

The Good, the Bad and the Dalí
A Production History of La Dama Spagnola e il Cavaliere Romano

from the Lorenzo Alvary Papers, 1919-1992, JPB 06-16. Music Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts

By Rachel Smiley

Topic History

Towards the end of his career as a bass at the Metropolitan Opera, Lorenzo Alvary undertook the enormous task of producing a Baroque opera composed by Alessandro Scarlatti. To complicate matters, Alvary sought to turn the Scarlatti into a surrealist opera and engaged the artistic services of Salvador Dalí to achieve this end. At this time, Dalí was already an established artist and well known for his excitable, unpredictable temperament. Alvary pressed on, however, and collected around him a stellar production team that included conductors, ballet choreographers, composers, perfumers, dancers, and singers in order to realize his Scarlatti-Dalí spectacle.¹

Scarlatti's original 1714 composition was called "Scipione nelle Spagne," which included comic, musical scenes interspersed with dances. One of these comic scenes, *La dama spagnola e il cavaliere romano*, became the working title for the entire performance and was the name Alvary used in his 1961 production. This obscure work was seemingly lost to music scholars until Giulio Confalonieri found the sole remaining manuscript at the Library of the Music-Academy of Bologna.² As a

¹ San Francisco Sunday Chronicle writer Everett Helm explained that Lorenzo Alvary used the term "spectacle" to describe the production – it often appeared in press releases and news clippings. "The Spirit of Dalí Dominated Alvary's Opera 'Spectacle.'" *San Francisco Sunday Chronicle* This World, September 10, 1961. Lorenzo Alvary Papers, JPB 06-16. Music Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

² The program from the premiere performance at the Teatro la Fenice in Venice in 1961 includes notes on Confalonieri's background and research into Scarlatti. Lorenzo Alvary Papers, JPB 06-16. Music Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

musicologist and composer, Confalonieri gladly worked on this project with Alvary and supplemented the opera music with his own ballet compositions written in the style of Scarlatti.

In addition to acting as the production chair with his organization, the Alvox Corporation, Alvary also performed in the event as the male lead. He had three women alternate the female lead in the opera, but everyone else performed every show. The main team consisted of Ludmilla Tcherina as the prima ballerina for the ballet component of the production, entitled *Gala*, Antal Dorati as the conductor, choreographer Maurice Béjart, and Confalonieri as a counselor and director. Dalí was commissioned to produce five watercolors that he would use in the creation of backdrops and four costume designs. This alone was not enough excitement for the Spaniard, however, and he soon became interested in creating specialized visual effects for the stage, including geometrically shaped bubbles and large meat carcasses hanging from the rafters.

Dalí's aesthetic came through strongly during the opera portion of the "spectacle," but more forcefully during the ballet. Despite the artist's popularity and success in the mid-20th century, the audience reactions to "La dama" were mixed and volatile – people either loved it or vehemently hated it. From the premiere in Venice, the show went on to Brussels and Paris before ending its debut run. Reviews at each city were conflicting and as news reached the United States, the "spectacle" became more of a frivolous joke than a serious operatic work.

Alvary struggled to maintain interest in his production despite the varied press responses, but he could not get a break from the continuously arising problems. In 1962 when the production went to Paris, Ludmilla Tcherina suffered cardiac arrest during the applause concluding the opening night's performance. She was rushed to the hospital but after a full recovery and continued performing the subsequent nights, newspapers speculated whether her condition was real or the whole thing was an act. Alvox Corporation was in debt for years after the performances of "La dama", and it took Alvary a long time to recover financially from his investment in the project. The cherry on top of the entire ordeal was that Dalí sued everyone else on the production team for creative damages in 1964 where his case went before a French Appellate Court.

The performances of *La dama spagnola e il cavalieri romano* only lasted through the 1961-1962 season but the preparation and concluding trauma surrounding the production established a

lengthier range of involvement from 1954-1965. Alvary never produced another opera, but upon returning to the U.S., created his own radio show called “Opera Topics” in 1964 (it ran until 1986) and became the artistic director of the Miami Opera Guild in 1972.³ Upon completion of the project, the team went their separate ways and did not remain in contact. After the musical and theatrical preparations, the artistic specifications, the financial settlements, the personal drama and the legal ramifications of Alvary’s “spectacle,” one could hardly blame him for cutting ties.

