

‘Che il pubblico non venga defraudato degli spettacoli ad esso promessi’

The Venetian Premiere of *La traviata* and Austria’s Imperial Administration in 1853*

Axel Körner

Historical myth (rather than scholarship) has it that the Austrians did everything in their power to make lovers of opera in the Habsburgs’ Italian provinces feel miserable, and that works by Giuseppe Verdi in particular were viewed with a persistent deal of suspicion. An image of ruthless censors, armed officers in the stalls and police spies in the corridors comes to mind.¹ In the case of opera in Habsburg Venice, this idea was fostered by a tradition of politically motivated historiography that tended to justify Italians’ struggle for independence with the alleged despotism of Austrian rule in the region, closely linked to the image of the Empire as a ‘prison of nationalities’.² That many of Italy’s greatest opera houses were built, and

* The author is grateful for two helpful reader reports. Research for this article was supported by a generous grant of the Leverhulme Trust.

¹ See for instance Giovanni GAVAZZENI, in ID., Armando TORNO, Carlo VITALI, *O mia patria. Storia musicale del Risorgimento, tra inni, eroi e melodrammi* (Milan: Dalai 2011), 60: «I palchi della Scala [...] erano occupati dalla soldataglia e dagli austriacanti». For a recent version of Verdi’s role in this tale see Angelo S. SABATINI, “Il contributo di Verdi alla formazione del mito del Risorgimento”, in *Giuseppe Verdi e il Risorgimento*, ed. Ester CAPUZZO, Antonio CASU, Angelo SABATINI (Soverelli Mannelli: Rubbettino 2014), 11-24. For a critical assessment see Fabrizio DELLA SETA, “Opera e Risorgimento: si può dire ancora qualcosa?”, *verdiperspektiven*, 2 (2017), 81-106. Roger PARKER, “Verdi politico: a wounded cliché regroups”, *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 17/4 (2012), 427-436. Axel KÖRNER, “Oper, Politik und nationale Bewegung. Mythen um das Werk Giuseppe Verdis”, in *Kunst, Politik und Gesellschaft in Europa seit dem 19. Jahrhundert*, ed. Hannes SIEGRIST and Thomas HÖPEL (Stuttgart: Steiner, 2017), 99-110.

² This view first found polemical expression in the accounts of Augusto Sandonà and G.M. Trevelyan, but its legacy still resonates in recent work. See for instance Spencer DI SCALA, *Italy: From Revolution to Republic, 1700 to the Present* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press 1995), 56. Also Paul GINSBORG, *Daniele Manin and the Venetian Revolution of 1848-49* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1979), 2. For a more balanced view see Marino BERENGO, “Le origini del Lombardo-Veneto”, *Rivista storica italiana*, 83 (1971), 524-544; Marco MERIGGI, *Il regno lombardo-veneto* (Turin: UTET

then heavily subsidised, under the Habsburgs, and that the Austrians did more than anybody to make the works of Rossini, Bellini, Donizetti, as well as those of Verdi, flourish in almost every corner of the Habsburgs' realm, does little to undermine the popularity of these myths. During the entire nineteenth century the Habsburgs used Italian opera—from Rossini's *Tell-Overture* to Verdi's *Ernani*—to mark dynastic occasions, as well as to showcase their cosmopolitan cultural ambition.³ But this fact is rarely discussed by historians keen to view opera in Risorgimento Italy as an expression of opposition to 'foreign' rule.⁴ This is not to say that aspects of particular libretti did not regularly attract the attention of the censors—in the Austrian provinces as much as anywhere in Italy or Europe;⁵ or that audiences did not on occasions decide to respond politically to particular

1987) and David LAVEN, *Venice and Venetia under the Habsburgs, 1815-1835* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2002). Also ID. and Laura PARKER, "Foreign rule? Transnational, national and local perspectives on Venice and Venetia within the 'multi-national' Empire", *Modern Italy*, 19/1 (2014), 5-19.

³ See for instance the use of *Guillaume Tell* for performances of the k.u.k. Hofreitschule in Vienna: *Allgemeine Theaterzeitung*, 03.05.1831, 215. For the wider context see Leopold KANTNER, "Rossini nello specchio della cultura musicale dell'impero asburgico", in *La recezione di Rossini ieri e oggi* (Rome: Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei 1994), 215-222, 215. As for Verdi, Claudio VELLUTINI recently demonstrated how the Habsburgs used *Ernani* for the construction of their dynastic memory: "Opera and Monuments: Verdi's *Ernani* in Vienna and the Construction of Dynastic Memory", *Cambridge Opera Journal*, 29/2 (2017), 215-239. For an analysis of the musical foundations they were able to explore see Fabrizio DELLA SETA, "*Ernani*. The 'Carlo Quinto' Act" (1989), in ID., *Not without Madness. Perspectives on Opera* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press 2013), 24-37. See also Gundula KREUZER, *Verdi and the Germans. From Unification to the Third Reich* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2010), 54. Michaela VOCELKA and Karl VOCELKA, *Franz Joseph I. Kaiser von Österreich und König von Ungarn. 1830-1916* (Munich: Beck 2015), 236.

