

Musicians' Correspondence in Zagreb: the Case of Blagoje Bersa

Nada Bezić

Croatian Music Institute, Zagreb

In Zagreb, the capital of the Republic of Croatia, among the institutions that conserve the largest and the most important holdings of the nation's archival material, four in particular are responsible for preserving the main sources of musicians' correspondences:

1. Hrvatska akademija znanosti i umjetnosti (HAZU) [Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts] with its divisions Zavod za povijest hrvatske književnosti, kazališta i glazbe HAZU [Institute for the History of Croatian Literature, Theatre and Music of the Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts] and Arhiv HAZU [Archives of the Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts];
2. Hrvatski državni arhiv [Croatian State Archives];
3. Nacionalna i sveučilišna knjižnica [National and University Library];
4. Hrvatski glazbeni zavod [Croatian Music Institute].¹

These are largely state institutions, such as the scholarly divisions of the Croatian Academy, the nation's most prominent archives (the Croatian State Archives) and the largest state library (the National and University Library), while the Croatian Music Institute is a private society of music lovers. Those engaged in work on musicians' letters include archivists, musicologists,

librarians, musicologist-librarians with a twofold education, and sometimes students of the Muzička akademija Sveučilišta u Zagrebu [University of Zagreb Academy of Music].²

None of the above institutions has as yet established lists of musicians' correspondence to be made available on the internet: while the greater part of the existing lists are quite simple and are attached to the correspondence itself, or can be obtained by users when visiting the reading room, no collection of musicians' letters has been digitised at present.

While letters written by musicians are generally kept within the archival collections dedicated to each musician, the National and University Library is an exception in that musicians' archives and their correspondences are stored respectively in the Zbirka muzikalija i audiomaterijala [Music and Audio Collection] and the Zbirka rukopisa i starih knjiga [Manuscripts and Old Books Collection]. This however has led at times to drastic errors: for example, for years it was believed that the correspondence of Ivan Zajc, an important nineteenth-century Croatian composer, was lost, simply because it was not conserved alongside his music manuscripts, until specific research was carried out in the Manuscripts and Old Books Collection.³

PUBLISHED CORRESPONDENCES

Various Croatian musicological research projects and papers have been devoted to musicians' correspondence, but only five books have been published so far, containing the correspondence of Franjo Ksaver Kuhač (2 vols.), Ivan Matetić Ronjgov and Blagoje Bersa (2 vols.). The edition of the correspondence of the Croatian composer Ivan Matetić Ronjgov (1880–1960) is rather simple, as it provides only transcriptions and biographical notes on the recipients of the letters written by Matetić Ronjgov.⁴ The published correspondence of Franjo Ksaver Kuhač (1834–1911), the first Croatian musicologist, represents only the beginning of a major project that will no doubt last for years, considering the huge proportions of his correspondence, which counts over 3,000 letters dating to the period from 1860 until his death. This edition was published by the Yugoslav (from 1991 Croatian) Academy of Sciences and Arts, a distinguished institution that followed the highest scholarly standards.⁵ The editor was Ladislav Šaban, but the teamwork involved saw the collaboration of 9 institutions and 18 experts. Each letter is followed by some 15 to 20 comments and notes, sometimes as many as 30, explaining names, works (not only

musical), proverbs and quotations. The books provide the best possible overview of their contents, since the letters are published in the original language (Croatian, German and Hungarian) and in translation to Croatian. The newest publication is the correspondence of the Croatian composer Blagoje Bersa, the only edition with a two-way correspondence, published in two volumes by the Croatian Music Institute.⁶

CROATIAN MUSIC INSTITUTE

The Croatian Music Institute was founded in Zagreb in 1827 as a Musikverein, a typical society of music lovers like the Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde in Vienna. Soon the Institute founded a music school, and in 1876 it built its own premises with the first concert hall in town. In the nineteenth century it started to publish compositions by Croatian composers, and is still today the main institution that cultivates music amateurism. The Institute's archives contain: general documentation, a huge collection of concert programmes, documentation of the music school and more than 40 collections of Croatian musicians (composers, performers and musicologists).⁷ Almost each one of them has some correspondence, although only the following have an interesting international correspondence:

- Sofija Deželić (1911–1985), pianist and piano teacher, one of whose pupils was Alfred Brendel, when he was living in Zagreb as a child. Recently, the Croatian Music Institute obtained his letters to Sofija Deželić, as a gift from her family.
- the composer and pianist Božidar Kunc (1903–1964), brother of the renowned soprano Zinka Milanov.
- Lovro Matačić (1899–1985), the most famous Croatian conductor.
- Boris Papandopulo (1906–1991), a highly talented composer with a strong family background: his mother, the soprano Maja Strozzi, was a friend of Igor Stravinsky.
- the composer Dora Pejačević (1885–1923), whose works are continuously performed today, even abroad.
- Svetislav Stančić (1895–1970), a piano teacher and composer who studied in Berlin with Busoni.⁸

The collections' lists and inventories differ in their level of description, depending on the period in which they were done; one of them, which describes the correspondence of Božidar Kunc, has even been published.⁹ After the

Croatian Music Institute acquired a portion of the legacy of Blagoje Bersa (mainly manuscripts of some compositions), it started the project *Sabrana djela Blagoja Berse* [*The Collected Works of Blagoje Bersa*] in co-operation with the National and University Library. Since 2010, the Croatian Music Institute has published 12 volumes of compositions (with 4 remaining to be published), Bersa's diary and his correspondence.

BLAGOJE BERSA AND HIS LETTERS

Blagoje Bersa was born in Dubrovnik in 1873, went to school in Zadar, learnt music at the school of the Croatian Music Institute in Zagreb and the Conservatory in Vienna, and spent 16 years in Vienna as arranger of operettas and consultant for the music publishing firm Doblinger. As of 1922, he was professor at the Academy of Music in Zagreb, and acting as both composer and teacher he laid the foundations of modern music in Croatia. The larger part of Bersa's collection is in the National and University Library, including music manuscripts, his diary and personal documents. The correspondence consists of 365 letters (that is: letters, telegrams, postcards, invitations, business cards) dating from 1903 to Bersa's death in 1934. The letters do not have individual call numbers, and have been numbered only when more than one letter was written by a single person (each group of such letters beginning with the number one). The editor of both volumes of the correspondence was Eva Sedak, one of the leading Croatian musicologists, and I was executive editor. Two years earlier we had edited Bersa's diary,¹⁰ which proved to be a perfect combination with the correspondence, both for our work, and for the reader to be able to obtain the complete picture.

The ordering used in the National and University Library was simple, like all other correspondences kept there: correspondence written by Bersa (copies or drafts) and correspondence received by him. However, we chose not to follow this order in the publication. As Eva Sedak wrote: 'This time, the edition of the complete correspondence of one Croatian composer did not need to be adjusted to the standards that already exist in this field, but within this freedom one had to find criteria and standards which best suit the nature and specificities of the material itself.'¹¹ That is why the first volume only contains correspondence in two directions, presenting 16 persons with whom Bersa exchanged letters (182 letters in total), and is ordered alphabetically by recipient and chronologically among each group. The remaining 183 letters had to be included in the second

volume, but the question was how to order the letters. Eva Sedak decided to divide the correspondence into three parts, according to content: 1) public (regarding Bersa as composer, teacher and public figure), 2) private and 3) *Laudatio*. After the first two had been divided into logical parts: Bersa to others, and others to Bersa, each part was ordered chronologically, the remainder consisting in less important correspondence, such as congratulations on the first performances of Bersa's operas in 1911 and 1918, in alphabetical order by sender.

Some basic questions arose to which we had to find an answer. First of all, what deserves to be considered a letter. Our decision was influenced by the standards of the National and University Library: if Bersa wrote the draft of an answer on the back of somebody's letter, it would be called 'Bersa's note' and would be published simply below the text of the letter to which Bersa replied. However, if Bersa had written the same content on a separate piece of paper, it would be considered a 'letter' and given a number.

The following lines provide an example of the first case. The transcription of Bersa's draft from 19 March 1921 was published in the book as 'Bersa's note':

Zgb. [Zagreb] 19.3.1921.

Highly respected Mr. Prefect!

Please, accept my apologies that I am today writing you an answer to your letter from 3 March. The theatre doorman is to be blamed that I received your letter no earlier than this morning.

Thank you for your trust, I am honoured by it and I am hurrying to let you know that I would gladly accept to be a member of the jury of the opera section.

My respects

Yours sincerely

Blagoje Bersa¹²

And this is the transcription of the draft of a letter, with the heading and number given by the editor, published in the book as a 'letter':

115. Letter, manuscript. BERSA.

Hvar, 1 August [19]25

Dear Matz –

I was so ill that I had to go to Italy. But in the meantime there was a doctor in passing here, and he cured me. So I am staying here, but I need absolute peace and must not work.