Bibliographic Findings

This project revolved around the archival collection of Lorenzo Alvary’s papers housed at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Music Division. While more research materials are available at NYPL and other repositories, the narrative of the production history of *La dama spagnola e il cavalieri romano* was drawn from the archive alone. Alvary’s interactions with his production team, and most notably with Salvador Dalí, spanned from 1954 to 1965 - much longer than the actual performance history of the opera and ballet. The documents chosen for analysis include personal biographies of the individuals, programs, correspondence, contracts, production materials and notes, news clippings, and images. Each document highlights a particular aspect of the production, encompassing the performance, the administration, the press coverage, and the legal ramifications.

For researchers interested in Lorenzo Alvary’s subsequent career as a radio host or in the opera performance itself, the NYPL Recorded Sound Archive has more holdings related to this topic. LPA holds over 2,000 recordings from Alvary’s radio show “Opera Topics” (one specifically dedicated to “La dama”), and the libretto and recordings of the Venice performance under the titles “Dalí in Venice” or “The Spanish lady and the Roman cavalier.”

The aggregated documents from the archival collection can be divided into subjects setting up for the performance and post-performance. Biographies of the key players were used to introduce each individual, and then selected contractual documents were chosen to establish the credential

³ Aziz, Shaneeza. Finding Aid: Bibliographic/Historical Information. Lorenzo Alvary Papers, JPB 06-16. Music Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

foundation of this enterprise. The program materials provided publicity for the event, and Dalí's projects demonstrated his interests and achievements in regard to the show, primarily focusing on the artwork and his research on bubble shapes. After the premiere performance, several American newspapers followed the opera and reported on its reception by the European community. Some foreign publications provided anecdotes about personal interactions, including the prima ballerina fainting and Dalí bringing a gun to a performance. The largest debacle in this narrative was the legal case Dalí filed against Alvary and his corporation for artistic damages. French court documents were included in this research in order to determine the allegations and outcomes of the trial.

The Lorenzo Alvary papers at LPA are the main resource for future performing arts researchers looking into Alvary, Opera Topics or his personal and professional career. As a primary source, it is unmatched in the offered detail and coverage; one should bring language dictionaries, however, if the researcher does not have a working vocabulary of English, French and Italian languages. As an international performer and citizen, Alvary produced correspondence and documents in various languages depending on the setting – the French court of appeals documents are highly refined, technical French typescripts. Adequate timelines and goals should be set for working with these materials in order to plan the availability of archival boxes. This collection is housed off-site and requires a few days of transport to arrive at LPA for viewing. Requests for boxes should be made in advance with the library, and keep transaction records of which boxes are in each location – Off-site, LPA delivery, or LPA Reading Room.

As mentioned earlier, the collection is quite detailed and covers Alvary's life from 1919- 1992. It also includes a variety of file formats, and care must be taken with each type. LPA implements their own handling regulations, which researchers must follow, but it is worth noting that photographs and paper worn by acid damage necessitate extra care. Photography of the collection is permitted, so the use of a smart phone or tablet is highly encouraged during research.

Project Documents

Individual Biographies

Lorenzo Alvary Papers JPB 06-16

Box 10 – Folder 13 & 14

Press Releases 1961-1962

These paragraph bios cover Alvary, Dalí, the ballet dancers, singers, the conductor, the choreographer, and the artistic director for the gala performance of “La dama.” The information included in the biographies was used in press releases, newspaper information, and printed programs for the event. Each program included biographical information for that set of performers, but these two typescript pages covered the main individuals who took part in the majority of the opera performances.

Meant as introductions for audience members, these biographies serve as excellent introductions for outside researchers as well. It covers a broad scope of each person’s professional background and his or her input or collaboration on the project. Alvary, Béjart, and Confalonieri have the longest bios describing their history and personal interest in the Scarlatti opera, and even though Dalí has a short bio entry, the writer indicatively says Dalí “certainly needs no introduction.”

