

# Opera and Spectacle in Florence Under Ferdinando I and Cosimo II de' Medici

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The Medici dynasty left an unforgettable mark on the evolution of opera in Florence during the 17<sup>th</sup> century, controlling an art form that transcended mere entertainment to become a potent tool of political propaganda and eventually a complex business venture. Spectacle, understood as a visually striking public display, was a defining characteristic of opera and played a pivotal role in the Medici manipulation of the art form. They orchestrated opera as a grandiose display of power and prestige, emphasizing boldness, movement, rich costumes, and scenography. These elaborate productions not only entertained but also served as a means of displaying Medici wealth and influence on both local and foreign audiences. As avid patrons of the arts and skilled political figures, the Medici family played a crucial role in shaping the narrative of opera. Under the leadership of Ferdinando I de' Medici (1587-1609) and Cosimo II de' Medici (1609-1621), Grand Dukes of Tuscany, they used their power to align the art form with their agenda. Their goal was to establish Florence as the artistic hub of Europe during the 17th century. The Medici controlled the historical record of opera; while they initially utilized the art form as a propagandistic tool, opera ultimately became a business venture for noble patrons of Florence.

## Medici Influence on Changing the Historical Record of Opera

To understand the origin of opera, one must consider the role of the Medici played in supporting and funding it. To do this, it is necessary to examine both the true composer of the first opera, Emilio de' Cavalieri, and the historical misunderstanding that has led to Florentine composer Jacopo Peri being unfairly credited with this achievement. Roman-born Emilio de' Cavalieri is responsible for the first recorded opera and is considered the most original composer of his epoch between the Renaissance and Baroque periods.<sup>1</sup> His first operas were in 1590: *Satiro* and *Disperazione di Fileno*, two *pastorales* of which neither the music nor text has been preserved.<sup>2</sup> A *pastorale* refers specifically to an opera that is based on a rural theme or set in the

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<sup>1</sup> Warren Kirkendale, "The Myth of the 'Birth of Opera' in the Florentine Camerata Debunked by Emilio De'Cavalieri: A Commemorative Lecture," *The Opera Quarterly* 19, no. 4 (2003): 632.

<sup>2</sup> Warren Kirkendale, "The Myth of the 'Birth of Opera,'" 634.

countryside.<sup>3</sup> These theatrical productions were the first of their kind, being entirely set to music, and are the earliest documentation of humour in an opera.<sup>4</sup> His third opera and best-known work, *Rappresentazione di Anima e di Corpo*, is the first fully preserved opera.<sup>5</sup> It was composed and printed on the occasion of the Holy Year 1600 and performed for the Sacred College of Cardinals in Rome.<sup>6</sup> Cavalieri dedicated the production to Cardinal Pietro Aldobrandini, the nephew of Pope Clement VIII, and alluded to him by name in the text of the opera's fifteenth libretto by saying: "Il ceil clemente ogn'hor gratia e favore."<sup>7</sup> *Anima di Corpo* was the first religious opera to be performed.<sup>8</sup> According to historical documentation of the production, it was mistaken for an *oratorio* rather than an opera.<sup>9</sup> This mistake is significant, as *oratorios* are strictly concert pieces, and *Anima di Corpo* included costumes, scenery, and gestures—components characteristic of opera.<sup>10</sup> Rome became the centre for religious opera in Tuscany due to Cavalieri's activity there in the 17<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>11</sup> Cavalieri's works may not have been acknowledged in Florence due to a governmental bias in favour of Florentine achievement.<sup>12</sup>

Cavalieri's works were left uncredited in historical documentation, as the widely considered first opera is Florentine composer and patron Jacopo Peri's *Dafne*.<sup>13</sup> This opera was performed at Florence's 1598 Carnival, eight years after Cavalieri's *pastorals* of 1590.<sup>14</sup> Two years later, as a part of the Holy Year 1600 festivities, Peri's *Euridice* was performed on the 6<sup>th</sup> of October.<sup>15</sup> *Euridice* was offered as a wedding gift for Maria de' Medici and Henry IV of France.<sup>16</sup> *Dafne* came before *Euridice*, but many refer to *Euridice* when referencing the "first" opera, as it is reported to be the earliest surviving opera.<sup>17</sup> Both *Dafne* and *Euridice* were referred

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<sup>3</sup> Paul Alpers, "What Is Pastoral?" *Critical Inquiry* 8, no. 3 (1982): 22.

