

A political interpretation of a proscenium arch designed by Francesco Romanelli for the opera “San Bonifazio” (1638)

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Some years ago, while I was looking for information about the artists who were hired by the Barberini to stage their operas in Rome for the Carnival season 1638, I found an interesting drawing by the painter Giovanni Francesco Romanelli (c.1610-1662). The drawing, held in the Metropolitan Museum of New York, shows an incomplete proscenium arch of a stage with the crest of the Barberini placed at the centre of the architrave.

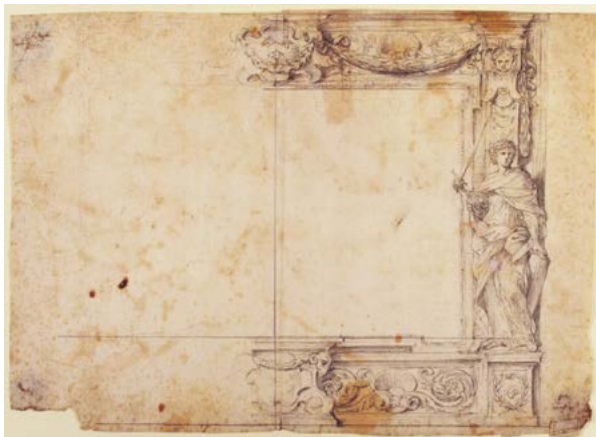


Fig. 1. Giovanni Francesco Romanelli (c.1610–1662). Medium: Graphite or black chalk on cream laid paper. Dimensions: 10-1/16 x 14 in. (25.6 x 35.6 cm). Classification: Drawings. Credit Line: Gift of Leon Dalva Sr., 1965. The Metropolitan Museum. Accession Number 65.654.120: public domain. (See: <<http://www.metmuseum.org/Collections/search-the-collections/90007522>>)

The caption illustrating the picture on the on-line page of the museum describes the character on the right as “a Figure of Justice.” Even if this

description might fit in part to the character as some of its attributes are usually associated to the personification of Justice, I will propose another reading, which better matches the programmatic meaning the Barberini family wanted to convey with the opera *San Bonifazio* for which his arch was very likely designed. Romanelli was in fact one of the artists chosen by the noble family to design works of art that could be a good means of conveying their political propaganda (about the role of Francesco Romanelli see Oy-Marra 2007: 303-16).

Born in Viterbo, Romanelli, also known as Il Viterbese, from his birth city, or Il Raffaellino, after Raffaello, was trained in Rome where he studied with Il Domenichino (Domenico Zampieri, 1581-1641) first, and then with Pietro da Cortona (Pietro Berettini, 1596-1669). It is probable that the latter introduced him to the court of the Barberini family since Romanelli was his collaborator in painting the frescos for the chapel inside Palazzo Barberini (1631-32). Moreover, both Gian Lorenzo Bernini (1598-1680) and Cardinal Francesco Barberini (1528-1600) acted as his patrons and helped him in having important commissions (Bruno 2017). It must be considered that Bernini was very influential in the choice of the artists to be hired for stage performances at the Barberini court since, when not directly involved in making the backdrops and inventing new machines, he supervised most of the operas patronized by the noble family during the seventeenth century, as attested by his biographer Filippo Baldinucci (Baldinucci 1682: 45).

Considering the above, it is not surprising that Romanelli’s name appears in the payment records of the artists and masons hired by Francesco Barberini for the Carnival season 1638, when

the cardinal sponsored the performance of two operas: *La pazzia d'Orlando* and *San Bonifazio*¹. In the payments there is evidence that Romanelli was involved only in the staging of the latter for which he designed the scenes, painted numerous canvases probably used to make side-wings and perspectives, and supervised the construction of the stage. He also ordered the colours for himself and for the other painters as well as cardboard used to make some clouds (Giust. I: fol. 271r).

