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Music in Late Seventeenth-Century Rome. The Palazzo Orsini as a Performance space

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Let's first picture the general setting of seventeenth-century Rome. Alongside the pontifical curia and a vast number of churches and convents of every kind, stood the palaces of the many aristocratic families whose court life strove for social power within a polycentric urban structure.¹ Within their own palace and holiday residences, as well as their more distant feudal fiefdoms, princes developed the patronage of cultural activities that had to take into account the artistic choices of the princes of neighbouring palaces.² This very specific situation led to a strong sense of rivalry: social élites competed to dominate the urban space through patronage of churches and chapels, placement of coats-of-arms on the façades of their palaces, and financing of festive events.³ Music and theatre, but also the collection of artistic material objects such as paintings, statues and luxurious carriages, reinforced the prestige, cultural legitimacy and political position of these Roman families. The city of Rome was not only a backdrop: it also stimulated the development of musical and theatrical activities within the palaces as the result of a specific palatial architecture, an economy of entertainment and a particular market structure as regards artistic labour.

My investigation focuses on one specific court: that of Prince Flavio Orsini, last heir of a major branch of the Orsini, a family of the old feudal nobility that provided the Church with six pontiffs.⁴ Flavio Orsini, Duke of Bracciano, was a prince assistant to the pontifical throne, a dignity he shared with Prince Colonna. This hereditary post gave them—one after the other—the privilege to be seated to the right of the pontifical throne during the great ceremonies of the Church.⁵ Orsini supported the French crown,⁶ his marriage with Marie-Anne de La Trémoille—the future Princesse des Ursins—was celebrated in 1675 at the Palazzo Farnese (the palace that housed the French embassy, as it still does today).⁷ This marriage further solidified his links with the French Crown. Later Marie-Anne would strengthen the French Crown's nuptial ties with Rome when she played a pivotal role in the 1682 marriage of her sister, Louise-Angélique, to Antonio Lante della Rovere, Marquis and then Prince of Belmonte.

In this essay, I will focus on the Orsini urban palace, better known as the Palazzo Pasquino (which owed its name to a famous sculpture placed at one of its corners), built at the current location of the Palazzo Braschi south of the Piazza Navona.⁸ While researching in the Orsini

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1. On the polycentrism of the Roman curia, see Signorotto and Visceglia 2002; and Romano 2008; for more on the courts of the cardinals, see Fragnito 1994; for a politico-urban reading of the city of Rome, see Connors 2005; and for more on Roman aristocratic families, see Reinhard 1991 and Ciucci 2002.
 2. On the question of patronage, and more particularly musical patronage, the bibliography is vast: for an analysis of the concept, see the classic studies by Claudio Annibaldi, notably Annibaldi 1993 and 1998, as well as the very stimulating article by Anna Tedesco: Tedesco 2014.
 3. Among a rich bibliography, see in particular Dandelet 1999.
 4. See Brigante Colonna 1955 and Celletti 1963; see also Ago 2008.
 5. See Cermakian 1969: 81.
 6. On the existence of a French faction in Rome, see Poncet 2011: 236, and 251.
 7. See Cermakian 1969. Marie-Anne de la Trémoille was successively named the Countess of Chalais, Duchess of Brachane (or of Bracciano) and Princesse des Ursins. For an analysis of the relationship between palace and power, see Sabatier 2013.o
 8. The only, brief historical study concerning the Palazzo Pasquino is found in Pietrangeli 1958: 15-20 (Chapter 1: 'I precedenti del Palazzo Braschi-Palazzo Orsini-Santobono a Pasquino'). Further information can be found in Pericoli Ridolfini 1969: 48. It was Cardinal Oliviero Carafa, occupant of the palace at the beginning of the sixteenth century, who installed an ancient statue from the third century BCE on the corner of the Orsini palace and the Piazza Parione. The statue formed part of a group representing Menelaus, King of Sparta, carrying Patrocles, Achilles's horseman, who died in combat. Of this group,

archive at the Archivio Storico Capitolino for several years, I discovered a great deal of information about the Palazzo Pasquino and the artistic activities that were hosted there at the time.⁹ Since the palace no longer exists, I will describe it based on the documents that I have pieced together from the archives, before elaborating on the methodological significance of this research.