<sup>4</sup> Kirkendale, 638-639.

<sup>5</sup> Kirkendale, 639.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Kirkendale, 638.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Kirkendale, 637.

<sup>13</sup> Tim Carter, "Non Occorre Nominare Tanti Musici: Private Patronage and Public Ceremony in Late Sixteenth-Century Florence," *I Tatti Studies*, no. 4 (1991): 93.

<sup>14</sup> Kirkendale, 636.

<sup>15</sup> Carter, "Non Occorre Nominare Tanti Musici," 99.

<sup>16</sup> Giuseppe Gerbino and Iain Fenlon, "Early Opera: The Initial Phase," in *European Music, 1520-1640*, James Harr (ed.) (Martlesham, UK: Boydell & Brewer, 2006), 476.

<sup>17</sup> Carter, 93.

to as *pastorali* by those who attended.<sup>18</sup> Peri's operas were both performed after those of Cavalieri in Rome, with *Euridice* being performed 8 months after *Anima de Corpo*.<sup>19</sup> Publicly, Peri is credited as the creator of the first ever operas, despite Cavalieri's activity in Rome in the years before the creation of *Dafne* and *Euridice*.

Florence's reigning family were influential patrons of the period of emerging opera. As both the ruling government and passionate patrons of the arts, the Medici family, led by Grand Duke Ferdinando I, exhibited biases that resulted in favouritism towards Florentine musicians. The omission of Cavalieri from the historical record can be attributed to favourable promotion of Florentine achievement and the Medici goal to establish Florence as a regional hub of arts and culture.<sup>20</sup> Nearly all contemporary accounts of the first operas are influenced by Florentine civic pride, which underlies the heated debates over who had the greatest role in pioneering a new style of dramatic music that prevailed during the 1590s and early 1600s.<sup>21</sup> Jacobo Corsi, a Florentine composer and leading patron of the arts alongside the Medici family, was a significant collaborator on Peri's operas.<sup>22</sup> Corsi was an influential patron who came from a noble family.<sup>23</sup> It benefitted Corsi and his family, along with other patrons, to bring attention to their achievements, elevating their social position and furthering their connection to Florence's high society.<sup>24</sup> The propaganda surrounding *Euridice* can be explained by the benefits Florentine patrons could gain from an achievement such as the creation of a new art genre.<sup>25</sup> *Euridice* proved to be a family project for Corsi, with nearly all the artists involved in its production being linked to him.<sup>26</sup> He was also featured in the performance playing the harpsichord.<sup>27</sup> While it was in the interest of Florentine patrons concerned with elevating their status to miscredit opera's origins, the musicians themselves gave credit to Cavalieri for his influence on their work. Peri wrote in his popular 1601 preface: "[S]ig. Emilio de' Cavalieri, as far as I know before anyone else, made our music heard on the stage with marvellous intention..."<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, Giulio

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<sup>18</sup> Gerbino and Fenlon, "Early Opera," 473.

<sup>19</sup> Kirkendale, 636.

<sup>20</sup> Carter, 93.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Carter, 95.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Carter, 96.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Kirkendale, 637.

Caccini, one of the composers of *Euridice*, said in a letter that was published in 1993: “Sig. Emilio de’ Cavalieri, a Roman gentleman of honoured memory, was the first who here let these Serene Highnesses hear those tales on the stage.”<sup>29</sup> Significantly, while the influence of patrons and the Medici family’s interests led to Cavalieri’s works being left out of the historical record of this art form, his works stand as the first creation of what is now considered popular opera.