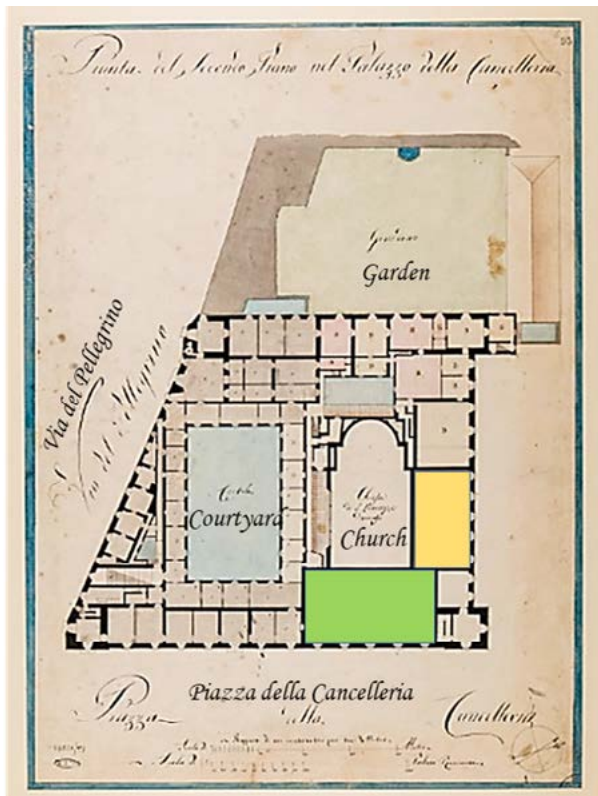


Fig. 2. Giuseppe Valadier (1762-1839). Medium: drawing on paper, orthographic projections. Dimensions: Width: 383 mm x Height: 537 mm. Inventory numbers: 58821_93 and Roma XI.100.93. Repository: Biblioteca di archeologia e storia dell'arte (Rome, Italy). On-line location: <http://purl.stanford.edu/jp933tz4188> (the image has been modified by the author to make it more accessible to the reader).

Since this was also the only occasion attested in the payment records held in the Archivio Barberini of the Vatican Library in which the artist was involved in the staging of a theatrical performance, I suggest that the drawing shown in fig. 1, might refer to the proscenium arch built for the performance of *San Bonifazio* for the Carnival 1638. A further confirmation is that when the opera was staged again in November 1638 on occasion of the visit to Rome of Johann

Anton Furst von Eggenberg, Imperial envoy of Ferdinand III, the responsibility of staging the performance was given to other artists even if it is likely that most of the scenography was reused, as was common at that time (Zammar 2017: 80-90). The opera was staged in a *salone* on the *piano nobile* of the Palazzo della Cancelleria, which had been Francesco Barberini's residence since 1632. The *salone* is on the side facing Piazza della Cancelleria, just above the porch of the Church of San Lorenzo in Damaso (see room evidenced in green in fig. 2).

The stage would have been built along the south wall corresponding to the short-left side in the above picture (Murata 1981: 35). The access to the hall was achievable through five doors, but almost certainly the guests who attended the opera entered from the door in the north corner of the west wall, which leads to the room known as the *Salone dei Cento Giorni* (the room indicated in yellow in fig. 2). The reason for choosing this room was probably because it is the largest of the palazzo and is three stories high. The availability of space offered the artists several opportunities. They could build a raised platform, which allowed the positioning of theatrical devices under the stage to move part of the set design and they could place pieces of machinery under the ceiling. To prevent the audience from seeing the mechanisms it was necessary to erect a proscenium arch that allowed them to be hidden, and this task was most probably given to Romanelli, who designed the proscenium arch displayed in fig. 1.

Even if the drawing by Romanelli shows only a part of this proscenium arch, some of its details are of great interest in light of a political interpretation of the opera it was designed for. When the spectators entered the hall, the stage was not visible because a curtain covered it. This is made clear by the following lines from a request for payment written by an artisan who helped the other artists every time that they staged the 1638 performance of *San Bonifazio*:

per aver sparato e parato di taffettani per la rappresentazione di San Bonifazio ed essere stato assiduo giorno e notte per appicciare le lampade e tirare i taffettani ogni volta che si faceva la rappresentazione con due uomini.

[for placing and removing the cloths for the performance of San Bonifazio and for being present day and night to

set the lights and for pulling, together with two men, the cloths every time that the performance was staged] (translated by the author from Giust. I: fol. 205r).

Since the frontstage was furnished with six vases, holding the torches to illuminate the proscenium, it is clear that the intention of the Barberini was to draw the attention of the public to it and its decoration. That is why it is important to analyse the message the noble family wanted to convey.

According to my interpretation, the character represented on the right (see fig. 3 below), despite its similarity with a personification of Justice as suggested by the curators of the Metropolitan Museum, can be better identified with the god Apollo. Some of the god's attributes are in fact easily recognisable.



