

Florence 1875: Musical Spaces at the Michelangelo Festivities

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In September 1875, ten years after the celebrations marking the six-hundredth anniversary of Dante Alighieri's birth, Florence prepared to consecrate another of its local heroes: Michelangelo Buonarroti. The Michelangelo Festivities (*Feste Michelangiolesche*)—organized to commemorate the fourth centenary of the artist's birth—took place from September 12 to 14, following more than two years of preparation. The program comprised a wide range of events, including art exhibitions, lectures, historical reenactments, and concerts, and reflected a deliberate cultural and political strategy: using the past as a means of legitimizing the present.

Beyond the widespread appeal of the event—evidenced by its extensive coverage in the international press and the presence of visitors and delegations from across Europe—the Michelangelo Festivities figured among the broader commemorative practices that characterized nineteenth-century Europe. As Ronald Quinault has explained, centenaries functioned as sophisticated nation-building devices, designed to provide a public representation of social cohesion and collective well-being.¹ Despite its distinctive traits, the Florentine case adhered to this logic: the initiative was not limited to celebrating Michelangelo's art but also sought to exalt the nation that claimed him as its own, offering the world an image of stability for a country that was still young and politically fragile.

Yet, as Ann Rigney has more recently observed with reference to the centenary of Robert Burns,² such events did not serve solely propagandistic purposes. Their profoundly performative nature contributed decisively to the construction of what Benedict Anderson has termed “imagined com-

1 Roland Quinault, “The Cult of the Centenary,” *Historical Research* 71, no. 176 (1998): 303–23.

2 Ann Rigney, “Embodied Communities: Commemorating Robert Burns, 1859,” *Representations* 115, no. 1 (2011): 71–101.

munities”—that is, symbolic collectives founded not so much on personal relationships as on a shared sense of belonging.³ In this sense, the public celebration of emblematic figures from the national cultural tradition acted as a catalyst, offering participants a common horizon onto which they could project both their roots and national aspirations.

While the Dante Celebrations of 1865 have been the subject of numerous studies—particularly in relation to the question of nationalism—the Michelangelo Festivities have received significantly less scholarly attention.⁴ As will become clear, the Michelangelo Festivities held a different significance for Florence than the Dante Celebrations had. The latter were planned at a pivotal moment for unified Italy and for Florence, which had only just been named the capital of the Kingdom. On that occasion, the celebrations assumed extraordinary symbolic significance, becoming the first great national festival of the new Italian state. Dante, elected as a symbol of the country’s unity and cultural rebirth, was celebrated not only as the supreme poet but also as a secular “patron” of the homeland—a model of cohesion capable, ideally, of linking all Italian cities, overcoming local particularism in service of a unified, national vision.⁵

In Michelangelo’s case, however, the construction of a shared imaginary was less straightforward. If the 1865 Celebrations had embodied a moment of national unity while also affirming Florence’s position as the epicenter of Italian unification, the Michelangelo Festivities took place in a markedly different context. The city’s loss of capital status to Rome in 1871 had weakened its political role, and Florence now found itself needing to reassert its cultural primacy. The

3 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

4 The only existing contributions are Stefano Carta, ed., *Michelangelo nell'Ottocento. Il centenario del 1875* (Milan: Charta, 1994); Simona Troilo, “Miti locali, manie transnazionali. Commemorare Michelangelo nell'Ottocento Borghese,” in *Lettere d'artista. Per una storia transnazionale dell'arte (XVIII–XIX secolo)*, ed. Giovanna Capitelli, Maria Pia Donato, Carla Mazzarelli et al. (Milan: Silvana Editoriale, 2022), 253–65.

5 On the Dante Celebrations and, more broadly, on post-Unification festivities in relation to the construction of national identity, see Ilaria Porciani, *La festa della nazione. Rappresentazione dello Stato e spazi sociali nell'Italia unita* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1997); Bruno Tobia, *Una patria per gli Italiani. Spazi, itinerari, monumenti nell'Italia unita (1870–1900)* (Rome: Laterza, 1991); Mahnaz Yousefzadeh, *City and Nation in the Italian Unification: The National Festivals of Dante Alighieri* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); Yousefzadeh, “Dante 1865: The Politics and Limits of Aesthetic Education,” in *Commemorating Writers in Nineteenth-Century Europe: Nation-Building and Centenary Fever*, ed. Joep Leerssen and Ann Rigney (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 102–16.

figure of Michelangelo thus assumed a dual role: a Florentine genius deeply rooted in the city's history, but also a symbol of Italian greatness. This dual affiliation was not without tension: the more he was celebrated as a national hero, the more his ties to Florence risked being diluted in a narrative that relegated the city's role to the background. This dynamic reflected broader anxieties, as the prevailing discourse surrounding the nation and the project of "making Italians" was increasingly perceived by many Italians as troubling. The fear was that this narrative could sacrifice local identities, thus dissolving the network of particularisms which ought to have constituted the very essence of the country. Unsurprisingly, the issue of local self-governance became central in the political debates of those years: many cities, Florence among them, began to vigorously assert their cultural and administrative autonomy.⁶

This localist impulse emerges with particular clarity in the ways in which urban space was reanimated and resemanticized during the Michelangelo Festivities. During those days, Florence was transformed into a city-theater—even more markedly than during the Dante Celebrations—a stage on which music, too, functioned as a means of symbolically appropriating the urban terrain. It is precisely the configuration of this sonic cartography that we will examine in order to explore how music and listening practices helped shape the collective imaginary during the Celebrations.

The Palazzo

If one examines the map of musical events included in the official program of the Festivities (Fig. 1), their distribution across a broad swath of the urban area becomes immediately apparent. The events covered not only the historic center, as had been the case for the Dante Festivities, but also extended into areas of more recent development.⁷

6 On the themes of municipalism and local identity, see Carlotta Sorba, "Identità locali," *Contemporanea* 1, no. 1 (1998): 157–70; Ilaria Porciani, "Identità locale-identità nazionale. La costruzione di una duplice appartenenza," in *Centralismo e federalismo tra Otto e Novecento. Italia e Germania a confronto*, ed. Oliver Janz, Pierangelo Schiera, and Hannes Siegrist (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1998), 141–82; Pietro Finelli, "Municipalismo," in *Atlante culturale del Risorgimento. Lessico del linguaggio politico dal Settecento all'Unità*, ed. Alberto Mario Banti, Antonio Chiavistelli, Luca Mannori, and Marco Meriggi (Rome: Laterza, 2011), 330–42; Axel Körner, *Politics of Culture in Liberal Italy: From Unification to Fascism* (New York: Routledge, 2008).