But you are free to come, if you wish; and I will try, as far as I can, to help you.

But don't count on much help, because of my sickness.

It will be difficult regarding the piano. I don't have one. It could be arranged at somebody else's home, but not so easily.

So, these are the difficulties, which I am bringing to your attention in advance. But if you decide, come, and we will see.

With kind regards

Yours

B. B.¹³

The two texts are different, but the form is the same; both examples have place and date, a greeting phrase, content, the greeting 'yours sincerely' ['Vaš / Vaš odani'] and a signature. One is a 'note', and the other a 'letter'.

Another question was how to differentiate a letter from a brief note written on a small piece of paper (sometimes of only 10 cm), but which could be of great importance. Even more, an order form which served Bersa to write a draft (FIGURE 1) gives us precious information on a music shop, Rikard Rosskamp, that we know little about.¹⁴ Bersa also wrote 'letters' on the back of the tax return forms or obituaries he received.

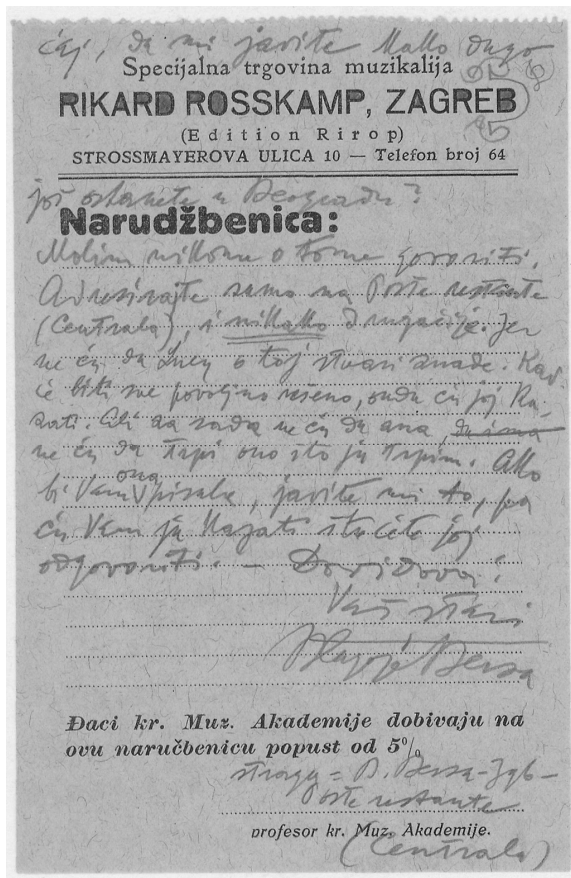


FIGURE 1. Blagoje Bersa: draft letter written on an order form from the music shop Rikard Rosskamp. Zagreb, National and University Library, R 7359a.

The other formal question was how to know whether the letter was actually sent, especially if Bersa himself wrote a note on the draft: 'I didn't send it' ['Ne poslao'] (FIGURE 2).¹⁵ And even if it was not sent, it may not really matter for us, because we still can find plenty of interesting information in his thoughts written in an unsent letter. On the other hand, when he wrote a note on somebody's letter: 'I answered' ['odgovorio'] we know that his letter could still be preserved somewhere today (FIGURE 3).¹⁶ Although we declared that we published Bersa's complete correspondence, this really only indicates the correspondence kept in the National and University Library. Researching other archives in Croatia and abroad, with the purpose of finding Bersa's letters there, would have gone far beyond the time we had available and our personal limits, which proves that projects such as this one demand a larger team and greater financial support.