Fig. 3. Detail from fig.1

Both the laurel crown and the tree trunk, on which the character leans his left hand, allude to the myth of Apollo and Daphne as reported in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. According to the myth, the river god Peneus, Daphne's father, transformed the nymph into a laurel tree to help her escape from Apollo's lascivious desires. Unable to possess his beloved physically, Apollo decided to decorate his attributes with the laurel to maintain a contact with Daphne's substance forever (Parker and

Stanton 2006: 39). In Ovid's account, Apollo, shocked by the transformation of Daphne, started embracing the laurel tree, which truncated at his kisses (De Girolami Cheney 1993: 135-76). Hence the meaning of the tree trunk in the drawing and in several other images representing Apollo. Less common is the representation of the god holding a sword instead of the most familiar lyre. This attribute dates to the epic of Homer, where Apollo is referred to as χρυσόορος (goldsmith) and the god by the golden sword who, sent by Zeus, protected the city of Troy against the Achaeans (Viscardi 2014: 39-61).

The choice of asking the artists to employ Apollo in decorating works commissioned by them was not new to the Barberini as the god was very dear to both Francesco, and to his uncle, pope Urban VIII (Maffeo Barberini, 1631-1658), for whom the god had a non-pagan significance. Although Maffeo had often condemned the use of mythological images as one of the main reasons of poetry's loss of power, Apollo was an exception (Scott 2007: 127-36). Since the beginning of his pontificate, Urban VIII had liked to identify himself with the sun-god and his virtues as a poet, being himself a writer of poems and music lover. For example, the lost fresco by the painter Andrea Camassei (1602-1648/49), who decorated the ceiling of one of the rooms on the ground floor of Palazzo Barberini was entitled *Apollo e le Muse sul Parnaso* and showed the Pope disguised as Apollo. A further confirmation of the devotion of the Barberini to the god is that in their heraldic deeds they often used the image of the sun to represent the pope as the sunny centre of a constellation made up of the other members of the family. There are also several other paintings, tapestries, and decorations commissioned by the Barberini referring in some way to Apollo or his attributes (Negro 2007: 447-52). One of the most elaborate allusions to the mythological character and to his relation with Urban VIII can be found in Pietro da Cortona's fresco *Triumph of Divine Providence* decorating the ceiling of the big *salone* on the *piano nobile* of Palazzo Barberini alle Quattro Fontane (Scott 2007: 127-36).

But which was the meaning given to Apollo holding a sword on the proscenium arch of an opera dedicated to a saint? To answer this question, it is fundamental to consider the plot and the aim of the staging of this opera, considering the historical



events of the period. Evidently the subject is based on the life of Saint Boniface, following the path inaugurated by one of the most popular operas staged by the Barberini, *Sant'Alessio*. The plot revolves around the relationship between the young Boniface and his lover Aglae. The prologue of the opera is sung by the muses Calliope and Urania and states the moral of the performance: mortals should follow Virtue rather than Love, because the former is the only source of peace. The presence of two muses in the prologue creates a first link to the image of Apollo on the proscenium arch since traditionally Apollo was identified as the leader of the muses. The choice of Calliope, the muse of epic and Urania, the muse of astrology is because the two muses are related to two topics very dear to the pope: poetry and astrology (Marshall Miller 2008: 49-72).

Act I opens with Boniface and Aglae celebrating their life of pleasure by singing and dancing together. Once Boniface leaves, the allegorical character Penitence enters on stage and convinces Aglae to give up her life of pleasure and foolishness. Penitence, as most allegorical characters appearing in operas staged by the Barberini, is meant to remind the audiences to focus their attention on the teachings of the Catholic Church and its leaders, who represent their spiritual and moral guide (Christy Lamothe 2009: 44). The message here is that there is still time for everyone to change their mind because, thanks to repentance, it is possible to be forgiven by God and be absolved of one's sins. The reference to the position of France in support of the Protestants in the Thirty Years War (1618-1648) and an appeal to Cardinal Maurizio of Savoy (1593-1657), guest of honour of the performance, seem to be clear. The intention was to warn Savoy on the consequences of betraying the true Christian faith and inducing him to exert any diplomatic deed possible to put pressure on French leaders to change their European policies.

At this point of the opera, the comedic character Captain Dragonivampasparaparapiglia is introduced². He wants to court Aglae and sends his servant Fagotto with a message to the girl, in which he boasts his military glories hoping to impress her. Aglae is not impressed at all by the Captain and decides to reach Boniface. She finds him speaking with his servants and tries to convince him to leave for Tarsus to fight for the

Christians. At first, the young man is confused, but finally Aglae persuades him. This decision provokes the reaction of the Devil, who does not want to lose the power he has long had over the couple and tries unsuccessfully to tempt them.