⁴ Chiara PLAZZI describes «la liberazione della patria dall'oppressore» as the principal theme of Rossini's operas, despite their remarkable success in Vienna, in *Nemico della patria! Migranti e stranieri nel melodramma italiano da Rossini a Turandot* (Acireale: Bonanno 2007), 54. For Carlotta SORBA many early nineteenth-century works were «the mirror-image of contemporary Austrian domination», in "Between cosmopolitanism and nationhood: Italian opera in early nineteenth century", *Modern Italy*, 19/1 (2014), 53-67, here 59.

⁵ Philip GOSSETT argues that the Austrian censors «wrought havoc on Verdi's operas», and after 1848 they were «even more ferocious», in "Giuseppe Verdi and the Italian Risorgimento", *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, 156/3 (2012), 271-282, here 277 and 280. But such claims only make sense within a wider comparative perspective. See for instance *The Frightful Stage. Political Censorship of the Theater in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, ed. Robert J. GOLDSTEIN (New York: Berghahn 2009).

events or to certain turns of the plot.⁶ Meanwhile, this article provides a different perspective on the relationship between the Austrian administration in Venice and the production of Verdi's works, interrogating a new set of documents on the 1853 premiere of *La traviata*.

What then did the Austrian administration in Venice think about La Fenice's plan to produce Verdi's new opera? As mentioned earlier, under the Habsburgs Verdi was regularly performed to mark official occasions, including visits of the Imperial family in the Italian provinces,⁷ regardless of the fact that the composer allegedly had sympathised with the Revolution in 1848 and supported the Italian national movement. In the case of *La traviata* it was more likely that the French source of Verdi's new libretto, known since September 1852, gave reason for moral concerns, for its topical engagement with themes such as adultery and venereal disease.⁸

Some scholars have argued that censorship in the Austrian provinces was even less severe than elsewhere in the peninsula: Martina GREMPER, "Die Rolle der Politik", in *Verdi Handbuch*, ed. Anselm GERHARD and Uwe SCHWEIKERT (Stuttgart/Weimar: Metzler/Bärenreiter 2013), 98-110, here 101. Michael WALTER explains that many composers and librettists accepted the public rationale behind censorship: *Oper. Geschichte einer Institution* (Stuttgart: Metzler 2016), 254-267. The censors were often literary figures themselves and were more concerned with issues of morality than with politics.

⁶ On the occasion of the Emperor's birthday the Austrian authorities were at times wary of signs of protest at the theatre, which usually turned out to be unfounded. In Vicenza, in 1854, when a number of noble ladies entered the theatre with several minutes delay, and after the imperial anthem had been played, it turned out that they had been listening to the music being performed by the military band outside the theatre. See Archivio di Stato di Venezia (from now on ASVe), Presidenza della luogotenenza delle province venete, Atti 1852-1856, busta 287, XIX. 4. 1: R. Vice Deputato di Provincia di Vicenza to Luogotenente Toggenburg, 15 settembre 1854.

⁷ Everywhere in the Lombardo-Venetian Kingdom visits of members of the imperial family resulted in generous celebrations organised by civic organisations and the municipal councils. A visit of the theatre was often part of the programme. For Venice, an important occasion was the 1856 visit of the Emperor and the Empress, the first after their recent marriage, for which La Fenice decided to open its door before the start of the season with performances of Verdi's *Giovanna de Guzman* and *La traviata*. See ASVe, Presidenza della luogotenenza delle province venete, Atti 1852-1856, busta 284, XIX.3. Viaggi dell'imperatore e famiglia: Nobile Presidenza del Gran Teatro la Fenice to the luogotenenza, 4 ottobre 1856. During a visit to Padova, a few days later, *I masnadieri* were performed: Presidio dell'Imp. Regia Delegazione provinciale di Padova to Conte di Bissingen, Consigliere e Ciambellano di S.M.I.R. A., 22 ottobre 1856.

⁸ Emilio SALA has demonstrated how Verdi's new opera reflected 'real life' experiences in Paris: *Il valzer delle camellie. Echi di Parigi nella Traviata* (Torino: EDT 2008).

Within a conventional reading of connections between opera and the Risorgimento, this political and cultural context of *La traviata*'s premiere in Venice might suggest that the Austrian administration was probably rather wary about La Fenice's renewed efforts to bind Verdi to the city's flagship theatre, especially as his previous opera *Rigoletto*, premiered two years earlier, had caused considerable difficulties with the censors, likewise on moral and political grounds.⁹

These concerns notwithstanding, compared to previous works, *La traviata* turned out to be less objectionable to the authorities. In fact quite the opposite: previously neglected sources originating from the Empire's provincial administration in Venice suggest that the Austrian authorities were extremely keen for the production of *La traviata* to take place, to the point that they threatened the theatre with serious financial consequences were the production to be cancelled or the commencement of rehearsals delayed. According to the Empire's local *luogotenente* (governor), the Venetian citizenry had every right to see Verdi's new opera in order to be given what it had been promised in the contracts signed between the impresario and their principal theatre. In underlining these contractual obligations the *luogotenenza* showed that they honoured the principle of representation in local politics that had distinguished Austrian rule in Italy since the times of Maria Theresa.¹⁰ Moreover, according to the imperial administration, an opera by Verdi was much to be preferred to one by Pacini or Mercadante, whom the municipality discussed as possible alternatives in case Verdi did not succeed in completing his work on time—names that did not meet the high standard of Venice's cultural expectations at the time.