7 On music at the Dante Celebrations, see Bianca Maria Antolini, "La musica nelle celebrazioni del sesto centenario dantesco," in *Il mito di Dante nella musica della Nuova Italia (1861–1914)*, ed. Guido Salvetti (Milan: Guerini, 1994), 33–51; Francesco Bissoli, "L'orgoglio iden-

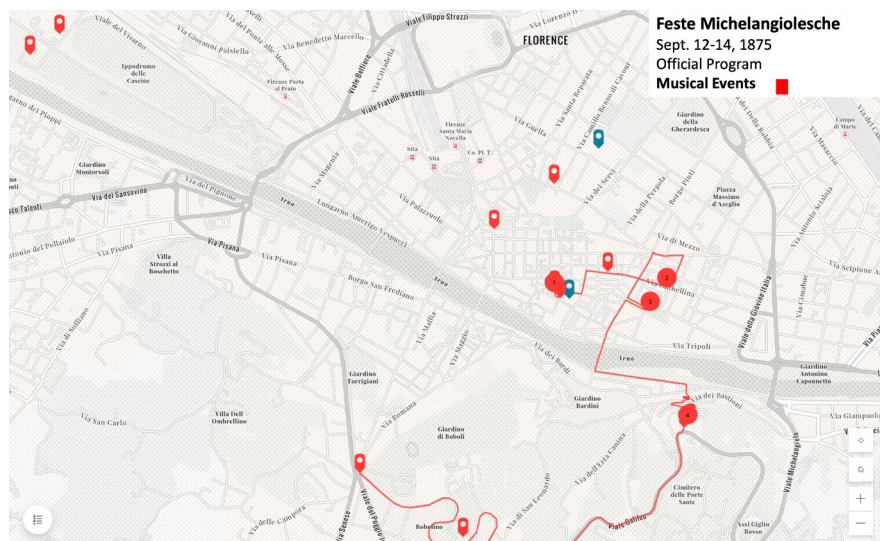


Fig. 1 – Map of the events included in the official program of the Michelangelo Festivities; events featuring music are shown in red.

This becomes evident when the map is compared with that of 1865 (Fig. 2), in which the inaugural cortège followed a more confined route across both banks of the Arno, symbolically connecting the city's popular districts with its institutional heart (Fig. 3). Chronicles of the time mention the presence of numerous bands marking the procession's path toward the epicenter of the festival: Piazza Santa Croce.⁸ This ceremony represented the core of the 1865 celebration, allowing for a form of mass participation that indoor events—held at the Teatro Pagliano or the Sala della Società Filarmonica—could not offer. Piazza Santa Croce was transformed into a grand temporary amphitheater with over two thousand seats. There, alongside Rossini's overture to *L'assedio di Corinto* (The Siege of Corinth), a vast choral ensemble of five hundred singers performed the *Inno a Dante* (lyrics by Guido Corsini, music by Carlo Romani).

This moment arguably represents the clearest construction of an imagined community. The choice of Rossini's overture took on a specific meaning: its heroic dimension and association with the struggle against foreign oppression allowed it to function as an allegory of the Risorgimento cam-

titario e lo 'spirito di Dante' nella musica italiana postunitaria," *Dante e l'arte* 2 (2015): 143–60.

8 A detailed account can be found in *Guida ufficiale per le feste del centenario di Dante Alighieri nei giorni 14, 15 e 16 maggio 1865 in Firenze* (Florence: Cellini, 1865), 20–36.

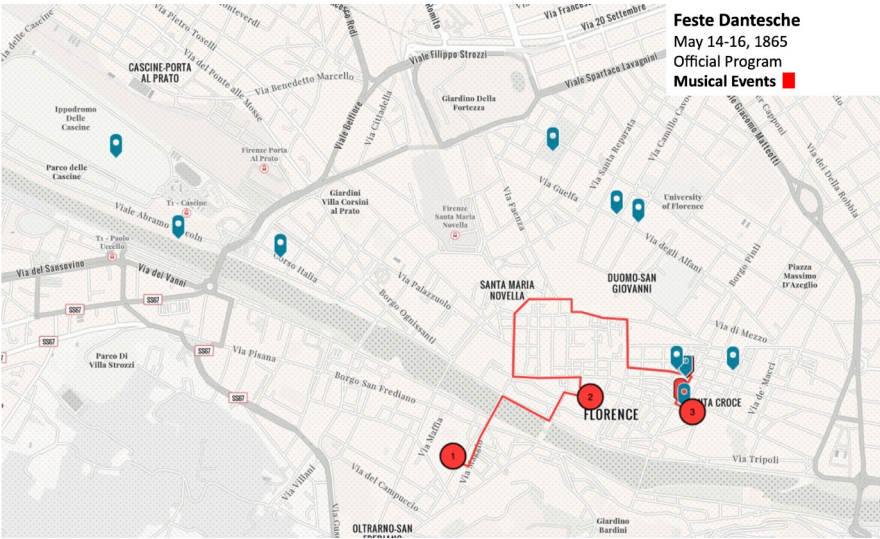


Fig. 2 – Map of the events included in the official program of the Dante Celebrations; events featuring music are shown in red.