### **Medici Control of Opera and Its Use as Propaganda**

The Medici family played a pivotal role in altering the historical and public perception of opera and shaping its evolution in Tuscany. Their patronage and influence not only controlled the production of operas but channelled the spectacle into a tool for political propaganda that affirmed the legitimacy of their rule and celebrated their achievements. The Medici influenced opera through the control of spectacle at weddings, the commemorative account of the *descrizione*, and the operatic content that affirmed and supported the Medici rule.

Opera in Florence began as lavish entertainment at Medici weddings. Such weddings were grand and important for securing foreign relationships and funding to Florence, requiring their entertainments to reflect that. Common entertainment was the performance of *intermedio*, short theatrical performances featuring song and dance.<sup>30</sup> Considered to be the precursor to opera, these productions were typically performed between the acts of a play or in sequence at weddings.<sup>31</sup> Entertainments were meant to reflect the spectacular occasion of a Medici wedding as a major political event.<sup>32</sup>

These spectacles were recorded in a commemorative account of the event, the wedding *descrizione*.<sup>33</sup> The publication underwent several drafts which were edited and revised by Grand Duke Ferdinando I, aiming to maintain accuracy whilst glossing over any cracks in the perfection of the event.<sup>34</sup> The expert crafting of these publications worked to maintain and elevate the status of these events, whilst highlighting the elaborate achievements of the Grand

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Sara Mamone and Caterina Pagnini, “Florentine Festivals for the Entry of Archduke Leopold V of Austria in 1618,” *Writing Royal Entries in Early Modern Europe*, (2013): 144.

<sup>31</sup> James Saslow, *The Medici Wedding of 1589: Florentine Festival as Theatrum Mundi*. New Haven: Yale University Press, (1996): 1.

<sup>32</sup> Carter, 92.

<sup>33</sup> Carter, 89.

<sup>34</sup> Carter, 90.

Duke.<sup>35</sup> Florence's reputation at home and overseas was maintained by *descrizione*, as the recollection of the wedding was equally as important in dictating foreign policy as the wedding itself.

Medici weddings functioned as spectacle, but one that was carefully controlled. The wedding in 1589 of Grand Duke Ferdinando I de' Medici and the French princess Christine de Lorraine called for a spectacle which lasted for the entire month of their ceremony.<sup>36</sup> The entertainments of their wedding in 1589 defined their union as the biggest and most lavish wedding in Medici history.<sup>37</sup> The marriage solidified the political alliance of the two nations and brought Florence a generous dowry from France.<sup>38</sup> Performances of a series of *intermedi* composed by Cavalieri took place in the Medici theatre in the Uffizi Palace.<sup>39</sup> The *intermedi* functioned as allegorical tableaux inserted between theatrical acts of comedy.<sup>40</sup> This form of hybrid art fused instrumental music, song, dance, costumes, and stage designs, effectively laying a foundation for the combination of elements as seen in opera.<sup>41</sup> The wedding of 1600 between Maria de' Medici and King Henry IV of France was also a spectacular event that was recorded by Michelangelo Buonarroti *il giovane*.<sup>42</sup> The publication of the *Descrizione delle felicissime nozze... della Christianissima Maesta di Madama Maria Medici, Regina di Francia e di Navarra* has several surviving drafts in Florence's Biblioteca Medicea-Laurenziana, Archivio Buonarroti.<sup>43</sup> Buonarroti's manuscripts feature annotations with detailed revision instructions given by Grand Duke Ferdinando I.<sup>44</sup> The task of writing a *descrizione* was complex, as one needed to write with accuracy yet paint the event positively enough for both local and international readers.<sup>45</sup> The entertainment for the 1600 wedding featured the opera *Euridice*.<sup>46</sup> Low-level dilemmas occurred leading up to the event, like Giulio Caccini wanting his music in the opera instead of Peri's, an event resulting in a dramatic scene which was erased from the

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Saslow, *The Medici Wedding of 1589*, 1.

<sup>37</sup> Saslow, 1.