This is more than just artistic credit and popularity, but also foreshadows the eccentricity and commotion surround Dalí throughout the production history.

Alvary-Confalonieri Execution 1954

Lorenzo Alvary Papers JPB 06-16

Box 1 – Folder 5

Correspondence. Confalonieri, Giulio. 1954-1966

The 2-page letter addressed to Alvary explains how the Italian government released copyright permission to Confalonieri and Alvary for five antique musical documents. As part of the permissions,

Confalonieri and Alvary are the only copyright holders and therefore can publish, produce, and perform the music, but they are not allowed to grant those rights to anyone else. Confalonieri plans for his son to take over the copyright holdings in the case of his death, and he urges his friend Alvary to nominate someone as well. The consulate contract documents their meeting with the U.S. Vice Consul and guarantees that Confalonieri and Alvary are obtaining permission to use the music documents how they like and will share ownership over the materials when they leave Italy.

Confalonieri was a Scarlatti scholar and surprisingly found some lost musical scores in Bologna, one of them the “La dama” manuscript. Since these documents were housed in a national library, both he and Alvary needed permission to copy and use the music in their proposed production. With this permission, Alvary could begin planning his international “spectacle” and build his production team.

Alvary-Dalí Contract 1960

Lorenzo Alvary Papers JPB 06-16

Box 9 – Folder 4

Dalí. Correspondence. Dalí, Salvador 1960-1962

Dalí and Alvary agreed upon the artist creating five watercolors to be used in backdrop tableaux and four costumes for Alvary's surrealist opera. The total commission for this work was

\$30,000 to be paid in 2 parts – one before work began and the final upon completion of the artwork. Dalí requests, however, that the watercolors not be sold after the show; they can be donated but no profit is to be made from his work. Dalí also gave up ownership of the watercolors once he had been paid for his work. Alvary agreed to sign the document and was backed by his corporation, Alvox Corp. of NY.

This document lists the contractual agreements between Dalí and Alvary before production of the operabegan . It is interesting to note that Dalí was willing to give up custody of the watercolors upon receiving his final payment. No mention of the costumes' ownership is made, and this will foreshadow the 1965 lawsuit Dalí brings against Alvary and Alvox Corp.

Production Run Time 1961

Lorenzo Alvary Papers JPB 06-16

Box 3 – Folder 36

Radio Show. Inventory of Program. 1984-1986

Later in his career, Alvary became the radio host of a program called “Opera Topics” on which he engaged in pedagogical, historical discussions on pieces of music. He dedicated an episode of his show to “La dama” in the 1980s. His professional records contain a runtime list of the opera giving the movement name, the characters present, and the necessary timing of each movement compared to the estimated duration. The opera itself only lasted about an hour – in performance, Alvary supplemented the opera with a ballet component to extend the event.

Any musical production benefits from a show runtime in order to effectively plan the performance and to instruct each musician on his or her responsibilities. Knowing how long someone was on stage or playing an instrument could impact how much salary they received from the performance. As the producer, Alvary kept multiple records of the piece's duration to most effectively time the show and make alterations for different environmental circumstances. The show toured from Venice to Brussels to Paris, and each city put on a slightly different version of the opera.

Venice Premiere Program 1961

Lorenzo Alvary Papers JPB 06-16

Box 1 – Folder 5

Correspondence. Confalonieri, Giulio. 1954-1966

This program is from the premiere performance in Venice at the Teatro la Fenice. The brochure contains several pages of biographical information, historical information and photographs of the participants. Text is written in both Italian and English. Alvary, Dalí, the ballet dancers, Confalonieri, and others are described in the program along with select images of Dalí's work for the production and an image of the original manuscript Confalonieri found in Bologna.

Despite being the premiere of this work, the program is very straightforward and simple. It does, however, provide an excellent overview of the history of the work and how it came to be performed in August 1961. The performers changed over the opera tour, but Dalí and Alvary were always at the forefront of the opera and ballet production.