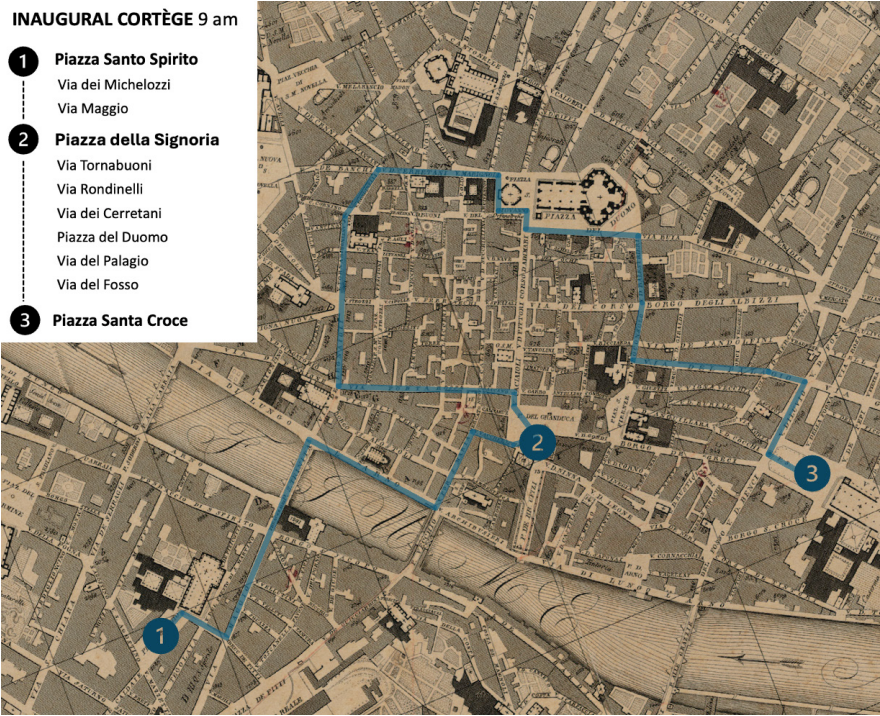


Fig. 3 – Route of the inaugural cortège of the Dante Celebrations.

paigns. In the Florence of 1865, the piece acted as an emotional device, a shared acoustic code that reinforced the experience of a common destiny.

By 1875, however, the spatial reach of the Michelangelo Festivities reflected a profoundly different urban and political reality. While the Dante Celebrations had been concentrated in a single location and aimed at sanctifying a specific national “patron” in a symbolic square, the Michelangelo events extended across multiple parts of the city.

This extensive spatial reach, largely produced by the routes of the cortèges, reflected the city’s new urban layout. Indeed, during the years in which Florence served as the capital of the Kingdom (1865–1871), a radical process of urban modernization was launched with the implementation of the Poggi redevelopment plan. The project envisioned the territorial expansion of the city, the renewal of the historic center, and the creation of new neighborhoods through measures that included the demolition of the ancient city walls and the opening of new boulevards modeled on those of Paris. This “Haussmannization” of Florence marked a profound historical break, significantly altering its inhabitants’ perception of urban space: until then, they had lived in a city whose medieval and Renaissance fabric had remained largely unchanged.⁹

The Michelangelo Festivities thus served as a symbolic occasion to display the city’s new face—its new urban arteries and its potential status as a cultural capital. Yet this movement toward modernity was not unidirectional; rather, it took the form of a continuous dialogue between past and present, a two-way process in which every progressive impulse contained the possibility of reactivating the past.

Music was fully aligned with this movement. While accompanying the city in its self-representation as a modernized space, the music performed during the celebrations moved between old and new—between the celebration of tradition and the pursuit of measured innovation. It emerged from a

9 For an overview of the urban, social, and cultural transformations of the city during the years in which Florence served as capital of the Kingdom—particularly regarding the Poggi plan—see Carlo Cresti, *Firenze, capitale mancata. Architettura e città dal piano Poggi a oggi* (Milan: Electa, 1995); Zeffiro Ciuffoletti, *La città capitale. Firenze prima, durante e dopo* (Florence: Le Lettere, 2014); Attilio Brilli, *Quando Firenze divenne capitale. 1865–1871* (Bologna: Minerva, 2014); Monika Poettinger and Piero Roggi, eds., *Una capitale per l’Italia. Firenze 1865–1871* (Florence: Opificio, 2016); Sandro Rogari, ed., *1865. Questioni nazionali e questioni locali nell’anno di Firenze Capitale* (Florence: Polistampa, 2016); Piero Marchi and Laura Lucchesi, eds., *Una capitale europea. Società, cultura, urbanistica nella Firenze post-unitaria* (Florence: Consiglio regionale della Toscana, 2018).

I.	MEYERBEER.	Sinfonia dell'opera <i>Dinorah</i> .
II.	MARIANI.	<i>L'Abbandono</i> , melodia per violoncello con accompagnamento d'arpa e quartetto, eseguita da 10 violoncellisti, signori: Jandelli, Pontecchi, Mariotti, Castagnoli, Bellenghi, Forti, Pancani, Ruggini Gavilli, Sbolci.
III.	MEYERBEER.	<i>Rataplan</i> , Coro nell'opera <i>Gli Ugonotti</i> , eseguito dalla Società corale diretta dal maestro Mauro Giuliani.
IV.	LISTZ.	Primo concerto in <i>mi bemolle</i> con accompagnamento d'orchestra, eseguito dal signor L. Breitner.
V.	ARCHADELT.	1. <i>Deh! dimmi amor</i> ; 2. <i>Io dico che fra voi</i> , Madrigali di Michelangiolo (pubblicati in Venezia da Fr. Rampazetto nel 1565).
VI.	FACCIO.	Marcia funebre nell'opera <i>Amleto</i> .
VII.	FACCIO.	1. Chopin, <i>Impromptu in fa maggiore</i> , signor L. Breitner. 2. Mendelssohn, <i>Preludio in mi minore</i> , idem. 3. Gluck, <i>Gavotta</i> , idem. 4. Rubinstein, <i>Valzer</i> , idem.
VIII.	GOUNOD.	Meditazione sul primo preludio di <i>Bach</i> eseguita da tutti gli strumenti ad arco.
IX.	ROSSINI.	Sinfonia nell'opera <i>Semiramide</i> .

Fig. 4 – Program of the inaugural concert (September 12, Salone dei Cinquecento, Palazzo Vecchio).

process of negotiation that presented Florence as a city capable of positioning itself within the framework of European modernity without severing its ties to its historical legacy.