<sup>38</sup> Saslow, 7.

<sup>39</sup> Saslow, 1.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Carter, 89.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Carter, 92.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

event's *descrizione*.<sup>47</sup> Through erasures like this, careful articulation and strategic editing of the wedding *descrizione* elevated Florence's global status.

Along with the propagandistic nature of wedding *descrizione*, the content within the operatic performances also took measures to affirm and support the Medici family as rulers of the Republic of Florence. This entertainment was brought to the people by the Grand Duke to deliver an unsubtle political and ideological message.<sup>48</sup> The *intermedio* and operas seen in court productions were specifically shaped to depict "conspicuous consumption," as they featured direct musical effects and a candid message using specific dialogue.<sup>49</sup> This is seen in the final *ballo* of the 1589 wedding *intermedi*.<sup>50</sup> In the story, monarchs and royal patrons representing the Medici family were depicted as God-like creatures with the power to restore order to the world and alleviate the pain of their subjects.<sup>51</sup> The expression of pleading to the gods was often exhibited, affirming the ideology that the monarchs are the natural rulers of society and should remain as such.<sup>52</sup> Popular works such as *Euridice*, *Orfeo*, and *Arianna* all hold a similar message that supports this ideology.<sup>53</sup> Like the *ballo*, all three works depict a story of an ideal world and a paradise lost, with the world ultimately returning to its former state through a character's recourse to the gods.<sup>54</sup>

The Medici family's influence in altering the perception of opera was profound. Grand Duke Ferdinando's patronage and control over operatic productions turned these spectacles into tools for political propaganda, shaping the evolution of opera in Florence. Through the control of entertainment spectacles at weddings, the meticulous management of the wedding *descrizione*, and the monarch affirming propagandistic messages within the court produced opera, the Medici family ensured that opera became not just entertainment but also a means of promoting their political agenda and cementing their power in Florentine society.

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Gerbino and Fenlon, 481.

<sup>49</sup> Gerbino and Fenlon 484.

<sup>50</sup> Gerbino and Fenlon 482.

<sup>51</sup> Suzanne Cusick, "Of Women, Music, and Power: A Model from Seicento Florence," in *Musicology and Difference: Gender and Sexuality in Musical Scholarship*, Ruth A. Solie (ed.) (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 282.

<sup>52</sup> Cusick, "Of Women, Music, and Power," 282.

<sup>53</sup> Cusick, 282.

<sup>54</sup> Cusick, 281.

### The Transformation of Opera – Court Spectacle to a Private Enterprise

The evolution of opera from its origins in Medici court weddings to the privatization of commissioned performances marked a shift in cultural patronage in Florence. Patrons had contributed to Medici weddings and court entertainments in private until the *descrizione* of 1600.<sup>55</sup> As part of the celebrations for the wedding between Maria de' Medici and King Henry IV of France, there was a production of two operas, Peri's *Euridice* and Giulio Caccini's *Il rapimento di Cefalo*.<sup>56</sup> *Il rapimento* was sponsored and financed by the court, with the performance alone costing Grand Duke Ferdinando I 60,000 scudi.<sup>57</sup> *Euridice*, on the other hand, was a private commission by the noble patron Jacobo Corsi.<sup>58</sup> In the years leading up to this production, private financial support was also given by Corsi and his colleagues to fund the entertainment of other Medici weddings, including the marriage of Eleanor de' Medici and Vincenzo Gonzaga in 1584, as well as the wedding of Grand Duke Ferdinando I and Christine of Lorraine in 1589.<sup>59</sup> In the 1600 event's *descrizione* written by Michelangelo Buonarroti, *Il rapimento* was discussed on a single page.<sup>60</sup> However, in a gesture that marked the first step in the policy shift towards privatized opera commissioning, *Euridice* was given sixteen pages.<sup>61</sup> The *descrizione* showed a clear bias toward the production of *Euridice*, even mentioning that it was a private commission.<sup>62</sup> The public acknowledgement that it was someone other than the Grand Duke who was responsible for the spectacle that was a Medici wedding entertainment marked a significant change in opera production, moving away from court-sponsored opera towards a more commercially driven model.<sup>63</sup>