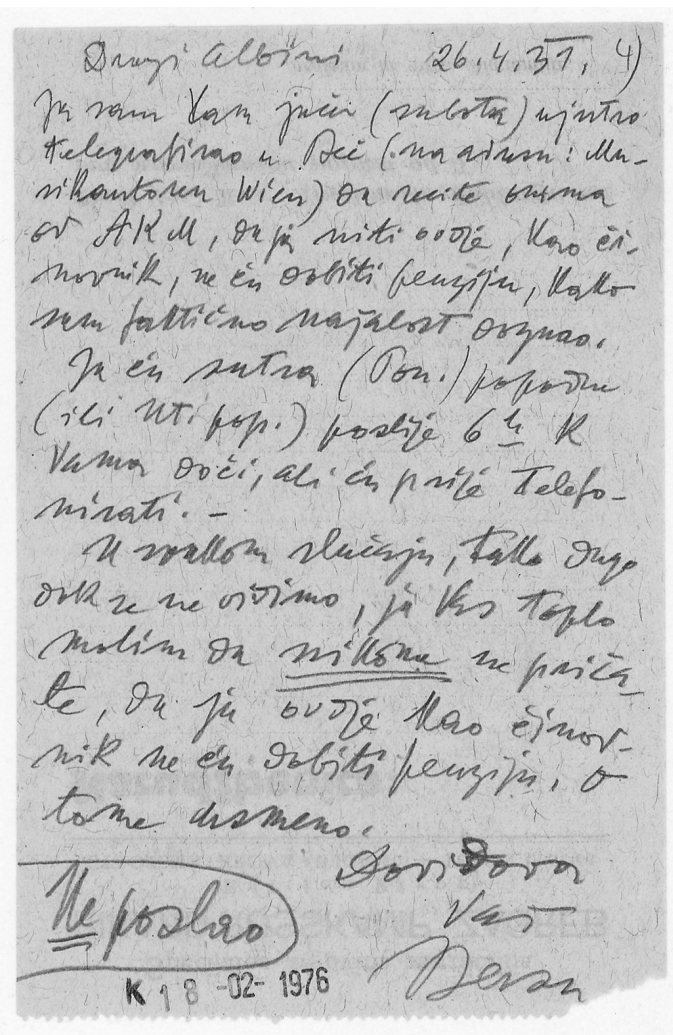
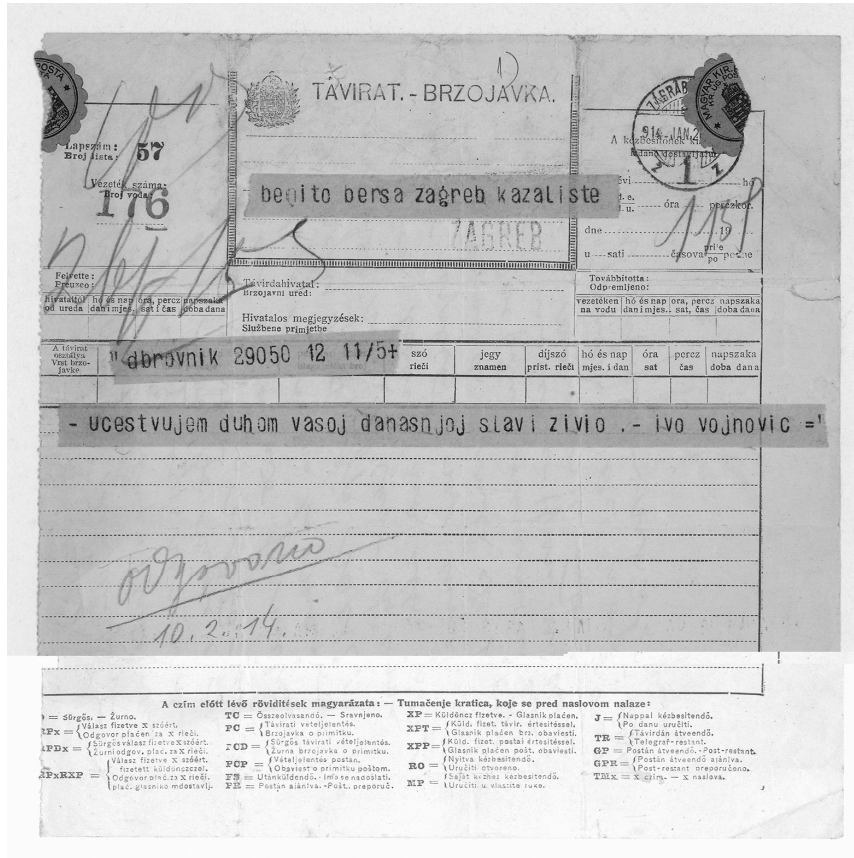


FIGURE 2. Blagoje Bersa:
 draft of an 'unsent' (?) letter
 (26 April 1931). Zagreb,
 National and University
 Library, R 7359a.

FIGURE 3. Telegram from Ivo Vojnović to Blagoje Bersa of 2 January 1914, annotated by Bersa. Zagreb, National and University Library, R 7359b.



