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Count Firmian to Parini on Mozart’s serenata (19 Aug 1771)

Dexter Edge

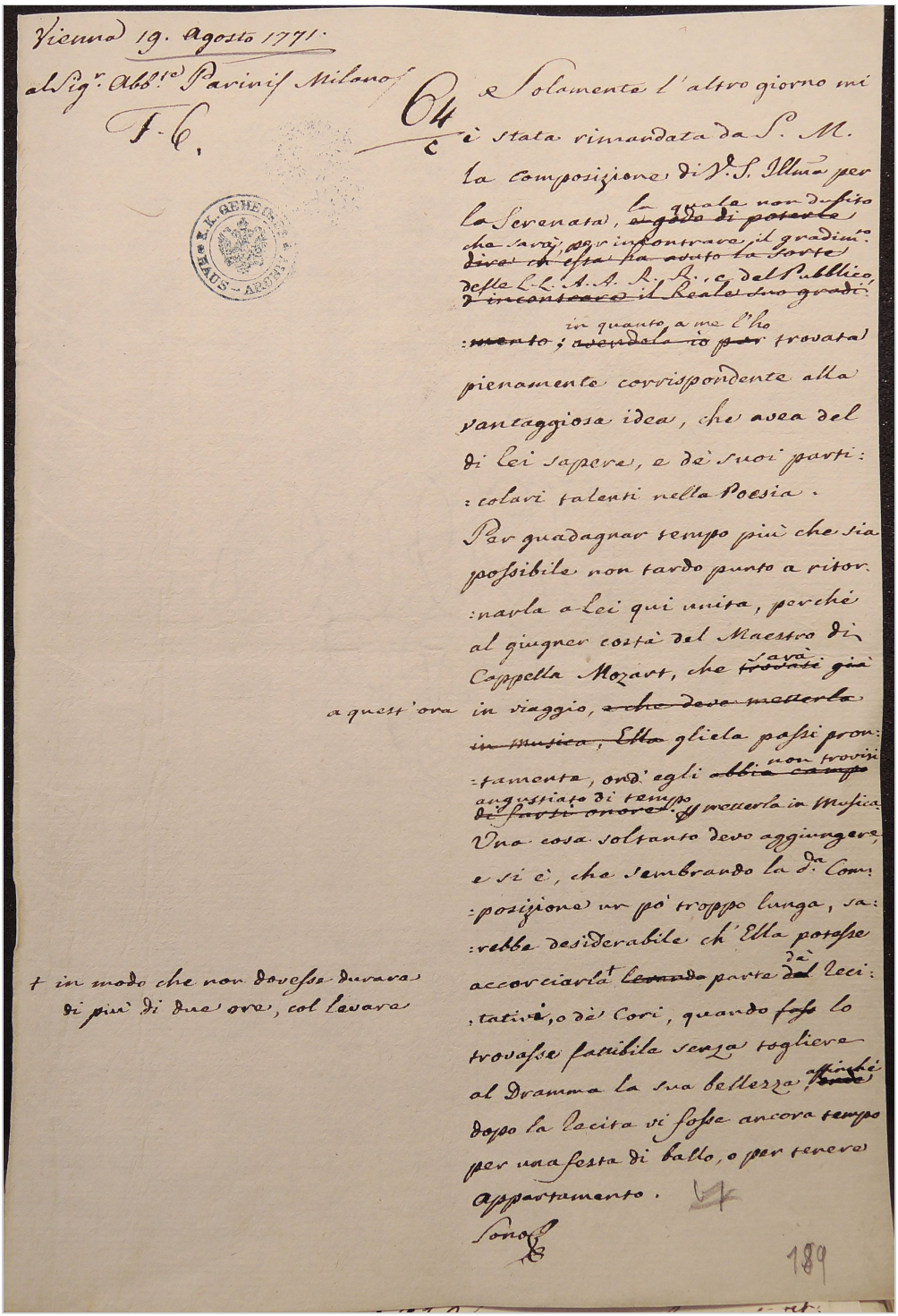
Count Firmian to Parini, 19 Aug 1771 (draft), HHStA, Ält. ZA, Kart. 84, 189r

[upper left:]
Vienna 19. Agosto 1771.
al Sig.r Abb.te Parini Milano
[...]