The culture of entertainment in Florence shifted toward privatization and away from government mandated court spectacles after the death of Grand Duke Ferdinando I in 1609.<sup>64</sup> Under the leadership of his son, Grand Duke Cosimo II, direct control over festival events was released, characterizing spectacle with a detached sense of economy in Florence.<sup>65</sup> Spectacle became removed from the hands of official government culture, finding itself under the control

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<sup>55</sup> Carter, 97.

<sup>56</sup> Carter, 94.

<sup>57</sup> Carter, 98.

<sup>58</sup> Carter, 95.

<sup>59</sup> Carter, 97.

<sup>60</sup> Carter, 94.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Carter, 99.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Mamone and Pagnini, "Florentine Festivals for the Entry of Archduke Leopold V of Austria in 1618," 138.

<sup>65</sup> Mamone and Pagnini, 139.

of private establishments.<sup>66</sup> The management of large-scale productions changed, with events hosted more often in private theatres in noble homes rather than the official Medici Uffizi theatre.<sup>67</sup> The privatization of opera transformed stage design, changing the outcomes of the productions as they became funded by diverse patrons. For example, the production of *Solimano* used 30-year-old recycled stage scenery by Orazio Scarabelli, moving toward a sense of *teatralita diffusa*.<sup>68</sup> Celebratory festivities for the entry of Archduke Leopold V of Austria in 1618 followed this trend toward private leadership.<sup>69</sup> The entertainments included a staging of *Andromeda* by Jacobo Cicognini, and six *intermedi* inserted into a *pastoral*, likely being Giovan Battista Guarini's *Bonarella*.<sup>70</sup> These productions took place in the great hall of Gherardesca Palace, Ugo Rinaldi's house, Dietro SS. Annunziata – which was considered to be more privileged than the official Medici residences at the time.<sup>71</sup>

Although the sons of Grand Duke Cosimo II, Mattias, Giovan Carlo, and Leopoldo, were Medici princes, their theatrical management style effectively turned Florentine opera into a lucrative business. Beyond simply patronage, each brother contributed to a fluid system by opening theatres and running academies where they could discover and train musicians.<sup>72</sup> Along with this was the emergence of a new figure, the *impresario*, who invested money in theatre as a business.<sup>73</sup> Together, the Medici brothers facilitated divisions of court theatre, academic theatre, and commercial theatre, with each functioning as a system with a team of proteges and employees.<sup>74</sup> These included administrative teams who emphasized their efforts on the reliability of theatre as a business.<sup>75</sup> The correspondence between Prince Mattias and the Venetian musician Francesco Sacrati describes a continuous, affectionate, daily collaboration and exchange of influence among the princes that shows their commitment to Florentine theatre.<sup>76</sup> Their correspondence is kept in the Florence State Archive in the catalogue Mediceo del Principato and

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Mamone and Pagnini, 138.

<sup>68</sup> Mamone and Pagnini, 139.

<sup>69</sup> Mamone and Pagnini, 137.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Sara Mamone, "Most Serene Brothers-Princes-Impresarios: Theater in Florence under the Management and Protection of Mattias, Giovan Carlo, and Leopoldo de' Medici," *Seventeenth-Century Music* 9, no.1 (2003): 1.

<sup>73</sup> Mamone, "Most Serene Brothers-Princes-Impresarios," 7.

<sup>74</sup> Mamone, 5.

<sup>75</sup> Mamone, 16.