While the difficulties concerning the premiere of *La traviata* at Venice's Gran Teatro are well known, scholars have had only limited insight in the

Roger PARKER has discussed Basevi's disdain for the immorality of Verdi's new opera, in which he detected the influence of Paris melodrama: "'Insolite Forme,' or Basevi's Garden Path", in ID., *Leonora's Last Act. Essays in Verdian Discourse* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1997), 42-60, 58 f. The most detailed discussion of these aspects is Susan RUTHERFORD, *Verdi, Opera, Women* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2013), 129-138. The Austrians were seemingly less concerned.

⁹ Cormac NEWARK, "'Ch'hai di nuovo, buffon?' or What's new with *Rigoletto*", in *The Cambridge Companion to Verdi*, ed. Scott L[eslie] BALTHAZAR (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2004), 197-208, 202

¹⁰ On the legacy of these legal principles for the Empire as a whole see Pieter M. JUDSON, *The Habsburg Empire. A New History* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press 2016), 51-102. On the balance between Napoleonic and Austrian practices of administration in the region see LAVEN, *Venice and Venetia* (n. 2), 69, 70-73

political and administrative circumstances of the work's original production. The fact that many of the documents concerning the premiere of the opera (or of any number of other works) have not been taken into consideration by scholars is at least partly the consequence of the archives musicologists have chosen to explore when reconstructing the genesis of a particular work. There are of course good reasons for musicologists to limit their use of archival material. In order to produce a philologically 'correct' score for a critical edition, the political and administrative context of a first performance remains largely irrelevant: examining different versions of the score and its parts is obviously more directly relevant than reconstructing the context of performance. The same is true for information on the score's genesis, which we try to identify in the personal papers of the composer, the librettist and the impresario, or in the archives of the theatre where the work was produced. Meanwhile, if it is the scholar's aim to understand opera as a cultural practice within a specific societal and political context, our idea of the work will change if we make use of a wider range of sources. In the case of *La traviata's* Venetian premiere there are at least a dozen documents in the files of the *delegazione provinciale* at the Archivio di Stato di Venezia, which scholars of the work have not previously explored. These documents will not dramatically change what we know about the opera today, but they can add a wealth of information to our understanding of the context in which *La traviata* was first produced.

Fabrizio Della Seta's 1996 edition of *La traviata* for *The Works of Giuseppe Verdi* not only presents a model of philological scholarship; it also constitutes a milestone in exploring archival material that explains the opera's complicated genesis.¹¹ In addition to autograph sources, manuscript copies, printed musical sources and libretti, Della Seta made ample use of Verdi's and Piave's correspondence in order to shed light on the difficulties the composer and his librettist encountered in completing the work in time for its planned premiere in February 1853, which then had to be postponed to 6 March 1853.¹² Della Seta used several previously unknown letters and documents, but also presents us with a critical reading of what is to date still the most detailed collection of material on *La traviata's* original

¹¹ *Giuseppe Verdi. La traviata* (The Works of Giuseppe Verdi, I/19), ed. Fabrizio DELLA SETA (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press – Milano: Ricordi 1996).

¹² Difficulties relating to the genesis of the libretto Della Seta also discussed in a separate piece, where he points to the scarcity of information on this process: Fabrizio DELLA SETA, "New currents in the libretto", in *The Cambridge Companion to Verdi* (n. 9), 69-87, 76-80.

performance: Marcello Conati's book on Verdi's collaboration with La Fenice.¹³ Conati's work is largely based on correspondence of various agents with La Fenice, which includes the occasional document of the *direzione di polizia* regarding the approval of the libretto. His book remains invaluable for our understanding of the work, especially regarding the role of Francesco Maria Piave and of the debates around the original cast; but owing to the very specific archival base of this collection, he used only very few files that highlight the role played by the municipal and the provincial administrations in the work's original production.

A big issue in past debates about *La traviata's* genesis concerns Verdi's repeated delays in completing the work and starting rehearsals. Along with the composer's tight schedule of work for the premiere of *Il trovatore* in Rome, just six weeks before the premiere of *La traviata*, several sources dating from the end of January 1853 refer to the composer's alleged attack of rheumatism; and it was in a letter of 30 January 1853 to Carlo Marzari, *presidente degli spettacoli* at La Fenice, that Verdi suggested that he might not be in a position to complete the opera on time.¹⁴ It is difficult to assess whether Verdi was really too ill to write or if he had simply left it too late and now looked for reasons to cover up his failure to deliver the work on time. A week later, on 8 February, the day when Verdi should have arrived in Venice, La Fenice sent its *segretario* Guglielmo Brenna to S. Agata, as Della Seta writes, 'to ascertain the composer's real condition'.¹⁵ On 13 February Piave and Brenna were back in Venice with enough material to start rehearsals. When Verdi finally arrived in Venice, on the evening of 21 February, he still had to work on the orchestration.¹⁶ All this is known from previous reconstructions of the facts, but the chronology of events is even more clearly documented in the files of the *delegazione provinciale*. According to a schedule of work that the theatre transmitted to the Austrian au

¹³ Marcello CONATI, *La bottega della musica. Verdi e la Fenice* (Milan: il Saggiatore 1983), 267-332. Recent standard introductions to *La traviata* still rely on Conati. See for instance Hans-Joachim WAGNER, "La traviata", *Verdi-Handbuch* (n. 5), 454-462; Anna TEDESCO, "La traviata", in *The Cambridge Verdi Encyclopedia*, ed. Roberta MONTE-MORRA MARVIN (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2013), 442-449.