Dalí Costume Designs

Lorenzo Alvary Papers JPB 06-16

Box 9 – Folder 20 Dalí. Artwork

Dalí created four costume designs for the Scarlatti opera – the male and female leads, the servant to the female lead, and the unnamed narrator of the story. Aside from the physical costumes made for the performances, Dalí's designs were printed and distributed on postcards as advertisement for the show. Comparing the postcards with photographs from the event, there are strong similarities between the design and actual implementation on stage.

The costumes demonstrate Dalí's surrealist style and highlight the incongruity between Dalí and Scarlatti. While the costumes are somewhat antiquated, they still have a modern sense of absurdity. Apart from the characters on stage, the orchestra members were also in costumes but not of Dalí's creation. The conductor and the orchestra musicians dressed in 17th century period outfits and wigs to juxtapose the surrealism on stage.

Dalí Backdrop Designs

Lorenzo Alvary Papers JPB 06-16

Box 9 – Folder 20 Dalí. Artwork

The Alvary-Dalí contract from 1960 stipulated Dalí would create five watercolors to be used in scenery backdrop images. This manifested in four backdrops to be used during both the opera and ballet sections of the event. Like the costume designs, the artwork was used as publicity material on postcards in color and in black and white. These backdrops are essentially paintings and are very much in Dalí's style – the melting clocks, odd shape proportions, and busy, cluttered sets are indicative of his other surrealist works.

Even though Alvary wanted to produce a surrealist opera, the melding of Dalí and Scarlatti never seemed entirely successful. The general confusion around Dalí and his work led to skepticism about Alvary's project, and comparing the costume designs with the backdrops, Dalí wanted to incorporate all of his personal ideas and feelings into the show regardless of others' opinions and aesthetics.

Dalí's Soap Bubble Technique

Lorenzo Alvary Papers JPB 06-16

Box 10 – Folder 16

Dalí. Production Material. Designs for Show Undated

In addition to his own sketches about soap bubble formations, Dalí also consulted a book called *Soap Bubbles*. Pages 107-110 were included in his production notes. His goal was to create geometrically shaped bubbles rather than the standard round formation. Dalí envisioned cubes, pyramids, and cylinders floating around the stage during the ballet portion of the performance. He collaborated with a perfumery in Paris to create a scented liquid heavy enough to hold a particular shape.

In the end, the bubbles came out round despite all of Dalí's research and planning. This production design goes beyond his contractual agreement for artwork, but he was obviously very excited about the production and wanted to influence as much of the design as possible. For instance, he also

wanted a real cow carcass to hang from the ceiling of the theater, but thankfully plastic replicas replaced it after realizing the problem with keeping and storing meat carcasses in a theater.

News – Dalí at performance 1961

Lorenzo Alvary Papers JPB 06-16

Box 9 – Folder 24

Dalí. Clippings 1961

This photograph from the European newspaper *l'Europeo* from August of 1961 depicts Dalí at the Venice Film Festival brandishing a gun. The caption translates as: "Venice. Salvador Dalí, with wig, waistcoat and golden gun from the Far West, arrives at the opening of the Venice Film Festival. Dalí is located in Venice for the preparation of a curious pastiche. The surrealist painter took care of the scenic part of the show".

Dalí was well known for not getting along with people and for causing commotions wherever he went – Venice in August 1961 seems to be no different. The opera/ballet was about to debut and Dalí with a gun at a film festival was not the best press coverage for "La dama." If there is no such thing as bad press, at least this article raises concerns on Dalí's public behavior and sense of responsibility.

NY Times Press Clippings 1961-62

Lorenzo Alvary Papers JPB 06-16

Box 9 – Folders 24-30

Dalí. Clippings 1961-1962

Several American newspapers covered the Scarlatti-Dalí "spectacle" on its European tour from Venice to Brussels to Paris. *The New York Times* covered the initial premiere in Venice and then followed up with reviews from the Paris production run. This article is from Friday, April 20, 1962 on the reception to opening night at the Champs-Élysées. It describes the event as "bedlam" and informs the readers in the U.S. that the Paris audience laughed at the performance; the opening line states, "the house was a bedlam of cheers, boos, bravos and catcalls."

