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Introductory note

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This issue of *Cambridge Opera Journal* is devoted to Venice, opera, dance, and in particular the work of the late Irene Alm, Associate Professor of Music at Rutgers University. Alm's premature death in October of 2000 at the age of forty-four was deeply mourned by numerous friends, colleagues, and students, who had come to love her extraordinarily generous spirit, humour, grace, and discerning intellect. Her death also represents an incalculable loss to musicologists and dance historians.

Alm's interests in the intersections between music and dance were first explored in her masters thesis on Stravinsky's *Agon*, but for her doctoral work Alm changed her focus to Venetian opera, an area that would continue to fascinate her for much of her career.[1] Readers of this journal are certainly familiar with one of Alm's most significant contributions, her *Catalog of Venetian Librettos at the University of California, Los Angeles*, an invaluable reference source, replete with indexes of operas, librettists, composers, roles, dancers, choreographers, and dedicatees, and of primary importance to anyone concerned with seventeenth- and eighteenth-century opera.[2] The same combination of scholarly rigor and creativity can be seen in Alm's most important body of research on theatrical dance in Venetian opera. This was the subject of Alm's dissertation and several of her articles, and was the topic of the book that she was writing at the time of her death. The article that we have included in this issue is a distillation of the central chapters of that manuscript.

Our relative ignorance about dance in this repertoire stems from a number of factors. Despite the resurgence of research on Venetian opera – stimulated in large part by Ellen Rosand's seminal book *Opera in Seventeenth-Century Venice* – much of the repertoire itself is still unknown. There are relatively few modern editions and recordings, although the situation is improving. Some recently released performances of Cavalli operas have introduced a wider audience to what are unquestionably more conventional Venetian operas, but they have provided little sense of the role of dance in these complex multimedia works. Moreover, the situation is not helped by the fact that the best-known Venetian operas today – Monteverdi's *L'incoronazione di Poppea* and *Il ritorno di Ulisse* – are somewhat anomalous with regard to the use of dance. Unusually, *L'incoronazione di Poppea* contains no indication for *balli* either in the score or libretto. The situation with Monteverdi's other surviving Venetian opera is slightly more typical. The libretto mentions a *ballo* in Act III, scene 3, but the only score omits the relevant sung verses and contains no *ballo* music whatsoever, leaving the stage director to improvise a solution if the libretto is to be followed. The fact that the Venetian *balli* usually come at the end of the acts means that it has been possible to record or perform what

[1] 'Stravinsky, Balanchine and *Agon*: An Analysis Based on the Collaborative Process', *Journal of Musicology*, 7 (1989), 254–69.
[2] *Catalog of Venetian Librettos at the University of California, Los Angeles* (Berkeley, 1992).

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appears to be a complete work while entirely omitting the dances. The problem with this practice is not simply that it contradicts our modern notions of historical accuracy; in many instances, the omission of the *balli* profoundly changes the visual impact of the opera as spectacle; it alters the pacing, characterization, and even the potential meanings of the work.

Alm's research into theatrical dance in Venetian opera thus provides an important corrective to the prevailing view that Italians did not dance on the operatic stage or that they danced badly. Through her work we see that the *balli* were an integral part of opera from its inception in Venice; that the subjects chosen were as varied as those used in the operas themselves, and that the Venetian opera dancers expressed themselves with the same lack of generic homogeneity that characterizes the inherently carnivalesque nature of the repertoire. The *balli* could be funny, violent, elegant, or pathetic, mirroring the primary action or providing an enticing contrapuntal voice that may well have caused the viewer to hear or see the action in a different way. Alm's primary sources included the various treatises on both dance and theatre from the period that, while not specifically pertaining to Venetian opera, provide considerable information about Italian views on the role of dance in opera, and in particular the way in which early moderns rationalized dance in relation to ancient practice. Alm not only carefully examined the many descriptions of the *balli* found in the libretti, but more importantly matched those with the surviving musical sources, discovering dance music that she had often been told 'did not exist': her dissertation contains over ninety-five musical examples of *balli* from Venetian operas, some of which are reproduced in this issue. Despite the fact that choreographies do not survive for these dances, Alm uses surviving Italian treatises, the descriptions and texts of the libretti, eyewitness reports, information about choreographers, and the music to provide us with a vivid picture of theatrical dance on the Venetian stage. This was a highly physical, at times athletic art, including complex pantomimes, the representation of exotic or supernatural characters, comedy (even slapstick), or the formation of intricate figures including the spelling of words. Dance in this repertoire was thus not a mere remnant of the court *intermedi* or a decorative afterthought; indeed, it would remain an integral part of the repertoire throughout the century. What emerges from Alm's work is an entirely new way of conceptualizing the visual and kinaesthetic nature of Venetian opera. Her fondest hope was that performers and scholars would not only recognize the importance of dance on the Venetian opera stage, but use her work as a point of departure for future studies.