A clear demonstration of this dynamic can be found in the events of the first day (September 12). The Festivities opened with a concert by the Società Orchestrale Fiorentina conducted by Jefe Sbolci—an authoritative figure in the city's musical life, long engaged in the promotion of early and classical repertoire—and by Franco Faccio, a conductor and avant-garde composer of national importance. The event took place in the Salone dei Cinquecento of the Palazzo Vecchio; this was the city's representative hall, the former seat of Parliament during Florence's years as capital, and the space meant to house Michelangelo's fresco *La battaglia di Cascina*—a work, as is well known, never completed.

The concert program (Fig. 4) served as a kind of manifesto of the musical tendencies then prevailing in Florence. Most of the composers featured had enjoyed significant success on the local scene—Rossini and Meyerbeer

foremost among them. Rossini, in particular, was highly appreciated by Florentine audiences and celebrated by local critics as the last great representative of the Italian operatic tradition. He was also held up as a model of formal balance at a time when Italian musical theater appeared to be in decline. It is not surprising, then, that Verdi was absent from the program: his orientation, considered too “progressive,” was viewed with suspicion in parts of Florence’s cultural milieu.¹⁰

Meyerbeer, too, was the object of genuine cult admiration: Florence was, in fact, the first city in Italy to welcome his works, regularly featuring them in the programs of its major theaters.¹¹ The cosmopolitan style of his operas aligned well with the image of a city open to European influences and eager to assert its cultural centrality beyond national borders. The inclusion of Liszt in the festivities’ program can be connected to the same tendency—the composer had spent a long period in Florence and actively contributed to its musical life¹²—and the same can be said of Gounod, Mendelssohn, Rubinstein, and Chopin. The presence of Gluck, by contrast, was a symbolic invocation of classicism, while two recently rediscovered madrigals by Arcadelt not only paid homage to Michelangelo the poet but also reinforced the interplay of contrasts between ancient and modern times.¹³

Despite its programmatic intent to evoke the European horizons of Florence’s musical life while maintaining close dialogue with the past, the inaugural concert was deemed—at least by certain observers—one of the least successful events of the celebrations: a missed opportunity, all the more conspicuous in light of the symbolic potential of the context. This judge-

10 With regard to the cult of Rossini in Florence and the critical attitude toward Verdi, see Antonella D’Ovidio, “Girolamo Alessandro Biaggi, critico musicale de «La Nazione» negli anni di Firenze Capitale d’Italia,” in Marchi and Lucchesi, eds., *Una capitale europea*, 583–606.

11 On the reception of Meyerbeer in Florence, see Fiamma Nicolodi, “Il grand-opéra di Meyerbeer da fenomeno elitario a spettacolo di massa,” in *Orizzonti musicali italo-europei 1860–1980*, ed. Fiamma Nicolodi (Rome: Bulzoni, 1990), 43–75; Nicolodi, “Les grands opéras de Meyerbeer en Italie (1840–1890),” in *L’opéra en France et en Italie (1791–1925). Une scène privilégiée d’échanges littéraires et musicaux*, ed. Hervé Lacombe (Paris: Société Française de Musicologie, 2000), 87–115; Francesca Vella, *Networking Operatic Italy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022).

12 On this topic, see Gregorio Nardi, *Con Liszt a Firenze. Il soggiorno di Franz Liszt e Marie d’Agoult negli anni 1838–1839* (Florence: Logisma, 2014); Mariateresa Storino, ed., *Franz Liszt e Jessie Taylor Laussot Hillebrand. Un capitolo inedito della storia musicale dell’Ottocento* (Lucca: LIM, 2019).

13 The two madrigals were rediscovered during the preparations for the festivities in the library of the Conservatory of Florence and reprinted by the publisher Giovan Gualberto Guidi in 1875.

ment was eloquently expressed by the French painter Jules Salles, in attendance at the event, who in his report underscored the disjunction between the grandeur of the venue and the inadequacy of the musical program:

Considerable turnout at the Palazzo Vecchio. This immense hall of the fifteen hundreds, with its wooden ceiling and vast flat walls covered with the bombastic paintings of the Vasari school, is an admirable concert hall—above all, an incomparable one in terms of acoustics. With the orchestral forces available, one could have organized a Michelangelesque concert and produced a stunning effect upon the crowd; one could have drawn—and there was no shortage of choices—from the masters' works some of those grand frescoes, such as the finale of Beethoven's Symphony in C minor, the Scythian chorus of Gluck, the Dies Irae of Mozart, or the chorus of the Titans by Rossini—works which, in the power of their execution and the grandeur of their style, would have recalled, and matched, the formidable inventions of the painter of the Sistine Chapel. Instead, we got a fetid stew of modern fantasies, orchestral overtures, and piano pieces. Can you conjure the scene of a gentleman in black evening attire, opening a Pleyel piano and playing—beneath these awe-inspiring vaults, before the great shadow of Michelangelo—a mazurka by Chopin?¹⁴

Salles's observations diverged from the dominant narrative conveyed by the local press, pointing to the absence of a coherent artistic direction capable of convincingly integrating music with the celebratory space. What had been conceived as an expression of Florence's specific musical identity appeared instead, in his view, as a disjointed and uninspired offering. In a context so charged with historical and political references, one might have expected a program designed to evoke the monumentality and expressive force associated with the figure of Michelangelo. On the contrary, the disproportionate emphasis on a virtually chamber-like dimension produced the opposite effect: rather than amplifying the symbolic impact of the celebration, the music proved unable to engage meaningfully with the space. Nevertheless, if the concert failed to render the dialogue between ancient and modern intelligible, this pairing found a more coherent and recognizable form in the performative practices that took place outdoors. It was in the inaugural centenary cortège and the carriage parade—central events

14 Jules Salles, *Les Fêtes de Florence à l'occasion du IV^e centenaire de Michel-Ange* (Nîmes: Typographie Clavel-Ballivet, 1876), 13.

on the day of September 12—that the relationship between past and present assumed a more visible and collectively shared dimension.