[right-hand column:]
Solamente l’altro giorno mi
è stata rimandata da S. M.
la composizione di V. S. IIlmā per
la quale non dubito
la Serenata, ~~e godo di poterle~~
che sarà per incontrare il gradim.to
~~dire ch’essa ha avuto la sorte~~
delle L. L. A. A. R. R. e del Pubblico,
~~d’incontrare il Reale suo gradi=~~
in quanto a me l’ho
=~~mento~~; ~~avendola io pur~~ trovata
pienamente corrispondente alla
vantaggiosa idea, che avea del
di lei sapere, e de’ suoi parti=
=colari talenti nella Poesia.
Per guadagnar tempo più che sia
possibile non tardo punto a ritor=
=narla a lei qui unita, perchè
al giugner costà del Maestro di
sarà
Cappella Mozart, che ~~trovasi già~~
[a quest’ ora] in viaggio, ~~e che deve metterla~~
~~in musica, Ella~~ gliela passi pron=
non trovisi
=tamente, ond’egli ~~abbia campo~~
angustiato di tempo

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~~di farsi onore~~. p metterla in Musica.
Una cosa soltanto devo aggiungere,
e si è, che sembrando la d.ª Com=
=posizione un po’ troppo lunga, sa=
=rebbe desiderabile ch’Ella potesse
accorciarla [+ in modo che non dovesse durare
de'
di più di due ore, col levare] ~~levando~~ parte ~~del~~ Reci=
=ativi, o dè Cori, quando ~~forse~~ lo
trovasse fattibile senza togliere
affinchè
al Dramma la sua bellezza ~~onde~~
dopo la Recita si fosse ancora tempo
per una festa di ballo, o per tenere
appartamento.



Vienna 19. Agosto 1771.

al Sig.r Abb.te Parini f. Milano

F. C.

84

c

Solamente l'altro giorno mi è stata rimandata da S. M. la Composizione di V. S. Illma per la Serenata, ~~la quale non dubito di poterla~~ che sarà per incontrare il gradim.to delle L. L. A. A. R. R. e del Pubblico, ~~d'incontrare il Reale duo gradi~~: in quanto a me l'ho trovata pienamente corrispondente alla vantaggiosa idea, che avea del di Lei sapere, e de' suoi parti: colari talenti nella Poesia.

Per guadagnar tempo più che sia possibile non tardo punto a ritor: navla a Lei qui unita, perchè al giugner costà del Maestro di Cappella Mozart, che l'avà a quest'ora in viaggio, ~~che deve mettere~~ in Musica, Ella gliela passi prom: tamente, ond' egli non trovisi angustiato di tempo per ~~far~~ onore all'mettere la Musica

Una cosa soltanto devo aggiungere, e si è, che sembrando la Com: posizione un pò troppo lunga, sa: rebbe desiderabile ch' Ella potesse accorciarla ~~levando~~ parte delle Recitativi, o de' Cori, quando fosse lo trovasse fattibile senza togliere al Dramma la sua bellezza, affinchè dopo la Lecita vi fosse ancora tempo per una festa di ballo, o per tenere appartamento.

Sono &

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[reconstructed final version:]

Solamente l'altro giorno mi è stata rimandata da S[ua] M[aestà] la composizione di V[ostra] S[ignoria] Ill[ustrissima] per la Serenata la quale non dubito che sarà per incontrare il gradim[ento] della L[oro] A[ltezze] R[eali] e del Pubblico, in quanto a me l'ho trovata pienamente corrispondente alla vantaggiosa idea, che avea

del di lei sapere, e dè suoi particolari talenti nella Poesia.

Per guadagnar tempo più che sia possibile non tardo punto a ritornarla a lei qui unita, perchè
al giugner costà del Maestro di Cappella Mozart, che sarà a quest’ ora in viaggio, gliela passi prontamente, ond’ egli non trovisi angustiato di tempo p[er] metterla in Musica. Una cosa soltanto devo aggiungere, e si è, che sembrando la d[etta] Composizione un po’ troppo lunga, sarebbe desiderabile ch’ Ella potesse accorciarla in modo che non dovesse durare di più di due ore, col levare parte de’ Recitativi, o de’ Cori, quando lo trovasse fattibile senza togliere al Dramma la sua bellezza affinchè dopo la Recita si fosse ancora tempo per una festa di ballo, o per tenere appartamento.

