. The dance featuring the remnants of antiquity that come to life amid the ruins and dance playfully with the satyrs may not be essential to the progress of the main drama, but can nonetheless be understood to reflect the opera’s central preoccupation with the notion of resurrection, perhaps symbolizing as well the living spirit of Greek tragedy in Venetian opera.

But it was in those works that brought history to life on the operatic stage that we find some of the most striking intersections between the Public Statuary and the dancing statues. While the Statuary may have provided opportunities for Venetians and visitors to gaze upon the great heroes of Greece and Rome, condemn their vices and applaud their acts of bravery, opera was seen as the most expedient means of making the past live anew and speak to the present in previously unimagined ways. The fact that opera was regarded as an important medium for recounting history is more than apparent in the care with which numerous printed librettos recount the distance between historical fact and operatic fancy.53

In Francesco Cavalli’s Mutio Scevolo (1665), with libretto by Nicolò Minato, the dancing statues are in fact linked to a particularly expressive kind of musical language: the prophetic voice. The ballo delle statue in this work is part of an elaborate scene that takes place in the temple of Jano (Janus) at the conclusion of Act I.54 The Roman consul Publicola and his captain Melvio enter the temple to ask the god whether they will be victorious in the battle with Tarquinio Superbo (Tarquinian the Proud). This provides an opportunity for a remarkable series of special effects: a sudden, flashing, light illuminates a vision of a battle which is being fought inside a cloud of fire. Publicola and Melvio take this as a sign of impending doom, and run from the temple in fear. The final scene of the act features a ponderous recitative sung by

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the statue of Jano, who scolds the Romans for giving credence to false gods such as himself. While no music survives for the actual ballo, the last phrase of Jano’s recitative provides a hint of the music that would have followed. Jano shifts unexpectedly to a jovial triple meter as he compels the evil spirits to confer motion on the stones and allow their ‘hard steps’ to melt into a happy dance (see plate 8). The statues step down from their niches, dance around Jano, and then return to their places as if had nothing had happened. The god Jano, who takes on the role of the prophet, possessed the power not only to predict the future but also to make the past live again.

The dancing statues of Venice provide a glimpse into the provocative association between sculpture and opera during an arguably critical moment in the development of both media. In the age of Bernini, when sculpture had acquired a newly lifelike quality, when the display of art collections acquired a theatrical meaning and antiquities provided a vital link to the past, opera must certainly have seemed the most expressive way to make past glories live once again, inspiring awe and wonder in the viewer. Opera not only endowed statues with voices, as Barkan suggests, but also challenged notions of verisimilitude by imagining them as if they possessed the grace and agility of dancers – an art form whose roots in ancient practice were no less noble. We cannot know, of course, whether the audiences would have associated the dancing statues or any recreation of antiquity on the stage with the Public Statuary, Venice’s other public display of ancient myth and history. But like Amphyon whose lyre playing caused the walls of Thebes to magically build themselves, the Grimani family and other nobles who sponsored opera in Venice used music not only to bring statues to life but to create a vision of Venice’s imaginary mythic past, one that was calculated to ensure her continued glory.
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Notes

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 2008 Annual Meeting of the Renaissance Society of America in Chicago. I would like to thank all those whose comments improved this paper, and extend my special gratitude to Estelle Lingo and Barbara Sparti for their comments on early drafts.

1 'Quel musico Tebano / Lo cui soave canto / A le pietre die vita, / Hor son di pietre imagine scolpito. / Ma benche pietra, io vivo, io spiro, e / 'n tanto / Cosi facendo io canto,' Hor ceda ogni altra il profigo a la tua mano / Fabro illustro, e sovra no / Poichi animar la pieta / Si meglio il tuo scarpel che la mia cera.' Anfione in Marro, in Giambattista Marino, La galeria del Cav. Marino distinta in pitture e sculture, Venice, 1620, 286. Translations mine unless otherwise indicated.


3 Marino seems to have imagined that the reader would experience the poems in his collections much as a viewer walking through a picture gallery. The theatrical implications of this are apparent, particularly in so far as 'Marino deliberately extends the pictorial moment beyond the temporal limits of the depiction with his original interpretations of the narrative', Nemerow-Ullman, 'Narrative unities', 76. Moreover, when he endows his images with the powers of expression, this allows 'the poet to enter into the time frame of the narrative' (79) – in short the poet and (hence the reader) becomes involved in the ongoing drama – that is to say they not only see the image in their minds eye but also listen to its inner voice.

4 Pietro Paolo Biniata, La Tríola, Venice, 1648, 127. The music, likely by Francesco Cavalli, is lost.


8 Gregory Lambranzi, Nuovi curiosi suolo de' balli teatrali, Nuremberg, 1716. The preface and descriptions of the dances is in Italian, but the plates by Giovanni Georg Puschner contain descriptions of the dances in German. The work was reprinted in facsimile as New and Curious School of Theatrical Dancing, trans. Derra de Motoda, London, 1928; repr. New York, 2002. See also, Daniel Heartz, 'A Venetian dancing master teaches the Forlana: Lambranzi's balli teatrali', Journal of Musicology, 17, 1999, 136–51.