¹⁴ CONATI, *La bottega della musica* (n. 13), 312, 314 f.

¹⁵ DELLA SETA, "Introduction", in *Giuseppe Verdi. La traviata* (n. 11), XVI.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, XVI. For the official confirmation of his arrival see ASVe, Delegazione provinciale, Atti 1856, Busta 85, Teatri: La presidenza del Gran Teatro la Fenice alla I.R. Delegazione Provinciale, 21 febbraio 1853.

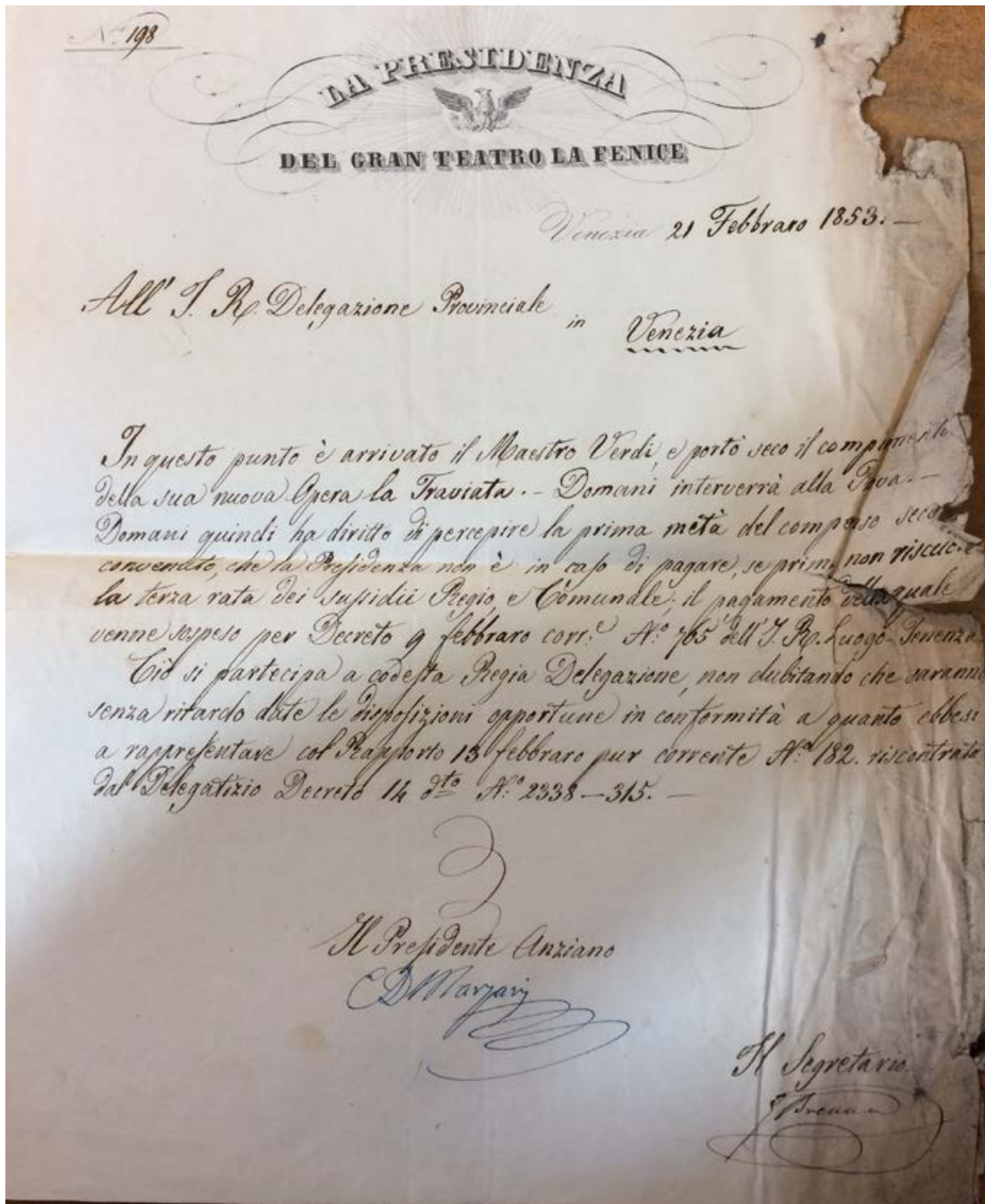


Illustration 1 (ASVe, Delegazione provinciale, Atti 1856, Busta 85, Teatri; cfr. n. 17) authorities, the orchestra finally started rehearsals on 25 February.¹⁷

¹⁷ ASVe, Delegazione provinciale, Atti 1856, Busta 85, Teatri: La presidenza del Gran Teatro La Fenice alla I.R.Delegazione Provinciale, 24 febbraio 1853. Presenting a new production on time was generally regarded as an important issue within the imperial administration, and something about which the highest ranks did not hesitate to intervene: Claudio Vellutini recently demonstrated that in 1844 Emperor Ferdinand I insisted on revising the terms of the contract with impresari in Vienna in order to ensure that new works were produced within the first ten days of the Italian season so as to please the public: VELLUTINI, "Opera and Monuments" (n. 3), 220.