What do we actually know about the Orsini palace as a performance space? The Orsini palace was the first large civic edifice built in Rome at the very beginning of the fifteenth century. Constructed as an hexagon of irregular shape, the palace was located between three squares: the Piazza Navona, the Piazza San Pantaleo and the Piazza Pasquino.¹⁰ This prestigious location at the complex urban site of the Piazza Navona was a rich site of commercial activities—mainly booksellers and art dealers—that promoted regular street shows.¹¹ Offering a counterpoint to nearby buildings which showcased Spanish power—such as the Palazzo Pamphilj, the church of San Giacomo degli Spagnoli, and the church of Sant-Agnese—the Orsini palace stood as a manifesto of the French faction in Rome. Erected in a highly visible place, the palace was a strategic site of engagement between the Orsini family and the outside world.¹² It was an official station on the *via papalis*, the street travelled by each new pope on his way from the Vatican to the Lateran basilica, where the ceremonies took place to mark his ascendance to the throne as Bishop of Rome.¹³ After the arrival of the Flavio Orsini's French spouse, the façade of the palace proudly carried the coat-of-arms of Louis XIV at each of the key political events that involved the French nation, thus creating an effective visual propaganda for this international ally.

Figure 13.1. Giambattista Nolli, *Alla Santità di Nostro Signore Papa Benedetto XIV, La Nuova Topografia di Roma ossequiosamente offerisce e dedica l'umilissimo servo Giambattista Nolli comasco* (1748). The Palazzo Palace, whose particular structure is visible here, was situated southwest of the piazza (lot no. 621). On this map, the San Giacomo degli Spagnoli church was located at lot no. 606, the Pamphilj Palace at lot no. 607, and the Sant-Agnese church at lot no. 608 (Rome, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, 18.P.O.8)

At this point it is worth mentioning an architectural project undertaken by the Orsini family in Flavio Orsini's time.¹⁴ They planned to purchase the Torres-Lancellotti palace (on the other side of the present Vicolo della Cucagna) in order to build a tower at the corner that was intended to be symmetrical to their own tower. The two palaces were then to be linked by an arch, mounted with a Palladian window adorned with the Orsini coat-of-arms. This large-scale project, with its marked symbolic significance, was never completed because of a lack of financial means.

only the statue of Menelaus remains, with Patrocles's torso in front of him. The Romans quickly attached satirical phrases to the statue, transforming it into a speaking statue that took on the name Pasquino, after the place where it was located.

9. I wish to thank Orsetta Baroncelli, graduate of the Scuola di Archivistica, Paleografia e Diplomatica de l'Archivio di Stato de Rome, for her help in the transcription of the Italian documents used in this study.
10. For more on this neighborhood, see Franchi and Sartori 2001, and for information on Roman aristocratic palaces, see the comprehensive study by Patricia Waddy (Waddy 1990). On the palace as a site of artistic exposition, see Feigenbaum 2014.
11. See Bernard 2014.
12. For an analysis of aristocratic dwellings as veritable political manifestos, see Eric Hassler's recent work which is dedicated to spatial strategies of social élites in the context of the Viennese court (Hassler 2013).
13. See Franchi and Sartori 2001: 9.
14. Pietrangeli 1958: 17.