Act II opens with Boniface, who, alone, is thinking about his future, when his guardian angel arrives to reassure him. The Devil tries to convince Boniface to renounce his purposes and go back to his beloved Aglae. Boniface defeats him and the Devil decides to look for Aglae to tempt her. In the meantime, the Captain tries again to conquer Aglae singing her a serenade. The Devil tries unsuccessfully to convince Aglae to ask Boniface to reach her in Rome. The fact that the actor playing the Devil wore Arab clothes seems to be a reference to the Islamic Turks, a way to identify them with the enemies of the true faith and to warn the audience on the potential consequences of their gaining power in Europe.

Act III opens with Boniface, who is being taken captive by the Romans, but, despite to surrender to them, prefers to be martyred. As soon as Aglae receives the news from Boniface's servant, two allegorical characters, the Church Militant and the Church Triumphant, appear to declare their victory and the opera ends with a rejoicing ballet (see Hammond 1994: 232 and Christy Lamothe 2009: 69). Very likely the curtain was closed once more, leaving the audience to contemplate the two characters on each side of the proscenium arch.

The programmatic intention of the opera is apparently in contrast to its poor setting, which gives the impression of an opera staged without a great display of machinery and scenographic effects, compared to other operas sponsored by the Barberini. In fact, the only piece of machinery was a cloud to lower the actor playing the Angel, and the only device used to change the scenes consisted in sliding flats treetops-shaped, which covered the fixed scene (Giust. I: fol. 216v, transcribed in Bruno 2005: 67-88). However, the organization of two contemporary performances for the Carnival season 1638 can be considered as an incredible effort to react to conditions adverse to the family. The presence of Maurizio of Savoy, one of the most powerful noblemen in Rome, at the first performance of the opera indicates the intention of the Barberini to support the authority of the French faction in a period in which Spain was gaining more and more power, but also to

find a balance between the two factions as Savoy had supported his brother Tommaso of Carignano in promoting a pro-Spanish policy in opposition to the ruler of the Duchy of Savoy, Christine of France. Savoy had long been familiar with the Barberini since he first arrived in Rome in 1621 and stayed there for a few months. When he returned in May 1623, he had a great influence in the election of Maffeo Barberini to the papal see. Therefore, the Barberini had a special devotion to him, which is why Maurizio was the guest of honour of the performance (Mörschel 2001: 147-78)³. This is attested by the payment records for the opera that report that 1500 *argomenti* were bound for this performance with *carta colorita*, while a special copy with a binding of parchment and golden threads was made for him (Giust. I: fol. 238r). The special copy of the *argomento* was very likely given to the cardinal on occasion of a banquet Cardinal Francesco organized for the guests who attended one of the performances of the opera. In fact, an *avviso* dated 13 February 1638 reports that, on that date, Francesco gave a banquet for Cardinal of Savoy, which was probably the occasion to give him the special copy⁴. It is credible that he offered this banquet in the large *Salone dei Cento Giorni*, because it was the only room next to the hall where *San Bonifazio* was staged that would have been capable of hosting numerous people.

The main intention of the Barberini in inviting Savoy to attend a performance of this opera was to make him reflect on the possible consequences the position of France in support of the Protestants in the Thirty Years War might have had. But the presence of Maurizio of Savoy as a guest of Cardinal Francesco also attests that during a period of turmoil in Rome between the Spanish and the French parties, which had started in 1635, it was important for the pro-French Barberini family to demonstrate their impartiality towards both factions. Since Cardinal Maurizio had long promoted a pro-Spanish policy, his acceptance to attend a banquet organized by a member of the Barberini family must have had an important significance for the pro-Spanish party in Rome.

Not less important was the meaning the opera acquired when it was given in a more elaborate version to honour Ferdinand III's ambassador, Johann Prince Eckembergh, in November 1638 (Rietbergen 2006: 181-216). The opera was staged after a luxurious banquet organized once more

by Francesco Barberini. In this renewed version of the opera the appeal, once addressed to Savoy, was directed to the ambassador who was supposed to report to the Emperor that it was important to make any effort to renovate the true Christian faith, because it was the only means to conquer the deceitful attempts of the demon and to gain eternal glory. The Catholic Church was in fact at risk of losing its moral authority over most European countries for several reasons. On the one hand, the events related to the Thirty Year's War (1618-1648) were turning in favour of Protestantism; on the other, the growing Islamic power in the East menaced Europe. For these reasons the pope had favourably hailed the election of the Catholic Habsburg Ferdinand III as King of the Romans (December 1636) because both of them had to face two common enemies – the Protestants, who were increasing their power in Europe, and the Islamic Turks, who menaced their stability from outside. In his turn, Emperor Ferdinand soon sent his ambassador to Rome. News spread in Rome early in January 1637, and when the Prince arrived, he was invited to attend the numerous events organized for the occasion, including the new version of *San Bonifazio* (Rietbergen 2006: 181-216). The Prologue of the renewed opera was then modified to praise the politics of Ferdinand III and his important role among the European powers in an attempt to gain his favours and to push him to support the Pope in his policy.