Our goal is to make the central core of Alm's work available and – with the accompanying articles – provide a small sample of the sort of research that might be inspired by Alm's study of theatrical dance in Venetian opera. For publication in *Cambridge Opera Journal*, we have necessarily had to abbreviate, rearrange and distil material from Alm's unfinished book manuscript, while attempting whenever possible to retain her original prose. Nevertheless, a single journal article cannot do justice to the breadth and depth of Alm's research. Irene's doctoral dissertation contains much invaluable additional information about the Italian *ballo* prior to the advent of public opera in Venice, details about the theatres and theatre finances,

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discussions of various dance treatises, and an invaluable collection of surviving dance music.[3] For more on the dance treatises, including *Il corago* and Doni's *Trattato della musica scenica*, we also refer you to her elegant essay on the humanistic tradition in theatrical dance.[4] The salient points about the choreographer Balbi can be found not only in her entry on Balbi in the second edition of the *New Grove Dictionary*, but also in her last published essay, 'Giovanni Battista Balbi: "Veneziano Ballerino celebre" '.[5] She also published several articles dealing with topics that are necessarily only touched upon in this essay, such as the Venetian *feste di ballo*, exoticism in Venetian theatrical dance, and pantomime.[6]

At the time of her death, Alm had embarked upon several promising studies. She had uncovered a number of new documents concerning singers and opera finances in mid-seventeenth-century Italy; she had begun a study of the political implications of operas produced at Marco Contarini's villa at Piazzola, and had presented some of this research at the 1999 annual meeting of the American Musicological Society in Kansas City. She had also embarked upon a study of American ballet in the 1930s, thus following up her long-held interest in twentieth-century ballet, first explored in her seminal essay on the choreography for Stravinsky's *Agon*. It is unfortunate that the full range of her scholarship cannot be presented to the public. Nonetheless, it is with great pride, admiration, and considerable sadness that we present a portion of her study of theatrical dance in Venetian opera to the readers of the *Cambridge Opera Journal*.

[3] 'Theatrical Dance in Venetian Opera', Ph.D diss. (University of California at Los Angeles, 1993).

[4] 'Humanism and Theatrical Dance in Early Opera', *Musica Disciplina*, 49 (1995), 79–93.

[5] *Giacomo Torelli: L'invenzione scenica nell'Europa barocca*, ed. Francesco Milesi (Fano, 2000), 214–46. Irene was also the author of a number of other important articles for the second edition of *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, including the entries on Francesco Cavalli (a revision of the original article by Thomas Walker), Marco Contarini, Mattioli, Sbarra, and Varischino.

[6] 'Operatic Ballroom Scenes and the Arrival of French Social Dance in Venice', *Studi musicali*, 25 (1996), 345–71; 'Dances from the 'Four Corners of the Earth': Exoticism in Seventeenth-Century Venetian Opera', in *Musica Franca: Essays in Honor of Frank A. D'Accone* (Stuyvesant, NY, 1996), 233–57; 'Pantomime in Seventeenth-Century Venetian Theatrical Dance', in *Creature di Prometeo: Il ballo teatrale. Dal divertimento al dramma. Studi offerti a Aurel M. Milloss*, ed. Giovanni Morelli (Florence, 1996), 87–102. For an excellent summary of Venetian dance practice, see also Alm, 'Theatrical Dance in Venetian Opera 1637–1660', in *L'arte della danza ai tempi di Claudio Monteverdi: Atti del convegno internazionale, Torino, 6–7 settembre 1993*, ed. Angelo Chiarle (Turin, 1996), 95–111.

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