Figure 13.2. Giovanni Battista Falda, *Veduta della fontana del Moro in Piazza Navona*, etching, 1667 (© Comune di Roma- Sovrintendenza Capitolina ai Beni Culturali-Museo di Roma, MR 19619) : the Fountain of the Moor, conceived by Bernini and realized by Giacomo della Porta; in the background on the right, the Orsini Palace; on the left, the Torres-Lancellotti Palace; between the two the Vicolo della Cucagna can be seen , MR 19619)

The design and decor of the Orsini palace further emphasized the family's noble origins. From the main staircase, which exhibited Flavio Orsini's collection of statues,¹⁵ to his library, which shelved—at least according to an inventory drawn up after his death—190 poetry and music books, to his collection of paintings that adorned the palace walls: every aspect of the palace interior reinforced the cultural and political significance of the Orsini family.¹⁶ The living area, where the Duke and Duchess had their respective apartments, upheld the separation between the masculine and the feminine domains that was standard in European princely residences since the Middle Ages.¹⁷ They shared the palace with the Duke's younger brother, Lelio Orsini, Prince of Vicovara.¹⁸ He was closely involved with the Franciscans, and his austere apartment, situated in the wing of the palace between the Piazza Pasquino and the Piazza San Pantaleo, contrasted starkly with the luxurious apartments of Flavio and Marie-Anne.¹⁹

Figure 13.3. Map of the second floor (*piano nobile*) of the Orsini Palace (I-Rasr, Collezione Disegni e mappe, coll. I, cart. 87, no. 567)

Each room had its own rules of access. The Duchess's apartment overlooking Piazza Navona consisted of three anti-chambers, the courtroom with its red canopy, the conversation room, covered with green wall hangings with beautiful Venetian mirrors and furnished *à la française*, a red and gold *cabinet*, and a library.²⁰ The colour red, highly symbolic of power and authority, dominated each space. Every evening the princess ran her own salon, following a strict protocol.²¹ When a visitor was announced, he could not enter the conversation room without having first visited the whole apartment:

One was no longer received in Madame la Duchesse's salon if he had not first seen her apartment; there foreigners were required to bow in each room and hardly dared to speak. Spitting is forbidden there under threat of a life sentence, and that occurs there more regularly than in the mosques.²²

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15. On the role of the principal staircase as a space of representation in aristocratic dwellings, see Hassler 2013: 239.
 16. On Flavio Orsini's library, see the posthumous inventory (Rome, Archivio di Stato, *Trenta Notai Capitolini* [TNC], uff. 29, prot. 281, cc. 1191r-1379r: cc. 1258r-1271r). The list of paintings belonging to the Duke appears in this same inventory: cc. 1272v-1291v. On the paintings housed at the Orsini Palace, see Boyer 1931.
 17. See Chatenet and De Jonge 2014.
 18. See Amendola 2013.
 19. For an analysis of the familial stakes at play in the distribution of space in aristocratic dwellings, see Borello 2016.
 20. The taste of the Duchess of Bracciano recalls that of Parisian feminine society for their residences in the first half of the century, who were fond of light colors for their lodgings. See Courtin 2014: 261.
 21. On the Princess' salon, see Goulet 2011.
 22. 'On n'est plus reçu chez Madame la Duchesse si auparavant on n'a vu son appartement; la on oblige les etrangers a faire une reverence dans chaque chambre, et a peine ose-t-on s'y parler. Pour cracher cela est

Thus, conversation had its own ritual and implied a strict observance of etiquette and precedence.²³ It was a space that demanded appropriate dress, gestures, and decorum—a worldly version of the papal ceremonial.²⁴

In this context, the theatrical plays and music concerts that accompanied the domestic life of the palace also acted as social mediation. Observing a long tradition of family patronage previously exemplified by Paolo Giordano Orsini II and Virginio Orsini, Flavio Orsini supported musicians throughout his life. Musicians can be identified in the family *ruoli*, but their presence was consistently concealed behind their staff roles within the house, which makes locating them a laborious process. For instance, in the 1660s, gentleman and renowned singer Francesco Vulpio was Flavio Orsini's *maestro di casa*, while his brother, Giovanni Battista Vulpio, a priest, composer and singer for the papal chapel and a passionate music collector, was among the family's *nobiles viri*.²⁵ Other musicians under the Duke's protection included: Alessandro Stradella, who was raised as a page in the Lante family; Ercole Bernabei, director of music at the church of Saint-Louis des Français; musician-architect Carlo Rainaldi; Alessandro Scarlatti; Alessandro Melani; Paolo Lorenzani; and towards the end of Orsini's life, Giacomo Simonelli and Giuseppe Trivelli. The family pageboys were given regular dance lessons by a dance master named Ciolli, as were the Duchess's ladies-in-waiting.²⁶ In his own bedroom the Duke of Bracciano had a spinet and an 'organo a forma di cimbalò'.²⁷ Indeed his accounts contain countless references to payments to the harpsichord tuner.²⁸