Following what has been discussed above, the image of the god Apollo rising his sword, acquires a completely new meaning. Apollo, alias Maffeo Barberini in his role of leader of the Catholic Church, is ready to defend his followers and protect the true Christian faith from the insidious attempts of both the Protestants and the Islamic Turks to contrast and destroy its power. The reference to the Barberini family is then evident in the crest at the centre of the proscenium just above the stage. As well illustrated by Peter Rietbergen, the bees on the emblem of the Barberini assume a specific connotation if we consider them according to the meaning they had acquired thanks to the Jesuits during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. For the Jesuits, the image of the bees had a religious significance and was associated with the Virgin Mary and her chastity, while honey became a symbol of Divine Wisdom (see also Rice 2007: 181-94). So, the use of the bees in their crest was



Fig. 4. Hypothetical reconstruction of the proscenium arch of the opera *San Bonifazio* designed by the author. The figure of David is after Gian Lorenzo Bernini's drawing for the frontispiece of Maffeo Barberini's collection of poems entitled *Maphaei S.R.E. Card. Barberini Nunc Urbani PP. VIII Poemata* and published in Rome in 1631.

a means of propaganda, a way for the Barberini to suggest that they ruled by Divine Wisdom protected by the Virgin Mary.

A question remains unsolved: who was the character represented on the left of the stage balancing the figure of Apollo on the right? A possible answer might be either Jupiter or David. Jupiter could be possible since this god was one with whom the pope liked to identify himself. Evidence for this is to be found in the *Allegoria della nascita di Urbano VIII* by Andrea Sacchi (1599-1661) and Charles Audran, kept in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, in which the pope/Jupiter is fed by Melissa the nymph, who is associated with the bee and is surmounted by the three bees, symbol of the Barberini family (Faedo 2007: 381-92). However, in my opinion, a more likely possibility might be David, another character dear to the pope, as is well attested by the two editions of his poems whose frontispieces were engraved with images showing David killing the lion (Rietbergen 2006: 181-216). This interpretation can better fit the political aim of the opera and match the meaning conveyed by the two allegorical characters of the final scene since Apollo, holding the golden sword, might represent the Church Militant whereas David, with his victory over the lion, might represent the Church Triumphant on the enemies of the true Christian

faith. The latter reading can find some evidence in a cartoon designed by Pietro da Cortona for a series of tapestries commissioned by the Barberini to illustrate the Life of Constantine showing the emperor struggling with a lion. The link to the first Christian emperor, despite being based on the false document known as the "donation of Constantine", was often used by Maffeo Barberini as a means to reaffirm his legal authority over the Papal States and it might well have been the counter-part image of Apollo on the other side of the proscenium arch analysed in this article (Rietbergen 2006: 129). According to the above analysis, the full view of the proscenium arch as it appeared to the audience of *San Bonifazio*, while entering the *salone* soon after leaving the *Salone dei cento giorni* of Palazzo della Cancelleria, could have been like the reconstruction proposed in fig. 4. Once more the faithful artists of the entourage of the Barberini had agreed to subjugate their craft to please their patrons and once more art was a means of subtle propaganda for the noble family.

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Notes

1 Vatican City, B.A.V, Arch. Barb., Giust. I, vol. 71, Francesco Barberini seniore, Giustificazioni 2951-2993, year 1638. Further references to this source will be given in brackets in the text of this article as follows: Giust I: folio number. I would like to thank the archivists Luigi Cacciaglia and Antonio Schiavi for their help and support during my research at the Vatican Library.

2 The Barberini were fascinated by the actors of the *commedia dell'arte* and loved to attend their improvised performances. A confirmation is that they dedicated a space in their property at the Quattro Fontane to stage *commedia dell'arte* plays. This was known as the *Casino delle Quattro Fontane* (see Tamburini 2012: 47-48).

3 See also "Savoia, Maurizio di", in *Dizionario di Storia* [http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/maurizio-di-savoia_\(Dizionario-di-Storia\)/](http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/maurizio-di-savoia_(Dizionario-di-Storia)/) (last accessed 11/07/2020).

4 Avvisi di diverse parti nell'anno 1638. Di Roma, 13 February 1638, fol. 43. The document is transcribed in Murata 1981: 290, note 2.