

# Opera Observed: Views Of A Florentine Impresario In The Early Eighteenth Century

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## Review

William C. Holmes, *Opera Observed: Views of a Florentine Impresario in the Early Eighteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 256 pp., bibliography, illustrations.

Luca Casimiro degli Albizzi (1664–1745) was the impresario of the Teatro la Pergola of Florence for more than twenty years. The survival of approximately 3,500 letters and documents comprising the personal papers of Marchese Luca Casimiro and his father, Marchese Luca within the larger Albizzi archive thus provides historians with a rich lode of material about eighteenth-century operatic production in a major Italian city. According to Professor Holmes, these documents can be divided into two sections: one dealing with private operatic performances given by Ferdinando de' Medici at his villa in the Pratolino from 1679 to 1710, the other offering 'precise and detailed information on the operations of the Teatro la Pergola in the second and third decades of the eighteenth century' (p. 17). It is on the latter that Holmes concentrates.

Although the existence of an Albizzi family archive, spanning the years 1181 to 1786, was noted in the 1931 catalogue of the Guicciardini Archives by Roberto Ridolfi,<sup>1</sup> the importance of the Albizzi papers was recognised only recently. The Italian paleographer Gino Corti first published excerpts from them in 1980;<sup>2</sup> he also organised the documents, developed a numbering system for them and brought them to the attention of Professor Holmes, who published further selections in separate articles dating from 1984, 1988 and 1989.<sup>3</sup> With the publication of this book, which incorporates much of the material in those articles, Holmes offers the first extensive view of the riches of this collection.

Holmes presents the material in a series of 'individual episodes', organising the documents into separate stories or vignettes. After the Introduction, Chapter 2 focuses on the correspondence from Albizzi to Vivaldi, in which discussions about Vivaldi composing for the Pergola are intertwined with negotiations to hire Vivaldi's mistress Anna Giraud for the 1735/6 season. Chapter 3 covers the revisions of librettos for the 1733/4 and 1734/5 seasons. Chapter 4 depicts a specific conflict in the 1732/3 season between Albizzi and the Parmesan set designer Pietro Righini, and Chapter 5 highlights a correspondence over three years (1734 to 1737) between Albizzi and diplomat Bartolomeo Corsini about producing opera. Chapters 6 to 8 detail contretemps with individual singers: Margherita Gualandi in 1726, Giovanni Battista Pinacci (also in 1726) and Senesino in 1739/40. The last chapter chronicles the difficult season of 1737/8 following the death of the Grand Duke Gian Gastone and the succession of the Habsburgs. Each of these vignettes makes a compelling story, and it is difficult to resist retelling them or quoting from them here. Scholars of eighteenth-century Italian opera will be grateful for Holmes's publication of these informative and entertaining selections from the Albizzi archive, and there is little doubt that this book will be cited for years to come.

<sup>1</sup> *L'archivio della famiglia Guicciardini* (Florence, 1931).

<sup>2</sup> 'Il teatro la Pergola di Firenze e la stagione d'opera per il carnevale 1726–27: Lettere di Luca Casimiro degli Albizzi a Vivaldi, Porpora, ed altri', *Rivista italiana di musicologia*, 15 (1980), 182–8.

<sup>3</sup> 'An Impresario at the Teatro la Pergola in Florence: Letters of 1735–36', in *Music and Criticism: Essays in Honour of Paul Henry Lang*, ed. Maria Rike Maniates and Edmond Strainchamps (New York, 1984), 127–40; 'Vivaldi e il teatro la Pergola a Firenze, nuovi fonti', in *Nuovi studi vivaldiani* (Venice and Florence, 1988), 117–30; 'Righini in Florence: An Artistic Conflict', *Early Music*, 17 (1989), 539–50.

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