The conversation gatherings welcomed theatrical performances. In 1684, for instance, the Orsini palace and the Lante palace hosted plays performed by the French ladies-in-waiting: 'At the homes of the Orsini and Lanti, plays are produced in which the French demoiselles and dames perform'.²⁹ The Duchess's younger sister, Louise-Angélique, took the role of tragic heroines in palace performances of plays by Racine.³⁰ Sometimes these performances became important events for promoting the political sympathies of the family, and two of

defendu sous peine de la vie, et cela s'y observe plus regulierement qu'on ne fait dans les mosques'; letter addressed in 1685 to Louise-Angélique de La Trémoille par Gesvres, the future Cardinal. Rome, Archivio di Stato, Archivio Lante della Rovere [Archivio Lante], b. 304, bundle 20, fasc. 3, letter no. 17: The *Archivio Lante della Rovere* contains copious information concerning Marie-Anne de La Trémoille.

23. On the concept of 'conversazione' in Italy, see Ossola 1987; Burke 1997; Quondam 2007; Brambilla 2004; and Borello 2003: 86-87. On the issue of etiquette in play at the French court, where Marie-Anne de La Trémoille was raised, see Sternberg 2014.
24. See Visceglia and Brice 1997, and more specifically in this work, the article by Renata Ago, 'Sovrano pontefice e società di corte', 223-38. See also Visceglia, 2002.
25. See Timms 2009.
26. See, for example, Rome, Archivio Storico Capitolino, Archivio Orsini [Archivio Orsini], II^a serie, b. 2276, c. 33. February 3, 1673, among the credits of the 'provisionati diversi in Roma', is found the following: 'E adi 3 febbraio sc. 12 moneta buoni al detto [Achille Terzi esattore] pagati con ordine n° 1250 a Felice Ciolli, maestro di ballo, per sua provisione di mesi tre a tutto novembre 1672 per la lettione data alli nostri paggi, uscita 142, in questo [libro mastro c.] 20'. sc. 12'
27. Post-mortem inventory of Flavio Orsini: *TNC*, uff. 29, prot. 281, c. 1206v.
28. See for example *Archivio Orsini*, III^a serie, b. 589, February, giustificazioni di Dandini, 5-13 February 1683: order of payment sent by Flavio Orsini, whereby he asks Giovanni Balducci, collector of grain, to give three *rubbia* of grain to the *cimbolaro* Giacomo Ridolfi 'per sua recognitione di tenerci accomodati i nostri cimballi e questi per il passato anno 1682' (a *rubbia* was a measure equivalent to eight bushels or around 250 litres).
29. 'In casa Orsini, e Lanti però si fanno commedie, e vi recitano le damigelle, e dame francesi'; *Avvisi Marescotti* from January 6, 1684.. See Staffieri 1990: 57. *Avvisi* were a kind of newspaper, habitually read by aristocrats, that contained political, social and artistic news of other Italian and European towns.
30. See *Archivio Lante*, b. 303, bundle 19, fasc. 7, letter no. 88: letter addressed to Louise-Angélique by a certain La Jonquille, a gentleman then in the service of a German Elector whose name is not specified.