The Street

Although they followed distinct routes, the two cortèges were designed to converge both symbolically and physically at Piazzale Michelangelo, the ceremonial endpoint and emblematic site of the city's new monumental layout. The first began in Piazza della Signoria, but, as the official chronicler of the celebrations, Cesare Parrini, noted, movement toward the gathering point had already begun before the formal assembly:

At exactly two thirty, from various points in the city, twelve musical bands set off, alternating cheerful symphonies, marching at the head of the countless associations participating in the solemn ceremony, and made their way—followed by a vast crowd—toward the Vasari Loggias, commonly known as the Uffizi.¹⁵

We do not have precise accounts regarding the bands' points of departure (they came from various towns and localities in the environs of Florence), nor of the exact routes they followed to reach the center. However, Parrini's description allows us to hypothesize a radial parade design, intended to spread sound through the streets of the historic center and activate a centripetal movement converging from the periphery and outlying neighborhoods toward the symbolic heart of the city: Piazza della Signoria.

The auditory impact generated by this simultaneous movement must have been far from uniform. Parrini speaks of "cheerful symphonies," but the actual sonic experience of those present was likely far more complex and layered, characterized by a multiplicity of sources, directions, and perceptual levels. Sound thus became a map capable of orienting bodies within urban space and guiding the flow of the crowd toward Piazza della Signoria. From there, at around three in the afternoon, the official cortège set off, comprising the principal civic and institutional representatives at both the local and national levels. Each section was preceded by a band, which set the group's pace and acoustically shaped the cortège's route.

¹⁵ Cesare Parrini, *Relazione del centenario di Michelangiolo Buonarroti nel Settembre 1875 in Firenze* (Florence: Civelli, 1876), 35.

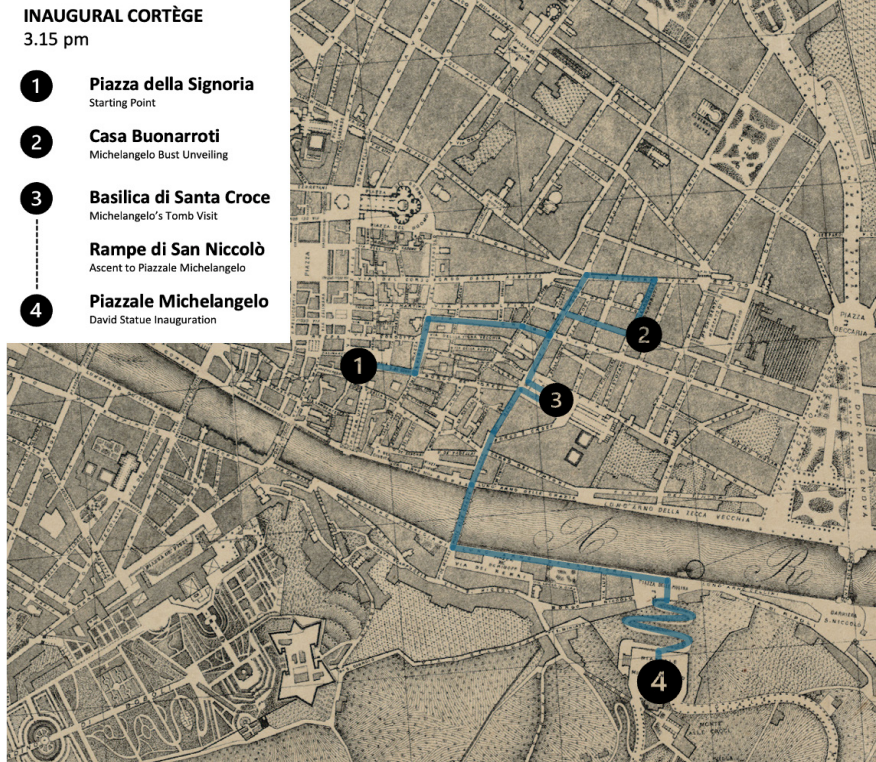


Fig. 5 – Route of the inaugural cortège of the Michelangelo Festivities.

The route comprised several symbolically significant stops, forming a veritable itinerary of Michelangelesque memory (Fig. 5). The first stop was made on Via Ghibellina, at the Casa Buonarroti, where a bronze bust on the facade of the building was ceremonially unveiled. From there, the cortège continued to the Basilica of Santa Croce, where participants paid homage at Michelangelo's tomb. Next came the ascent along the newly constructed San Niccolò ramp (Fig. 6), culminating in the final destination: Piazzale Michelangelo, the stage for the unveiling of the monumental statue of David, installed at the center of the *belvedere* and destined to symbolically overlook the urban landscape to this day (Fig. 7).

The cortège's route highlighted the symbolic transition from the historic city to the modern city, from the ancient to the new. The Lungarno Serristori, the San Niccolò ramps, and Piazzale Michelangelo represented, at the time, the city's newest face: spaces designed to reshape the urban image of Florence according to the codes of monumentality and visibility typical of European

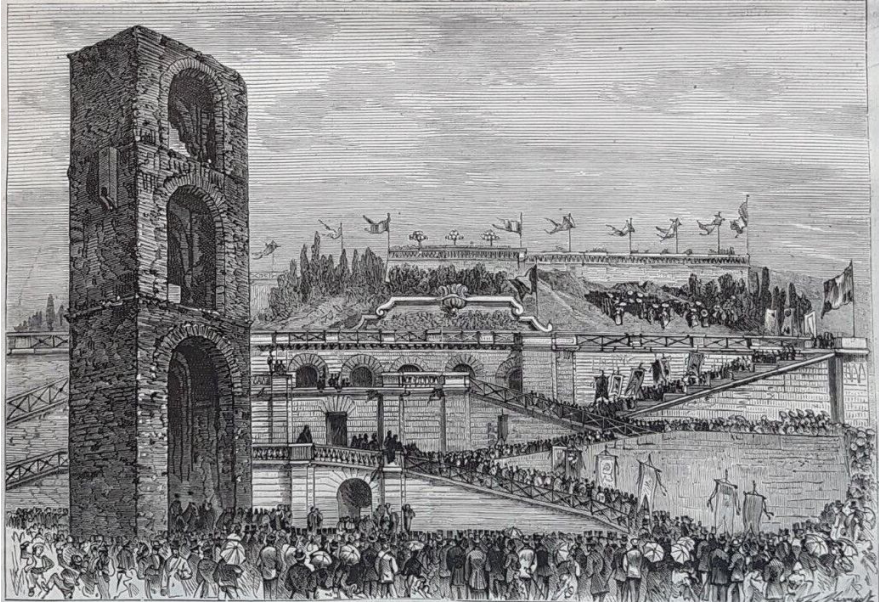


Fig. 6 – Cortège on the San Niccolò ramps heading toward Piazzale Michelangelo (Albert Robida, *Le monde illustré*, no. 963, September 25, 1875).