In what sense, then, do the sources of the *deputazione provinciale* add to what we know from Conati and Della Seta about the opera's completion? While they do not change the previously established chronology of events, the additional sources allow us to introduce an important additional agent in the opera's schedule of completion, one that Conati's documents mention only in passing: the Statthalter or *luogotenente*, the Empire's representative for the Lombardo-Venetian Kingdom in Venice. In assessing the role of these files the main interest is not to rewrite the history of *La traviata's* premiere, but to understand better how theatres, on the provincial level, interacted with the imperial administration. Thanks to Conati's and Della Seta's use of the documents of the *associazione teatrale* we know a lot about the role played by the Venetian municipality within the *associazione*, especially that of the *podestà* or mayor. But historiography tends to restrict the role of the imperial administration in the Italian provinces to that of a censor, a force regarded to have played a mostly negative role in operatic life. A more complete look at the sources challenges this idea.

From the point of view of the imperial bureaucracy it is crucial to distinguish between the roles of the municipal and the provincial administration. Unique among the Italian states at the time, the municipal administration of Italy's Austrian provinces, even after 1848, enjoyed an unusual level of self-rule and independence from state intervention. Although restricted to certain areas of local policy, this idea of *autogestione* was based on a concept of political representation that goes back to the enlightened reforms of Maria Theresa and Joseph II. Compared to the rest of the Italian states, it led to an exceptional degree of local participation in public life.¹⁸ Also Venetia's provincial level of administration included a significant element of representation that was unique among the Italian states as well as among the Habsburgs' hereditary lands.¹⁹ It was for those reasons that back in 1848 the great political theorist and protagonist of Milan's *Cinque Giornate*, Carlo Cattaneo, had opposed the local *Albertisti* (supporters of the Piedmontese king Carlo Alberto) in their attempt to replace Austrian rule

¹⁸ Brigitte MAZOHL-WALLNIG, *Österreichischer Verwaltungsstaat und Administrative Eliten im Königreich Lombardo-Venetien, 1815-1859* (Mainz: von Zabern 1993), 93. Eurigio TONETTI, *Governo austriaco e notabili sudditi. Congregazioni e municipi nel Veneto della Restaurazione (1816-1848)* (Venice: Istituto Veneto di Scienze, Lettere ed Arti 1997). See also Marco Meriggi, *Gli stati italiani prima dell'Unità* (Bologna: il Mulino 2011), 157. More critical as to claims of autonomy Nicola RAPONI, *Politica e amministrazione in Lombardia agli esordi dell'Unità. Il programma dei moderati* (Milan: Giuffrè 1967), 19 f.

¹⁹ LAVEN, *Venice and Venetia* (n. 2), 71.

with the province's annexation by Piedmont: Austrian rule guaranteed a much greater degree of local autonomy than Piedmont's centralised tradition of state.²⁰ The economist and statesman Stefano Jacini went so far as to call Maria Theresia's 1755 reform of the local administration Lombardy's "Magna Carta".²¹ As Giuseppe Mazzini reports in the 1840s, even in Britain a section of public opinion close to the government held the view that "the Lombard-Venetian Provinces are less unhappy, are better administered than any of the other States of Italy",²² although he himself did obviously not subscribe to this opinion.

Some of this tradition of self-rule was rescinded after the failed revolutions of 1848/49, but even after Franz Joseph's I introduction of neo-absolutism in 1851 one notices a constant effort of the imperial administration to return to a higher degree of self-rule in Lombardy-Venetia.²³ For the Empire's policies of culture the distinction between local and imperial administration meant that the running of the theatres remained basically untouched; and even after 1848 the municipalities continued to play basically the same role in interactions with their theatres' *associazione teatrale* as before the Revolution. The municipality was closely involved in questions regarding the contracts with the *impresari* and therefore had a direct say in fixing the repertoire and the casts. It also oversaw the management of the buildings and the contracts with the orchestra.

²⁰ For an analysis of Cattaneo's ideas in a comparative imperial context see Axel KÖRNER, "National Movements against Nation States. Bohemia and Lombardy between the Habsburg Empire, the German Confederation and Piedmont", in: *The 1848 Revolutions and European Political Thought*, ed. Douglas MOGGACH and Gareth STEDMAN JONES, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018, 345-382

²¹ Quoted in RAPONI, *Politica e amministrazione in Lombardia* (n. 19), 36f. See also Christof DIPPER, "Die Mailänder Aufklärung und der Reformstaat. Ein Beitrag zur Berichtigung der Urteile des Publikums über das Verhältnis der politischen Theorie zum administrativen Handeln", in: *Italien in Europa. Die Zirkulation der Ideen im Zeitalter der Aufklärung*, ed. Frank JUNG and Thomas KROLL (Paderborn: Fink 2014), 15-36.

²² Joseph [Giuseppe] MAZZINI, *Italy, Austria, and the Pope: A Letter to Sir James Graham, Bar[one]t* (London: Albanesi 1845), 11; see also Salvo MASTELLONE, "I prodromi del 1848. Mazzini e il dibattito sul tipo di rivoluzione (1843-1847)", in: *Libertà e stato nel 1848-49. Idee politiche e costituzionali*, ed. Franco LIVORSI (Milan: Giuffrè 2001), 57-69, here 64.