these events held particular significance. First, in 1682 an ephemeral theatre was built within the Palazzo Pasquino, financed by Flavio's brother-in-law, Antonio Lante della Rovere, who had just married Marie-Anne de La Trémoille's sister. This theatre functioned during the 1683 carnival with a performance of the opera *L'Arsate* (with music by Alessandro Scarlatti and a libretto probably written by Flavio Orsini himself).³¹ The opera was to be performed alternately with a comedy in prose: *La Dama di spirito geloso o la guerriera costante*, in which each act concluded with a brief drama in music.³² Scarlatti also composed the music for this, and Flavio Orsini wrote the libretto. To mark the arrival of his new wife in Rome, Antonio Lante intended to celebrate the recent birth of the Duke of Burgundy. Musical theatre thus offered a means for the news of this important birth to resound across the city. Prince Orsini and Prince Lante had certainly received a sizeable portion of the 15,000 *scudi* that Louis XIV had sent to the ambassador d'Estrées for the celebration of the Duke's birth, an event that had occurred on 16 August of the preceding year. I would thus describe the mounting of this musical event as a sort of collective patronage.³³

During the same Carnival, the pro-Spanish Colonna family commissioned Scarlatti's *Il Pompeo* and *La Tessalonica* for their own theatre.³⁴ Both works were dedicated to Lorenza de la Cerda, the young bride of the eldest son of Constable Colonna, and the daughter of Duke Medinaceli. Many of the artists and craftsmen who worked at the Palazzo Pasquino worked also at the Palazzo Colonna during the same season. It can therefore be assumed that in Rome there were famous artists and skilled craftsmen who specialized in theatrical work, and who were willing to work on different projects without concerning themselves with the political ties of their employers.

The second event took place in 1685 when Molière's *Tartuffe* was performed at the Palazzo Orsini with the consent of Benedetto Odescalchi, Pope Innocent XI. To this end, the living quarters of the palace were dramatically transformed to become a performance space. An unsigned letter, sent from Rome to Louise-Angélique on 17 November 1684, shows that the Duchess of Bracciano did not hesitate to make substantial transformations to her apartments to accommodate a theatrical performance that she had commissioned.³⁵ As mentioned earlier, her apartment consisted of a sequence of adjoining rooms. She ordered large holes to be made in the walls separating the rooms, holes that gradually diminished in size, thus creating the impression of a horizontal perspective in the performance area from every room in her apartments.³⁶ For those who attended the performance, it must have been a striking sensory and visual experience. The Duchess was clearly aware that these cultural events enhanced the family's public image and that such investments in theatrical and musical performances could serve a politics of prestige.

31. See Goulet 2014.

32. The two libretti were published at Bracciano by Angelo Bernabò in 1683: *L'Arsate Damma per Musica Dedicata All'Invitta Maestà Cristianissima Di Luigi XIV. Rappresentata nel Palazzo à Pasquino. Per la nascita del Serenissimo Duca di Borgogna; La Dama di spirito geloso, e la guerriera costante Comedia in Comedia. Di Filosinavro Recitata nelle Feste per la Nascita dell'Altezza Reale del Duca di Borgogna. Nel Palazzo di Pasquino.*

33. On this concept, see De Lucca 2011.

34. See Marco Micheletti, «La fortuna del *Pompeo* di Alessandro Scarlatti», *Studi musicali*, Nuova serie VI/1 (2015), p. 37-95.

35. See *Archivio Lante* b. 303, fasc. 19, sub-fasc. 07, no. 85.

36. 'La plus grande affaire de Pasquin est la comedie de ce Carnaval. On y perce en perspective tout l'appartement de madame votre sœur affin qu'on puisse de toutes ses chambres voir le theatre qui sera dans la chambre du dais qui communique à l'appartement de monsieur de Brachane et dans le lieu mesme où étoit ce dais d'un petit velours de différentes couleurs' (Rome, Archivio di Stato, Archivio Lante della Rovere, b. 303, fasc. 19, sub-fasc. 07, no. 85).