Fig. 7 – Piazzale Michelangelo with the monument of David (Albert Robida, *Le monde illustré*).

capitals. Yet this march toward modernity did not unfold in a linear fashion: backtracking and detours toward the past were always possible.

A clear example of this can be seen in the second cortège, which set off two hours later from another part of the city and joined the first at their shared endpoint. This was a procession of carriages, also accompanied by a significant number of bands (Fig. 8). Its route, extending from Piazzale di Porta Romana to Piazzale Michelangelo, followed the new Viale dei Colli, the panoramic thoroughfare envisioned in Poggi's plan, which wound through the hills south of the Arno. The avenue's tree-lined layout and sinuous course explicitly echoed the model of the Parisian boulevard, bringing Florence into line with the visual codes of modern capitals without neglecting the importance of the historic center. Indeed, from the Viale dei Colli, the eye was naturally drawn to the dome of the Duomo and the tower of Palazzo Vecchio, which remained stable points of reference within the urban landscape. In short, the center—with its monuments, network of streets, churches, and palaces—remained the radiating core of the city's culture, despite numerous attempts to create new urban centers.

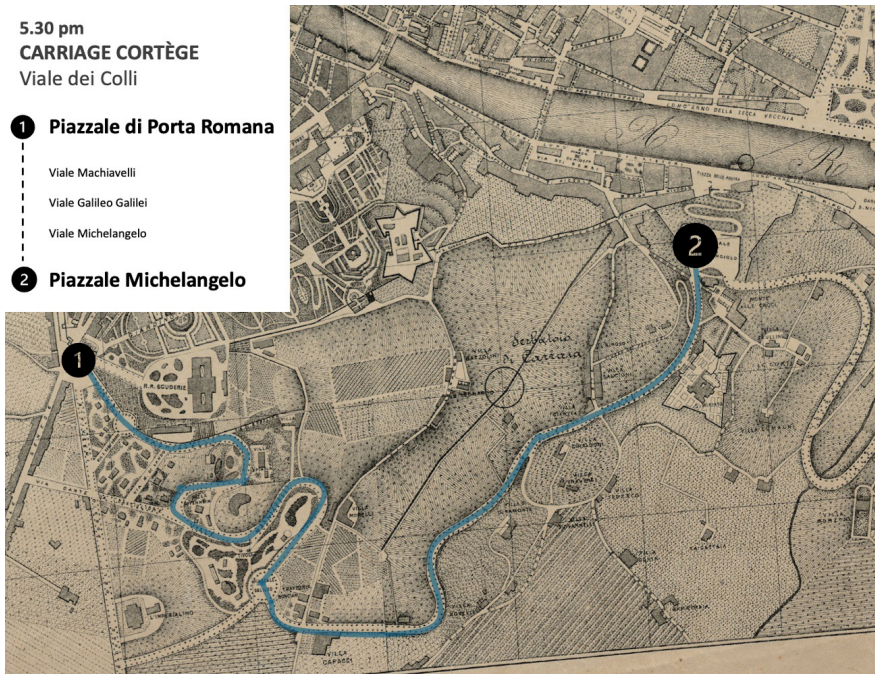


Fig. 8 – Route of the carriage cortège.

The visual component was complemented—though not subordinated—by the sonic one: the presence of bands along the entire route reinforced the immersive effect of the cortège, transforming the Viale dei Colli into a veritable acoustic corridor. Sound, advancing together with the cortège, guided the gaze and heightened perceptual intensity, helping to bind the urban landscape to a shared participatory experience. Although we lack direct accounts, one clue to this possible configuration lies in the presence of the trees, which must have functioned as natural acoustic barriers, blending into a single sonic flow the noise of carriages, the murmur of passersby, and the music of the bands.

The Garden and the Square

In the days following September 12, the celebrations continued with a series of official events, often accompanied by musical entertainment intended primarily for a select audience.¹⁶ Far more significant, however, in terms of collective participation and consensus-building, were the popular festivities held at the Tivoli Garden, which, on the evenings of September 12–14, offered band concerts, games, and open-air performances. Whereas the preceding official events reaffirmed the public dimension of power, these festivities, operating within a sphere of proximity and informality, promoted more horizontal forms of social gathering. Here, the celebration took on the character of a civic festival, rooted in the city's celebratory traditions, although one that included a patriotic component articulated through rhetoric openly invoking military symbolism.

This aspect already emerged on the evening of September 12: among the pieces performed by the “Principe Umberto” band and the Municipal Band of Montevarchi, both conducted by Enrico Del Lungo, the newspaper *La Nazione* mentioned only *L'assedio di Firenze* (The Siege of Florence), though without naming its composer. Although the score has not survived, it is plausible that the work was composed by Ottavio Frangini, a Florentine musician active in the field of operetta.¹⁷

¹⁶ Among these were the musical evenings at the Società del Casino and at Palazzo Riccardi, both held on September 13.