The article also goes into more detail about the production elements Dalí worked on – notably the meat carcass and bubbles – as well as describing disgruntled patrons wanting their money back and heckling the performers. Alvary had reservations about a Paris tour of the opera given similar mixed reviews received in Venice and Brussels. The production was not making as much money as originally hoped, and the Paris performances sealed the deal on "La dama."

News - Ballerina fainting 1962

Lorenzo Alvary Papers JPB 06-16

Box 9 – Folder 36

Dalí. Clippings 1961-62

The Paris productions of Alvary's "spectacle" were not going well and were receiving bad press from local and international newspapers. On top of everything, his prima ballerina suffered health problems after the opening night in Paris. This article is from *Match* – a Parisian publication – dated April 28, 1962. The caption translates: "Ludmilla Tcherina fell like an Egyptian statue from its base". Coming to greet the public, Ludmilla, overworked for six months, had heart failure. One spectator could understand the true plight of the dancer: Janine Charrat, was seriously wounded for a few months. As the curtain fell, Ludmilla murmured "I do not want to die, do not leave me."

"La dama" began performances in August of 1961, and now by April of 1962 the performers were tiring from the stress of traveling and performing. Ludmilla was the only leading ballerina in the

company, as well, so if anything happened to her there was no understudy. After Venice and Brussels, the production took one hit after another and the tour finally wrapped up after a few more performances with the Paris Ballet Company.

Rainer to Alvary letter 1964

Lorenzo Alvary Papers JPB 06-16

Box 9 – Folder 10

Dalí. Correspondence – OAI 1962-1964

Michael Rainer was the theater manager in Paris who handled money lending to Alvox Corp. for the “La dama” performances across Europe. Throughout the production process there was tension between Alvary and Rainer about payments being made on time and in the correct amount. This letter of March 23, 1964 from Rainer to Alvary responds to another of Alvary’s requests for the final installment of reimbursement to be made and also brings up the looming complication the case Dalí charged against Alvary.

Rainer explains that Dalí is making a damage claim against Alvox Corp., Alvary, the Theatre Royal de la Monnaie in Brussels, and Béjart the choreographer. The trial was set for April 7th, 1964 and all parties must attend in order to protect themselves and not let Dalí win automatically. Rainer further admits that Dalí chose Rainer’s lawyer as representation and thus he is not included in the lawsuit. He ends by saying since Dalí is seeking \$20,000 in damages; the measly \$300 Rainer still owes Alvary is of little importance. Two years after the conclusion of the opera performances, Alvary is still tying up loose ends and dealing with Dalí’s volatile nature.

Court Case request – Alvary 1964

Lorenzo Alvary Papers JPB 06-16

Box 9 – Folder 12 Dalí. Correspondence.

Pennie, Edmonds, Morton, Taylor & Adams, Counselors at Law

1964-1965

Upon hearing that Dalí was suing members of the production team, Alvary and his lawyers reached out to the Paris lawyers requesting information on the case. Alvary's lawyers clearly state that neither Dalí nor his counsel got in touch with Alvary to inform him of the charges, and the French courts did not serve Alvary with a summons to be under their jurisdiction. This letter, dated March 19, 1964, seeks to determine what, if any, action had been taken against Alvary, and subsequently who are the involved parties.

Each member of the production team went their separate ways after the final performances of "La dama." Alvary went back to the U.S. to begin his radio program, but Dalí stayed abroad and filed a damages case against Alvary and his corporation, the Brussels theater, and the choreographer for artistic damages. The whole affair was insulting and came as a complete surprise to Alvary, who had to respond within a month to the charges from Dalí.

Court Case decision – Paris 1965

Lorenzo Alvary Papers JPB 06-16

Box 9 – Folder 12 Dalí. Correspondence.

Pennie, Edmonds, Morton, Taylor & Adams, Counselors at Law

1964-1965

This document from the French appellate courts summarizes the court's conclusions in the case the Dalí made against Alvary and his production team. Written in French and six pages long, the file outlines in heavy legal jargon the results of the trial and finally concludes the case on February 17, 1965 – ten months after it began. The result was, happily, that Dalí lost. He sought artistic damages on the use of his costumes, but after being paid by Alvox Corp. for his designs, Dalí no longer held rights over them.