Figure 13.4. Extract from an anonymous letter dated 17 November 1684 sent to Louise-Angélique de La Trémoille (Rome, Archivio di Stato, Archivio Lante della Rovere, b. 303, fasc. 19, sub-fasc. 07, no. 85)

This brief summary of the results of my research could be complemented by a specific survey of the musical and theatrical repertory. Here, however, I would like to consider a few other questions: what are my research aims and methods? Can this inquiry offer anything beyond a contribution to local history? To use the term coined by Clifford Geertz in 1998, a ‘thick description’ based on material from several different archives can allow us to expand our still incomplete idea of what aristocratic daily life was really like in the palaces of early modern Rome. It becomes possible to provide new information about the professional careers of the great, lesser known and completely unknown composers, singers and instrumentalists who worked at the Orsini court. We can isolate and identify artistic practices which shaped power relations, involving patrons, musicians, actors, copyists—all of whom belonged to various institutional frameworks and to different networks of contacts. In this way, my work undertakes the type of contextual studies called for by Howard Mayer Brown, studies that go ‘beyond the pay records or the transcription of the music’.³⁷

Furthermore, this kind of study must be placed within a larger social and political context. The musical and theatrical representations at the Palazzo Orsini, such as *L’Arsate*, constituted a spectacular and memorable event that was related to the aristocratic culture of the time and, more specifically, that fell within a long-term strategy of legitimation through wealth and culture. Musical theatre was used to reinforce the family’s prestige and magnify their public image. To understand these issues, I would argue that we should picture music, performing arts, and arts in general as elements of the same general landscape. Patrons collected artistic goods such as paintings, statues, musical scores, instruments, exquisite fabrics and carriages.³⁸ All these objects had a *value*, financial as well as symbolic. There were also other values—more short-lived—that were not tied to these tangible objects. These values could have been derived from an artist hired for a single production, such as Alessandro Scarlatti who composed the score for *L’Arsate* and conducted the orchestra for the 1683 performances. Or the value could have been generated through the events themselves, which were ephemeral but never forgotten. The events were *valued*. Their valuation reinforced the prestige, cultural legitimacy and strategic political positions of the noble family.

Finally, I believe it is necessary to adopt a multi-scale approach: work has to start at the palace scale, then at the city scale to understand the interactions between various palaces, all of which were musical centres. At this stage it should be possible to determine whether the case study is unique or representative. Then the study must be developed on a regional scale since, as has been seen, the urban palace needs to be studied at the same time as the holiday residence. Next, the study broadens to the peninsula scale (for instance, Flavio Orsini maintained constant relations with Venice, where he sent female singers). Finally, it moves up to a European scale: in my case study the fact that Orsini married a French princess helps to take the investigation to this European level. In her correspondence the Princess continually made an obvious comparison between her native land and her adopted country. As family studies develop—I have in mind, for instance, the research of Valeria de Lucca on the Colonna family, or that of Alexandra Nigito dedicated to the Pamphilj—it should be possible

37. See Brown 1987: 7-8.

38. On the performative role played by the accumulation of precious objects in the creation of individual political and social status, see Gillgren and Snickare 2012.

to establish a pattern to be considered.³⁹ By comparing Flavio Orsini to other princes from the period, such as Lorenzo Onofrio Colonna or Giovanni Battista Pamphilj, the basis for a model Roman prince could be established. Although the tastes of each prince influenced the direction of his patronage (some specialized in the acquisition of paintings, others in architectural embellishment of their homes, still others in commissioning musical spectacles), the princes who promoted cultural activity in most of the Eternal City's courts wished to build their own image and that of their family through the arts. With these possible directions in mind, the contextual study goes beyond a simple collection of facts and has the potential to make a significant contribution to early modern studies.

Translated by Melinda Latour

39. See De Lucca 2009; and Nigito 2012. These questions are at the heart of the research program PERFORMART (2016-2021), which the European Research Council has recently agreed to finance: 'Promoting, Patronising and Practising the Arts in Roman Aristocratic Families (1644-1740). The Contribution of Roman Families' Archives to the History of Performing Arts' (Principal Investigator: Anne-Madeleine Goulet). See <<http://performart-roma.eu>>.