²³ See for instance the memorandum of Emperor Franz Joseph I to his Minister of Interior Bach, 13 agosto 1853: Österreichisches Staats-Archiv, Allgemeines Verwaltungsarchiv (OeStA/AVA) Inneres MdI-Präsidium A 53, Landesfürstliche Behörden Lombardien-Venetien. 5990.1853.

Contrary to the relative autonomy of municipal government, the *delegazione provinciale* was a direct entity of the imperial administration, comparable to the centralised control of a province through a prefect under the French system of administration, or under the Kingdom of Italy after the Unification of 1861. Following the events of 1848/49 the provincial administration of the Lombardo-Venetian Kingdom was directly controlled by the military, including the running of the police. Until 1857 the head of the Kingdom's imperial administration was Field Marshal Radetzky as Governor General, with a separate head of the civil administration for Venetia under Georg von Toggenburg in the role of a local *Statthalter*. Apart from running the police-controlled office of censorship, and contrary to the position of the municipality, the Empire's provincial administration, however, played only a minor role in the kingdom's theatres. Its main function was that of a financial sponsor, resulting in a regular state subsidy for the province's principal theatres, as well as that of an owner of a certain number of boxes, which granted them a vote in the meetings of the *associazione teatrale*.²⁴

To return to La Fenice's premiere of *La traviata*, Conati quotes a letter of 25 January 1853 in which the *delegazione provinciale* communicates to the *presidenza del teatro* the worries of the *luogotenente* regarding the delay in rehearsals.²⁵ If placed in its wider context of administrative procedures, this letter enables us to assess in more general terms the role the imperial administration played in the life of Venice's main theatre. Conati also quotes another letter from the *delegato provinciale* to the *presidenza del teatro*, dated 10 February 1853, to explain how the provincial administration used the accumulated delay as a pretext to stop the transfer of the already scheduled subsidies for La Fenice.²⁶ Without knowing the full context, one might easily rate this reaction as a sign of the administration's hostility to the theatre, or as an attempt to repress the city's cultural life. But a closer look at the complete correspondence, not contained in the papers Conati quotes, reveals a rather different set of motives. The letter quoted in the title of this essay shows that the *luogotenente's* intentions were not at all to curtail the

²⁴ At La Fenice the government owned in total eight boxes of the first and second order. See ASVe, Delegazione provinciale, Atti 1856, busta 85, Teatri: Luogotenenza al Delegato Provinciale, 15 aprile 1853.

²⁵ Conati, *La bottega della musica* (n. 13), 310.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 321.

theatre's artistic freedom.²⁷ Instead, von Toggenburg used his letter to express his sense of civic duty towards the citizenry of Venice, which had been promised an opera by maestro Verdi, arguing that funds released for this purpose must under no circumstances be channelled into a different work by a lesser composer. The documentary context shows that the imperial administration was not only very keen on the production of a new opera by Verdi, but more specifically keen that the promised *La traviata* be staged in the most splendid manner. An important argument here was indeed that the *luogotenenza* subsidised La Fenice with 30,000 Austrian Lire: substantially less than the 80,000 the theatre received from the municipal government, but still a sign of the Habsburgs' active cultural policy during the period of the so-called *terza dominazione austriaca*.²⁸

The *luogotenente's* intervention in favour of *La traviata* underlines how the Empire, through its provincial administration, mediated between the theatre and the municipality, and exercised its financial power; and it shows that the motives behind their actions were not ideological concern, but cultural ambition, and a desire to meet the expectations of local audiences that deserved entertainments of a certain grandeur. The correspondence also reveals the regime's remarkable appreciation for Italy's foremost composer. As the *luogotenente* explained, he had no direct means of intervening with the impresario; his only way to influence matters regarding the theatre was to use financial pressure as a way to ensure that contractual obligations were honoured.²⁹ As early as 9 February von Toggenburg had made enquiries with the theatre's board, confirming at the same time that the suspension of payments would be lifted as soon as he has «ottenuto la certezza che l'Impresa suddetta si è posta in grado di eseguire l'obbligo assunto».³⁰ At no point was there a question of trying to stop the production from going ahead.

This kind of direct interference in the production of a work and its rehearsal schedule represents an extremely rare example within the files of the *delegazione provinciale*. Their intervention happened in front of a wid

²⁷ ASVe, Delegazione provinciale, Atti 1856, Busta 85, Teatri: Toggenburg all'I.R. Delegazione Provinciale di Venezia, 18 febbraio 1853.

²⁸ For the accumulation of the two subsidies and a comparison of subsidies between different theatres, see John ROSSELLI, *The Opera Industry in Italy from Cimarosa to Verdi. The Role of the Impresario* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1984), 72f.

²⁹ ASVe, Delegazione provinciale, Atti 1856, Busta 85, Teatri: Toggenburg all'I.R. Delegazione Provinciale di Venezia, 18 febbraio 1853.

³⁰ ASVe, Delegazione provinciale, Atti 1856, Busta 85, Teatri: Toggenburg all'I.R. Delegato Provinciale, 9 febbraio 1853.

P.

All' S. R. Delegazione Provinciale
di Venezia.

Nel mio decreto q. febbrajo 1853 ho bensì accennato essere giunto a mia cognizione che per difetto dell'impresa fosse posta in dubbio la produzione dell'opera la Traviata. Ciò però non significa ch'io entri in un esame degli obblighi contrattuali assunti dall'impresa verso la Presidenza teatrale, nè che la disposta sospensione delle due rate del sussidio erariale venga fatta dipendere dalla sussistenza o meno di qualche mancanza per parte dell'impresa agli obblighi fuaccennati.