9 Plate 1 features only the first stage of the dance of the statues; the caption reads as follows: 'These three persons remain motionless until the air has been played once. When it is repeated and the sign "A" is reached, those at each side jump to the ground and assume another pose as shown in the next plate.' In the subsequent stages of the dance, the statue in the centre remains motionless throughout, while the two on the side engage first in a battle and are joined by two others for a sword dance before they return to their pedestals. See New and Curious School of Theatrical Dancing, Book II, plates 12–17, 98–105.

10 The caption for the dance of the sculptors reads as follows: 'Here is a wooden statue which has been covered with pieces of stone, made to adhere by means of plaster, so that it appears shapeless. It is set up on one stage. Then enter two sculptors who chisel the statue as they dance, so that the pieces of stone fall off and the mass is transformed into a statue. The pu can be arranged at pleasure. The air is played twice.' See New and Curious School of Theatrical Dancing, Book II, plates 24, 110.

11 A system of notating dance choreographies devised in the 1680s by Pierre Beauchamp and published in 1700 by Raul-Augier Feuillet.


17 Patricia Fortini Brown, Venice and Antiquity: The Venetian Sense of the Past, New Haven, 1996.


19 Vincenzo Scamozzi (1548–1616) completed the perspective sets for the Teatro Olimpico after the death of Andrea Palladio in 1580, and also went on to design the Teatro Ducale at Sabbioneta which, unlike the Teatro Olimpico, was conceived as a modern theatrical space. See Stefano Mazzoni and Ovidio Guaia, Il teatro di Sabbioneta, Florence, 1983; Franco Barbieri and Guido Beltraminii, eds, Vinomo Sumozii, 1548–1616, Venice, 2003. See also, Eugene J. Johnson, 'Jacopo Sansovino, Giacomo Torelli, and the theatricality of the Piazzetta in Venice', The Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians, 59:4, 2000, 436–53.

20 Delle antiche statue greche e romane (1740–1755) published also as Ancient Status, Greek and Roman. Designed from the Celebrated originals in St. Mark's, and other public collections in Venice, London, 1800. On Zanetti see Perry, 'Statuário Publico', 86–95. As Perry notes, there has been considerable confusion between the younger Anton Maria [Alessandro] Zanetti (1706–78) and his older cousin Antonio Maria [Girolamo] Zanetti (1680–1757), who was known as a printmaker, draughtsman and collector. Both cousins contributed to the collection of engravings, though Zanetti di giovane was responsible for the inventory.

21 Reproductions of the Zanetti drawings for the inventory preserved at the Biblioteca Marciana (I-Vnm Cod. II. IV, 123 [10040] and I-Vnm Cod. IV. IV, 65 [60528]) are included in Irene Favaretto and Giovanni Luisa Ravagnan, eds, Lo statuario pubblico della serenissima: due secoli di collezionismo di antichità 1596–1797, Padua, 1997, 140–227. These differ from the set of engravings published by the Zanetti in Delle antiche statue greche e romane che nell'Antisala delle Libreria di S. Marco e in altri luoghi pubblici di Venezia si trovano, Venice, 1740–3. For more details on the publication, see Perry, 'The Statuário Publico', 14–16.


23 Cropper describes ‘... a grace and liveliness that transcended the limits of stone that gave the statues facial expressions, softness, and a kind of vitality to their skin, as if indeed they were alive’ (108). Elizabeth Cropper, 'Vincenzo Giustinianis's Galleria: the Pygmalion effect', in Ian Jenkins, ed., Cassiano dal Pozzo's Paper Museum, Milan, 1992, 101–26.

24 The young Anton Maria Zanetti and his brother Girolamo revised several libretti for operas presented at the Grimani family theater, the S. Giovanni Grisostomo. These include the revision of Apostolo Zeno's Amorfo (Venice, 1742); the addition of several arias for Matteo Noris' Tite Manio, revised by Jacopo Sanvitale, the composition of the entire libretto of Sofonisba (1746), and the revision of Silvio Stampiglia's Camilla Regina di Würz (Venice, 1749). The elder Zanetti, famed for his caricatures of friends and colleagues, became particularly renowned for his humorous drawing of the castrato Farinelli. See Daniel Heartz,
The classic study of the Venetian approach to humanism remains Margaret L. King, Venetian Humanism in the Age of Patrician Dominance, Princeton, NJ, 1986.


Since the invention of opera, composers and librettists had grappled with the genre’s inherent lack of verisimilitude; by the middle of the seventeenth century they had arrived at a fairly consistent set of criteria of what was plausible within the inherently unrealistic world of opera, a boundary that was frequently transgressed in the dances. See Wendy Heller, ‘Truth and verisimilitude’ and ‘Dancing the myth of Venice’.

Thus, to cite one example, in Cavalli and Faustini’s opera La Calisto, the heroine’s transformation into a bear (a patently unrealistic moment) is acknowledged by a ballo featuring dancing bears. Although no less verisimilar, the bears have no place in the opera’s plot.

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