[translation:]

Just the other day was returned to me from Her Majesty Your Most Illustrious Lordship’s composition for the serenata, which I do not doubt will meet the approval of Their Royal Highnesses and of the public; as for
me, I find that it fully corresponds to the favorable idea I had of your knowledge, and of your particular talents in poetry.

In order to save as much time as possible, I do not delay in returning it to you here enclosed, in order that, upon the arrival here of Maestro di Cappella Mozart, who at this moment will already be in transit, it can be
given to him promptly, so that he will not find himself short of time for setting it to music. I must add just one thing, and that is that said composition appears a bit too long; it would be desirable if you could shorten it in such way that it would not last more than two hours, by removing part of the recitatives or choruses, where you find it practicable without detracting from the beauty of the drama, so that after the performance there would still be time for a ball or to hold an *appartement*.

Commentary

The passage transcribed and translated above is found in a letter dated 19 Aug 1771 from Count Carlo di Firmian in Vienna to the writer Giuseppe Parini in Milan (on Firmian, see our entry for 4 Apr 1770; on Parini, see our entry for 17 Oct 1771). At the beginning of that year, Empress Maria Theresia had informed Firmian, Habsburg minister plenipotentiary and de facto ruler of the Duchy of Milan, that she wished to commission a serenata as part of the festivities for the wedding in Milan of Archduke Ferdinand and Princess Maria Beatrice d’Este that coming autumn; the serenata would be in addition to a new opera that had already been planned (that opera would become *Il Ruggiero* by Johann Adolph Hasse). The empress had left it to Firmian to choose the poet and composer for the serenata, and he selected Parini and Mozart for the commission that became *Ascanio in Alba* (see our entries for 9 Feb 1771, 7 Mar 1771, 9 Mar 1771, and 17 Oct 1771).

In a letter dated 20 Apr 1771, Firmian had written to Count Johann Wenzel Sporck in Vienna that Parini had offered a choice of two subjects for the serenata: *Ascanio in Alba* and *Le nozze d’Atalanta* (for this and the following, see Sommer 1981, 496; on *Le nozze d’Atalanta*, see also

our entry for 17 Oct 1771). On 2 May, Sporck had replied that the empress preferred *Ascanio*, and Parini was informed of her choice on 23 May. Three months later, on 5 Aug, Firmian wrote to Parini from Vienna to acknowledge receipt of the finished libretto, saying that he had given it to the empress. Thus Parini did most of the work on the libretto for *Ascanio in Alba* between the end of May and the end of July 1771.

In the passage transcribed above, written two weeks after acknowledging receipt of the libretto, Firmian informs Parini that it has been returned, and that he is forwarding it immediately to Parini along with the letter. In the revised version of the letter as it was presumably sent, Firmian does not say whether the empress herself commented on the libretto, but he writes approvingly of it; his honorific "L[oro] A[ltezze] R[eali]" ("Their Royal Highnesses") refers to Archduke Ferdinand and the Princess. But Firmian's original draft contains the cancelled phrase "e godo di poterle dire ch'essa ha avuto la sorte d'incontrare il Reale suo gradimento" ("and I am happy to be able to tell you that it had the fortune to meet Royal approval"). Why Firmian decided to remove this direct indication of the empress's approval is unknown. Firmian himself asks only that the libretto be shortened a bit, in order that the whole performance not last more than two hours, in order to allow time for events afterwards. Firmian writes that Mozart is already on his way from Salzburg to Milan—Wolfgang and Leopold had departed Salzburg on 13 Aug and arrived in Milan on 21 Aug—and he asks Parini to make final changes to the libretto as quickly as possible, so that Mozart will have sufficient time to compose the music.

According a letter dated 24 Aug from Leopold Mozart in Milan to his wife in Salzburg, the libretto had not yet arrived from Vienna:

> *[...]* Ich muß dir sagen, daß die Poesie von Wienn noch nicht angelangt ist. Man erwartet sie mit entsetzlicher Begierde, indem man sonst mit verfertigung der Kleider und ausziehrung, veränderung etc: des Theaters nicht kann fertig werden. den 15ten octobris wird der Erzherzog in Mayland eintreffen *[...]* [*Briefe*, i:431]
>
> *[...]* I must tell you that the poetry has not yet arrived from Vienna. It is awaited with terrible eagerness, for without it the manufacture of the costumes and decorations, scenery etc. for the theater cannot be completed. The Archduke will arrive in Milan on 15 October *[...]*