Il Governo non ha diretta relazione coll'impresa, e po' è il gratuito sovventore del teatro, e come tale è interessato che il pubblico non venga defraudato degli spettacoli ad esso promessi. È cura della Presidenza teatrale di provvedervi.

Ora prescindendo intieramente dalla questione chi sia in difetto, essendo stato messo in giusta apprensione sulla produzione della parte più pregevole dei promessi spettacoli e non potendosi gli atti sapegnati col rapporto

er context of debate on the theatre in which, over the past few months, public discontent about the quality of productions at La Fenice, in particular of sets and costumes, had been voiced, an issue the *luogotenenza* wanted the *presidenza* of the theatre to address immediately. On 19 January 1853 a meeting at the residence of the *delegato provinciale* had brought together the *podestà*, the president of the *Accademia delle belle arti*, as well as sev-


24. corr: N° 2338 alcuna garanzia che sia
 tolta l'incertezza fuavvertita, io trovo
 di tener fermo la sospensione disposta
 col mio Decreto 9 febbrajo delle due rate
 non ancor percepite sul fupidio erariale.
 3. / Riscontro con ciò il Delegatizio rapporto
 anzi accennato di cui retrocedo qui uniti
 gli allegati per le ulteriori conformi di-
 sposizioni.
 In quanto poi al fupidio comunale
 stato pure sospeso da codesta Delega-
 zione su cui verte il rapporto Delega-
 tizio 15 corr: N° 2332 vedrà codesta Dele-
 gazione se equal parte del medesimo
 credesse di mettere in corso per non
 incagliare l'andamento degli spettacoli.
 Si ritornano pure gli allegati dell'
 anzicitato rapporto.
 Venezia 18 febbrajo 1853.


Illustration 2 (ASVe, Delegazione provinciale, Atti 1856, Busta 85, Teatri; cfr. n. 27)
 eral of its members, and the board of the Gran Teatro to discuss the poor
 quality of recent productions. The group produced a memorandum, send

ing a copy to the *luogotenente*.³¹ The example shows that the imperial authorities understood (and by their reaction almost condoned the fact) that a production which did not satisfy the audience's expectations risked provoking public disorder, a reaction not uncommon in Venice at the time.

Directly related to the debate on the quality of costumes and sets, is the question of the restrictions Verdi had to accept regarding the period in which the plot was to take place. In a famous letter to his Neapolitan friend Cesare de Sanctis, dated 1 January 1853, Verdi had called *La traviata* «a subject of our time», which meant for him that the opera had to be performed in modern dress.³² Piave, meanwhile, who in addition to providing the libretto for Verdi's new opera also worked as a stage director for La Fenice, had always planned to set the work in the seventeenth century. While the censors were generally wary of operas set in the present,³³ the correspondence shows that in this case it was not the Austrian government that insisted on the historical setting; rather, the conventions of La Fenice and the expectations of its audience dictated that the plot had to be set in a past century, ideally around 1700. This in itself demonstrates a need to reconsider the balance between political, economic and purely aesthetic considerations behind those decisions.³⁴ On 5 February Verdi ceded to these requests, as long as no wigs were used; and (seemingly as a compromise) the composer introduced a good deal of contemporaneity in the form of the opera's musical *tinta*.³⁵

But was 5 February really the end to the quarrels about costumes and wigs, as previously assumed? Two weeks later a letter by the theatre to the *luogotenenza* claims that Verdi was still confused about how to respond to the requests regarding the plot's period, though this might have been only

³¹ ASVe, Delegazione provinciale, Atti 1856, Busta 85, Teatri: Dalle stanze di residenza del R.Delegato Prov., 19 gennaio 1853.

³² Quoted in DELLA SETA, "Introduction", in *Giuseppe Verdi. La traviata* (n. 11), XI-XL, here XIV.

³³ For the censors' concerns regarding the period in which plots are set see Andreas GIGER, "Social Control and the Censorship of Giuseppe Verdi's Operas in Rome (1844-1859)", *Cambridge Opera Journal*, 11/3 (1999), 233-66. John A. DAVIS, "Italy", in *The Frightful Stage. Political Censorship of the Theatre in Nineteenth-century Europe*, ed. Robert Justin Goldstein (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books 2009), 190-227. In this context see also, a few years later, the debate on *Un ballo in maschera*: Arnold JACOBSHAGEN, "Un ballo in maschera", in *Verdi-Handbuch* (n. 5), 486-493.