An international scandal lasting ten months almost 2 years after the “La dama” performances was a huge burden and stress to Alvary. He was continuing his professional career in New York and could not stay in Paris for the stream of trials from 1964-65. This case came out of nowhere but finally put an end to the “spectacle” Alvary worked so hard on.

New Jersey State Opera Donation 1994

Lorenzo Alvary Papers JPB 06-16

Box 1 – Folder 13

Correspondence. New Jersey State Opera 1994

Several years after the “La dama” spectacle, Alvary donated the music manuscripts he and Confalonieri retrieved from Italy to the New Jersey State Opera. In December of 1992, he donated the opera and ballet music from “La dama” in addition to two other pieces of music. The director of the New Jersey State Opera, Alfredo Silipigni, estimated all four manuscripts to total \$21,000 in value.

It is unclear whether Confalonieri or his son gave permission for these manuscripts to be donated, because the original execution document from Milan stated ownership must remain between Alvary and Confalonieri. This document was the last piece of information pertaining to the Scarlatti-Dalí opera in the Lorenzo Alvary papers collection.

Archival Reflections

This research project overall was very enjoyable and educational. It not only expanded my personal knowledge about music and a specific opera production in the 1960s, but also introduced me to the research process and the subsequent joys and stresses it includes. Even though the Lorenzo Alvary papers collection consisted of 15 boxes, it took almost 5 weeks to work through it all. In the end, only 7 or 8 boxes proved to be relevant to my chosen topic narrative. This collection is housed off-site at NYPL’s Recap facility and I quickly had to learn how to plan ahead for research and requesting materials.

One issue that arose was the submission and receiving of boxes from off-site. NYPL allows patrons to submit call slip requests in person with the print-delivery desk at LPA or online via the NYPL catalog using the patron's library card. For the most part, this process went smoothly, but one box went missing when it was supposed to be on reserve at LPA. The difficulty increased because LPA has a rule that items can be held on-site for a maximum of 2 weeks – since this project lasted the semester, I needed the collection to stay at LPA longer. One staff member at print-delivery took care of this for me, keeping everything on-site, but one week later when I asked for a box that I knew was at LPA no one could find it. The assumption was that it got sent back to Recap by mistake, but there was no way to confirm this because no record of its transportation activity was documented. I filed a paper call slip with print-delivery for this particular box to be returned to LPA, and another staff member assured me she would process the request for me. The following week the box was still not at LPA – the library catalog showed the box as being back at Recap. I could only assume no one submitted my second request. At this point in the research process, I decided to cut my losses – the project was wrapping up in a few weeks and I was sure I had enough information for my narrative.

The second snag I encountered in my research was the availability and access to radio tapes in the Recorded Sound Archive at LPA. All of Lorenzo Alvary's radio shows were held there, but they were not cataloged and unprocessed. With no finding aid available to the public, I had no way of knowing if that collection contained any useful information. I got in touch with the curator of the archive, who then set me up with an A/V archivist. Once I gave her certain metadata information and a description of what I wanted, she could go through the tapes to see if any recordings were pertinent to my research. Unfortunately, my communication with the archivist was sporadic and her schedule very busy. Later in the semester the reference librarian for Recorded Sound joined the team, but I did not hear any news from them about the status of my research request. Again, I decided it was better not to worry about it – I had enough research and if I heard from them about the tapes it would be great news, but my project was not resting on their success.

Towards the end of this project I was exposed to copyright concerns that surround library and archive environments. The number of archival collections that NYPL holds the rights to is very small, and not surprisingly, they do not hold rights to the Lorenzo Alvary papers collection. Therefore, the institution

could neither grant nor deny permission to publish my research – I would have to evaluate my project under fair use and see if it would be permissible under copyright laws. Since I wanted to publish the material online, I opted for a safe alternative and created a password-protected site for the NYPL materials. I know NYPL is trying to actively bring in rights metadata for their holdings, but it is hard to go back and assess previous accessions for their rights information. Having rights data readily available to researchers is an excellent goal, not only for library administration and access, but to also encourage copyright discussions and evaluation among new library professionals.