¹⁷ In addition to the article in *La Nazione* (“Cronaca della città,” *La Nazione*, September 12, 1875, 3), an indirect reference to this attribution appears in a letter sent by Luigi Ferdinando Casamorata—who was in charge of the musical programming for the festivities—to the president of the organizing committee, Mayor Urbano Peruzzi. In the letter, dated August 9, 1875,

The piece, as the title suggests, belonged to the *battaglia* genre, widely disseminated within the band repertoire of post-unification Italy. The evocation of the 1529 siege by the imperial troops of Charles V not only recalled Michelangelo's role as a military engineer for the Florentine Republic, but also took on particular symbolic resonance due to the location of the performance: the Tivoli Garden, situated on the hills of San Miniato near the present-day Piazzale Michelangelo, stood on the very site where the events being commemorated had taken place. The sonic representation of the conflict functioned as a powerful rhetorical device, transforming the historical event into a civic myth. Thus, Michelangelo was celebrated not only as an artist, but as a republican hero, an emblematic figure of civic resistance.

Just hours earlier, during the inaugural cortège, the mayor of Florence had referred to him as a “steadfast zealot for the liberty of the homeland,”¹⁸ emphasizing his commitment to defending the city during the siege—a strongly localist reading. This narrative permeated several of the official addresses delivered over the course of the Festivities and was clear from the start to the organizing committee, which resolved to place the new monument to the artist “in that memorable place of his patriotic and military deeds”¹⁹—namely, Piazzale Michelangelo, located on the heights that had hosted the defensive lines during the siege.

In keeping with this logic, the final event of the Festivities took place precisely in the square which, on the evening of September 14, once again became a theater of patriotic memory. The focal point of the evening was the performance of *La battaglia* (The Battle) by Enea Brizzi, a potpourri for band inspired by the Battle of San Martino, one of the most significant clashes of the Second War of Independence. The choice of this subject marked a decisive chronological and symbolic shift from the event held on the evening of September 12: from the Renaissance to the Risorgimento, from local to national memory. From both a sonic and a scenographic perspective, the event also assumed more monumental proportions. The band, composed of 120 performers, gave the performance a powerful impact, amplified by the visual staging: electric lighting of the square and the San Niccolò ramps, fireworks, and the launch of hot air balloons transformed the

Casamorata mentions the rehearsals that the band conducted by Del Lungo was holding on a piece by Frangini, though without specifying the title (Archivio Storico del Comune di Firenze, ASC, Filza I, *Centenario di M.lo Buonarroti*, no. 4144, file “Corrispondenza”).

¹⁸ “Discorso del Comm. Ubaldino Peruzzi Sindaco di Firenze,” in Parrini, *Relazione del centenario*, 111.

¹⁹ Parrini, *Relazione del centenario*, 27.

urban space into a full-scale celebratory machine (Figs. 9 and 10). Music, at the center of this civic dramaturgy, acted as both a rhetorical and synesthetic device, immersing the audience in a deeply engaging experience.

As the piece had already been performed during other civic festivities, descriptions of previous performances allow us to reconstruct its structure and function with reasonable accuracy.²⁰ It took the form of a potpourri, organized as a sequence of sonic tableaux that represented an entire day of battle: dawn in the camp, evoked through imitations of a rooster crowing and birdsong; the bivouac and prayer; warning signals and the outbreak of combat, with gunfire, trumpet calls, and drum rolls; the moans of the wounded and the tolling of funeral bells; and, finally, the triumphant march and return of the troops. The composition included excerpts from operatic repertoire, specifically from Rossini's *Mosè in Egitto*, Bellini's *Norma*, and Meyerbeer's *Le prophète*. While sources do not specify exactly which excerpts were used, it is easy to imagine that the chorus "Dal tuo stellato soglio" (Act III) from Rossini's opera was chosen for its solemn and spiritual tone, ideally suited to represent the contemplative atmosphere of the camp before battle. To underscore the more agitated moments of combat, the chorus "Guerra, guerra" from *Norma* was likely employed. Finally, the triumphant march from Act III of *Le prophète* may have accompanied the symbolic victory and return of the troops. All of these pieces were well-known to the Italian public, resemanticized within the potpourri according to a patriotic imaginary that, as Alberto Mario Banti has explained, was grounded in the concepts of sacrifice, martyrdom, and redemption.²¹

Thus, on the one hand, Brizzi's *Battaglia* helped assign new functions to urban space and to the figure of Michelangelo himself, now fully incorporated into national mythmaking; on the other, it served as a form of collective elaboration of national trauma, evoked as a shared foundation of identity. Through the sonic evocation of suffering—the wounded, the fallen, the violated homeland—the idea of a nation built on sacrifice was reinforced. The music, therefore, did not merely recount a battle: it transfigured pain into a framework, and the violence of the past into an instrument of cohesion.

²⁰ See "Aquila 20 marzo," *Gazzetta del Popolo*, no. 85, March 26, 1862: 4; Pierin Del Vaga, "Corriere di Firenze," *Nuovo Giornale Illustrato Universale*, no. 11, March 12, 1871: 110.

²¹ Alberto Mario Banti, *La nazione del Risorgimento. Parentela, santità e onore alle origini dell'Italia unita* (Turin: Einaudi, 2000), see especially chapters 2 and 3; Banti, *Sublime madre nostra. La nazione italiana dal Risorgimento al fascismo* (Rome: Laterza, 2011), especially chapters 1 and 2.