³⁴ On the latter aspect see in particular DELLA SETA, "Introduction" (n. 32), XLIX.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, XV; see also SALA, *Il valzer delle camellie* (n. 8). On the debate about the costumes, see also John ROSSELLI, *The Life of Verdi* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2000), 107 f.

a pretext to justify the delays. The letter speaks openly of «l'incertezza in cui pareva starsi il Maestro stesso sull'epoca da assegnarsi all'azione del dramma, che non avendo base storica può essere attribuito a qualunque tempo». ³⁶ As a consequence of the maestro's 'incertezza', most details of the costumes and sets were improvised at the last minute, revealing a remarkable degree of flexibility on behalf of the authorities. The theatre received the «figurini pei costume» on 15 February, and these were then immediately passed for authorization to the *podestà* and the police. Despite a great deal of timely cooperation on part of the police, the *sartoria* started no earlier than 20 February to work on a total of one hundred and thirty-five *vestiti!* As for the sets, the *pittore* Bertoja did not have sufficient time to prepare sketches for approval and therefore the authorities were asked to inspect his work while it was coming into being. ³⁷ The authorities seem to have been altogether rather lenient regarding its own procedures, demonstrating an extraordinary level of cooperation in order to avoid further delays. The imperial administration would have had every opportunity to stop the premiere on 6 March from going ahead, but did not wish to disappoint the anxious expectations of its Venetian citizenry.

The delays caused the theatre financial worries, but not the composer. His original contract stated that he would be paid half of his fee of 8,000 Austrian Lire on the day of the first keyboard rehearsal, which was supposed to take place at the start of February, and that he be paid the second half of the fee on the day of the dress rehearsal. The correspondence of the provincial administration, however, states that irrespective of the delay the composer requested «essergli pagato il giorno stesso del suo arrivo alla piazza» in Venice. ³⁸ As the signed copy of Verdi's original contract has not survived, ³⁹ it is possible that changes to the conditions of payment had been introduced by the composer before returning his copy.

The material contained in the files of the Empire's *delegazione provinciale* will not, to repeat, oblige us to rewrite the history of *La traviata*. However, it sheds new light on Austria's operatic policies in Risorgimento Italy. This case study also demonstrates that musicological research benefits

³⁶ ASVe, Delegazione provinciale, Atti 1856, Busta 85, Teatri: Presidenza del teatro alla Delegazione Provinciale, 20 febbraio 1853.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ ASVe, Delegazione provinciale, Atti 1856, Busta 85, Teatri: Presidenza del teatro alla Delegazione Provinciale: Presidenza del teatro all'I.R. Delegazione Provinciale, 13 febbraio 1853.

³⁹ DELLA SETA, "Introduction" (n. 32), XII.

from closer exchange with historians, who tend to explore a more diverse range of archives. More specifically, opera scholars will come to a different understanding of the various processes influencing the production and reception of particular works if they take account of sources that go beyond the correspondence between composers, librettists, *impresari* and theatre companies. For the case of the Habsburgs' Italian provinces, the archives of the imperial administration represent the most immediate link between the state and what happened on stage. They will help to explain political decisions (and perhaps more frequently non-political decisions) that directly influenced the production of opera. Another example for an amplified use of documentary evidence is research in municipal archives, here in particular the debates of local councils and of the sub-committees in charge of theatres.⁴⁰ Along with insights in aesthetic decisions, these sources will provide new information on financial arrangements, as well as on general administrative procedures.

My case-study of *La traviata* also suggests that the archives of the *delegazione provinciale* and the *luogotenenza* contain material on many other works produced in Venice or elsewhere in the Habsburg monarchy, as well as on the more general context of performing opera in nineteenth-century Europe. Although the Haus-, Hof- und Staatsarchiv in Vienna holds a range of relevant materials, research based on the administrative structures and procedures of the Habsburg monarchy will have to take account of the fact that in 1927 large sections of the Verwaltungsarchiv were destroyed by fire. As a consequence, these archives remain difficult to use, with large numbers of documents missing or only partially legible. But historians can find many directly related files on the local level of administration in the Empire's periphery, in particular in the archives of the imperial *Statthalter*, as well as in those of the Empire's *delegazione provinciale*. These are collected and filed according to almost the same criteria as the documents in the Viennese Verwaltungsarchiv. For the Lombardo-Venetian archives, the large majority of documents, even those produced by Austrian civil servants, are written in Italian, with only occasional letters written in

⁴⁰ I have tried to exemplify such an approach with regard to Bologna's Teatro Comunale in Axel KÖRNER, *Politics of Culture in Liberal Italy. From Unification to Fascism* (New York: Routledge 2009), 47-65, 221-262.

Old-German cursive script. This practice directly reflects the Empire's language politics, which contrary to certain myths largely took account of local customs.⁴¹

Researchers using this wider range of administrative documents will frequently be confronted with inconsistencies in the organisation of files, from missing boxes or *buste*, to the misplacement of particular *fascicoli*. For instance, in the case of *La traviata* the files on the 1853 premiere are located in the boxes (*buste*) for the year 1856, three years after the premiere, possibly owing to the fact that the opera was again performed at La Fenice on the occasion of an official state visit in Venice of the Emperor and the Empress, two years after their wedding.⁴² But the central point remains intact: a systematic analysis of administrative files for all relevant years seems obligatory in order to provide scholars of Italian opera with previously neglected material. This strategy promises to dismiss a good deal of persisting myths regarding opera in Habsburg Italy.

⁴¹ Spencer DI SCALA, *Italy* (n. 2), 56, for instance, wrongly claims that «German reigned as the official language».

⁴² ASVe, Presidenza della luogotenenza delle province venete, Atti 1852-1856, busta 284, XIX Affari e viaggi di corte, fasc. 3 Viaggi dell'imperatore e famiglia: I. R. Delegato a Venezia al luogotenente Bissingen, 30 ottobre 1856. However, the same 'busta' also contains files of the judicial administration that seems completely unrelated to the section 'teatri'.