<sup>76</sup> Mamone, 4.

shows a clear definition of each of the princes' influences.<sup>77</sup> There was a large emphasis on finances at the time, with the three main Florentine theatres, Pergola, Dogana, and Cocomero, being powerful sources of income for the sons of Cosimo II.<sup>78</sup> Their network extended even beyond Florence, encompassing other cities in Tuscany, including Pisa, Siena, and Livorno.<sup>79</sup> Finally, the Medici brothers' support extended to musicians, providing them with protection and the freedom to collaborate with other *impresarios* and participate in local productions.<sup>80</sup>

The Roman-Florentine circle of Virginio Orsini, the nephew of Grand Duke Ferdinando, also played a significant role in fostering artistic talent, with members contributing to the humanist movement of the 17<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>81</sup> Orsini, being a patron of the arts, created a leading center for composers and poets in his court.<sup>82</sup> Members of the Florentine Camerata, including prominent figures such as Marenzio and Caccini were part of his circle.<sup>83</sup> The humanist search for modern tragedy within opera was a driving force behind its commercial evolution. This stemmed from the desire to recreate a form of theatre in Italian to recreate experiences of ancient Greek and Roman civilizations.<sup>84</sup> Florentine historian Girolamo Mei, the author of 1602's *Discorso sopra la musica antica e moderna*, was among the leading scholars who questioned why modern music failed to produce the extraordinary effects described by the ancients.<sup>85</sup> He pointed out a key difference: while ancient music was exclusively monophonic and aimed to arouse the passions of the soul, modern polyphonic music focused more on pleasing the ear.<sup>86</sup> Mei's monodic hypothesis for Greek music speculated that *tonoi*, or scales, were used to transpose two systems, the hard and the soft, up, and down from their neutral positions in the Dorian mode.<sup>87</sup> Mei's ideas were in line with the broader humanistic movement of the time, which simultaneously sought to revive classical art forms through operatic spectacle whilst encouraging research and experimentation.<sup>88</sup> His line of thought influenced the humanism of the

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Mamone, 9.

<sup>79</sup> Mamone, 8.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Valerio Morucci, "Poets and Musicians in the Roman-Florentine Circle of Virginio Orsini, Duke of Bracciano (1572–1615)," *Early Music* 43, no. 1 (2015): 53.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>83</sup> Gerbino and Fenlon, 476.

<sup>84</sup> Claude V. Palisca, "Girolamo Mei: Mentor to the Florentine Camerata," *The Musical Quarterly*, no. 1 (1954): 1.

<sup>85</sup> Gerbino and Fenlon, 474.

<sup>86</sup> Gerbino and Fenlon, 475.

<sup>87</sup> Palisca, "Girolamo Mei," 11.

<sup>88</sup> Palisca, 2.

Florentine Camerata, a group of intellectuals and musicians in Florence.<sup>89</sup> The group was led by Count Giovanni de Bardi and featured elite members such as Giulio Caccini, Jacobo Peri and Jacobo Corsi.<sup>90</sup> This ideology considered opera to be the solution to bridging the gap acknowledged by *pianto*, allowing modern theatre to channel the emotion evoked by productions of antiquity.<sup>91</sup>

The transformation of opera from a court spectacle to a private enterprise in Florence was driven by a combination of factors, including modern financial opportunities, the new socio-political landscape of Florence with the beginning of Cosimo II's reign, and the humanist pursuit of modern tragedy. This shift not only changed the way opera was produced and financed but also had a profound impact on the cultural landscape of Florence.

The influence of the Medici family on the perception, control, and economics of opera in Florence in the 17<sup>th</sup> century shaped its evolution from a court spectacle to a commercially managed enterprise. The role of the court in altering the historical recollection of the first opera, having removed Cavalieri's works from the popular narrative underscores the prevalent Medici influence in shaping opera's history. Through Grand Duke Ferdinando's meticulous control of the wedding *descrizione* and the sovereign-affirming messages within court entertainment, opera functioned as a tool for supporting the dynasty's political agenda. Led by the sons of Cosimo II, the emergence of private commissions and the role of *impresarios* signalled the departure from traditional court sponsorship, ushering in a new era of commercialized opera in Florence. This shift not only changed the way opera was produced and financed but also had a profound impact on the cultural landscape of Florence, opening doors for the innovation and experimentation of the 18th century.

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Gerbino and Fenlon, 477.

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