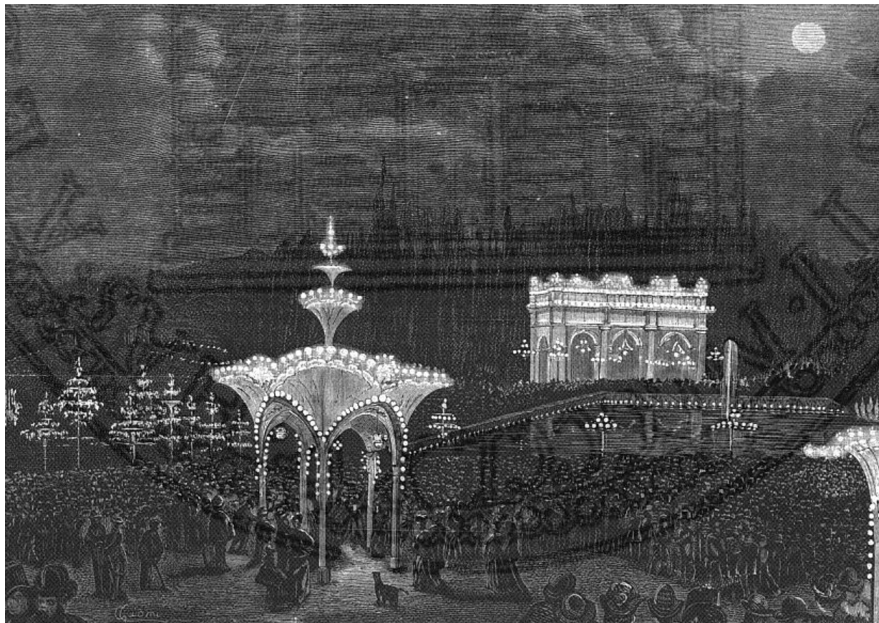


Fig. 9 – Piazzale Michelangelo during the closing event of the celebrations on the evening of September 14 (*L'illustrazione universale*, no. 60, October 3, 1875).

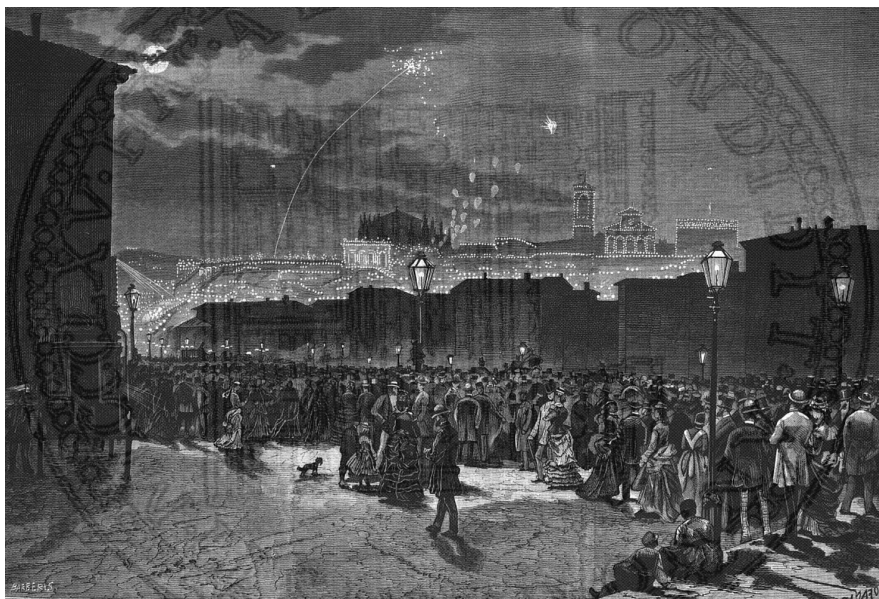


Fig. 10 – View of Piazzale Michelangelo from the Lungarno during the closing event of the celebrations on the evening of September 14 (*L'illustrazione universale*).

Within this narrative, however, the audience's attention remained focused on the city and its most recognizable landmarks, as Parrini recounts:

From the top of the terrace the spectacle was truly imposing. Night had fallen into the valley, broken only by the moon's rays and the lights of the city, in the midst of which—lit in reddish hues by the usual torches—the tower of Palazzo Vecchio rose, glowing amid a bluish illumination.²²

The tower of Palazzo Vecchio, lit by torches, emerged as a visual focal point, anchoring the spectacle in a horizon of local recognizability. This symbolic centrality, repeatedly emphasized in Parrini's chronicles, reflected a clear localist perspective: Florence was not presented as a mere backdrop to the Michelangelo Festivities but as a symbolic space within the national cultural imaginary. This narrative was echoed in the words of another observer, painter Serafina Botto-Tassara, a Florentine by adoption and correspondent for the newspaper *La Donna*:

A magical spectacle, not soon to be forgotten by the foreigners who came from all corners of the civilized world, and who had the chance to admire—in this truly unique city—its ancient beauty alongside the modern; with its historical and artistic memories religiously preserved, and the comforts and embellishments required by modern civilization. One hardly knows whether the greater contribution to Florence's decorum and beauty comes from nature, which granted it such a splendid setting, from ancient art, which lavished it with treasures, or from the squares transformed into gardens and the boulevards that encircle it with a green belt.²³

Botto-Tassara's words reflect the aspirational desires that animated the city's community and the organizing committee of the Festivities: the hope for a harmonious dialogue between ancient and modern, between historical memory and the momentum of urban progress. The event of September 14, with its synchronized illumination of the surrounding hills and its sonic reenactment of battle, gave visible form to this fusion: the lights illuminating the Florentine landscape extended the city's perimeter to its natural borders, while the sounds of explosions, trumpets, and drums echoed

²² Parrini, *Relazione del centenario*, 70.

²³ Serafina Botto-Tassara (Foglia d'Edera), "Le Feste Michelangiolesche," *La Donna*, nos. 265–6, October 25, 1875: 2351.

through the streets and hills, creating a visual and acoustic bridge between the historic city and the new post-unification Florence. The spectacle—visible and audible from afar—consolidated the image of a city intent on embracing its tradition while projecting itself into the future, presenting itself as a model of perfect integration between past and present within the national panorama. It was, in short, an effort to preserve local identity within a celebratory narrative that threatened to flatten its particularities.

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Abstract

This article examines the 1875 Feste Michelangiolesche in Florence to investigate the role played by music within large-scale post-Unification public celebrations. Held ten years after the Dante celebrations—the first great national festival of the new Kingdom—and four years after the relocation of the capital from Florence to Rome, the 1875 festivities were marked by profound tensions between local allegiances and national agendas. By reconstructing the city's sonic geography through its musical events (concerts, cortèges, and outdoor performances), the study demonstrates how sound actively shaped the experience of urban space, serving as a mediator between local memory and the national imaginary, and negotiating the cultural relevance of Florence within the newly formed Italian State.

Keywords: urban musicology, musical mapping, Michelangelo Buonarroti, Post-Unification Italy, nation-building

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