On 31 Aug, Leopold wrote to his wife that the libretto had arrived:

> *[...]* Die Poesie ist endlich angelangt, der Wolfg: hat aber noch nichts als die overtura gemacht, nämlich ein etwas Langeres *Allegro*, dann eine Andante, welches gleich muß gedanzt werden aber nur mit wenigen Personen, dann anstatt dem letzten allegro hat er eine Art von Contradance und Chor gemacht, so zu gleich gesungen und gedanzt wird. Nun wird es dieses Monat durch zimmlich Arbeit geben. *[...]* [*Briefe*, i:433]
>
> *[...]* The poetry has finally arrived, but Wolfgang has so far written nothing except the overture, namely a somewhat longer *Allegro*, then an Andante, which must at the same time be danced, but with only a few people, then instead of the final Allegro, he has written

> a kind of contredanse and chorus, that must be sung and danced at the same time. Now there will be very much work through the whole month. *[...]*

In a letter to his wife a week later, on 7 Sep, Leopold clarified that Parini had kept the libretto for several days after it had arrived to make changes, and Wolfgang had received it just two days earlier, that is, 5 Sep:

> Wir haben itzt den Kopf mit anderen sachen voll: indem die Poesie späth angelangt und noch zur änderung ein und anderes bis vor 2 Tägen in den Händen des Poeten geblieben. Es wird hoffe gut ausfall: allein der Wolfg: hat nun die hände voll zu schreiben, da er auch das Ballet, so die zwey act oder theile mit einander verbindet, Komponieren muß. [*Briefe*, i: 435]

> We now have our heads full of other things: for the poetry arrived late, and then remained until two days ago in the poet’s hands for one change and another. I hope everything will turn out well: but Wolfgang now had his hands full with writing, as he also has to compose the ballet that connects the two acts, or parts.

Just six days later, Leopold wrote that Wolfgang had finished all the choruses, as well as all accompanied and simple recitatives; he also wrote that they had attended the first dance rehearsals that same day, 13 Sep. In a postscript to Leopold’s letter of 21 Sep, Wolfgang apologized to Nannerl for writing so little because his fingers were sore, remarking that he had just two arias left to write (*Briefe*, i: 439). He finished composing the serenata on 23 Sep, apparently having composed everything but the overture in just eighteen days. The first choral rehearsals took place on 27 Sep, and the first full rehearsal on 28 Sep, with further rehearsals on 4, 8, 11, and 14 Oct. The first performance of *Ascanio in Alba* took place in the Regio Ducal Teatro on 17 Oct 1771 (see our entry for that date).

Whether any of the changes that Parini made to the libretto were in response to Firmian’s request remains unknown. Although a complete scenario for the serenata survives in Parini’s hand (see Silvestro 2018, 178–180), no other autograph manuscripts of the poem are known to survive. Modern complete recordings of *Ascanio in Alba* last over two and a half hours. Even if the performances in 1771 ran longer than Firmian’s hoped-for two hours, there were events afterwards: according to Parini’s own description of the wedding festivities (see our entry for 17 Oct 1771), the performances of *Ascanio in Alba* on 27 and 28 Oct were followed by masked balls.

Notes (⇧)

Firmian’s letter to Parini on 19 Aug 1771 was first mentioned by Andrea Sommer (later Sommer-Mathis) in her 1981 Ph.D. dissertation at the University of Vienna (Sommer 1981, 497 and n115; see also Sommer-Mathis 1994, 208). The only phrase from the letter transcribed in her dissertation is “quando lo trovasse fattibile senza togliere al Dramma la sua bellezza”.

Exactly when Parini wrote the libretto for *Ascanio in Alba* has been uncertain and the subject of speculation (see Silvestro 2018, 125–26). The correspondence in HHStA, Ält. ZA, Kart. 84 shows that he drafted the complete libretto between 23 May 1771—when he was informed of Maria Theresia’s choice—and around the end of July, when he sent the completed draft to Firmian in Vienna for the court’s approval.

The duration of the 1981 recording of *Ascanio in Alba* by the Mozarteum Orchestra conducted by Leopold Hager is 2:43:42. The duration of the 1995 recording by Concerto Armonico conducted by Jacques Grimbert is 2:28:33.

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