We, small nations, always have problems with language and need to translate everything. Bersa’s correspondence was very complicated in this aspect, because Bersa sometimes combined two languages in one letter and so did some other writers. Our intention was to give a clear picture of which part of the letter was written in which language. Here is one example (FIGURE 4):

148. Postcard, manuscript. Italian, Croatian text in italics. Ugo Alačević.

[postal stamp:] Zadar, [January 1911]

Wolgb. Herrn [Well-born]
 Benito Bersa Benito Bersa
 von Leidenthal, von Leidenthal,
 Komponist [composer]

Agram* – *Narodno kazalište* [Zagreb – Croatian Theatre]

Štovani g. Benito! (...) [Dear Mr. Benito!]

* Visokorođeni gospodin Blagoje Bersa [Croatian translation of the German text] od Leidenthala, skladatelj, Zagreb (njem.)¹⁷

The text is written in Italian, and it was translated into Croatian, transcribed in normal font ('Štovani g. Benito!...'), with the Croatian words transcribed in italics ['Narodno kazalište']. Bold font was used for headings and words added by the editor, so German words were simply given in the original language (Agram is the German word for Zagreb) and translated in a footnote. Incidentally, the letter was sent in 1911 from Zadar, at that time a capital of the Austrian province of Dalmatia, to Zagreb and that is why the Italian person from Zadar (Ugo Alačević) wrote the address in German. There were however further problems. All letters in Croatian were published as they are, with all the grammar mistakes that many people, especially Bersa, made. Of course, we did not correct that. The letters in Italian, German and Slovenian were translated by professional translators, and later corrected by a Croatian language consultant if necessary. Hence, the material is not completely balanced in style.

FIGURE 4. Postcard from Ugo Alačević to Blagoje Bersa of [January 1911]. Zagreb, National and University Library, R 7359b.



Another question concerned what was to be added by the editors. If there was no date and place at the beginning of a letter, we added this information only if it was written somewhere else in the letter. Some readers have told us that they miss this information where it is lacking, and would have preferred us to have reconstructed at least the place, which could have been done largely on the basis of the contents of the letter.

One has the whole picture only when the work is completely done. While I was preparing this article, I stepped into the shoes of an ordinary reader, and suddenly saw how some improvements could be made. For example, the numeration of the letters is separate in each volume, but could be continuous across both books.

Since we published Bersa's correspondence, with many corrections and new attributions of the letters, nothing has changed in the collection itself in the National and University Library. Of course, they would not dream of ordering the correspondence according to our criteria, but they could at least correct a few incorrect attributions.

What I personally would like to obtain from the correspondence of a particular musician would be information related to musical topography, which is also my field of research. For example, we still have no certainty as to where Bersa lived in Zadar. Here is a beautiful example (FIGURE 5):¹⁸ Bersa's friend wrote to him from Vienna in 1905, but the text on the envelope is written in Croatian. Unfortunately for me, although Zadar had 13,000 inhabitants, it was enough to write his name, the title 'composer' ['skladatelj'], Zadar, Dalmatia.



FIGURE 5. Envelope of a letter received by Blagoje Bersa in 1905. Zagreb, National and University Library, R 7359b.

Notes

- 1 Most of these institutions also have web-sites in English: the Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts: <http://info.hazu.hr/en/>; its Institute for the History of Croatian Literature, Theatre and Music: http://info.hazu.hr/en/about_academy/units/the_institute_for_the_history_of_croatian_literature_theater_and_music/ and Archives: http://info.hazu.hr/en/about_academy/units/the_archives/; the Croatian State Archives: <http://www.arhiv.hr/en/index.htm>; the National and University Library: <http://www.nsk.hr/en/>.
- 2 Lucija Bodić and Tereza Špralja, 'Korespondencija Huberta Pettana pohranjena u Zbirci muzikalija i audiomaterijala Nacionalne i sveučilišne knjižnice u Zagrebu', *Arti musices*, XLIV/2, 2013, pp. 315–325.
- 3 Even Lovro Županović, one of the leading Croatian musicologists of the second half of the twentieth century, wrote that the correspondence could be lost. See Lovro Županović, *Tragom hrvatske glazbene baščine*, Zagreb: Nakladni zavod Matice hrvatske, 1976, pp. 166–177. The first scholar to write on Zajc's correspondence was Zdravko Blažeković in his article 'Ivan Zajc u ogledalu svoje korespondencije', *Arti musices* X/1, 1979, pp. 43–77.
- 4 *Dragi moj ženso: Pisma Ivana Matetića Ronjgova*, ed. by Dušan Prašelj, Rijeka: Ustanova "Ivan Matetić Ronjgov", 1995.
- 5 Franjo Ksaver Kuhač, *Korespondencija I/1* (1860–1862), *Korespondencija I/2* (1863), ed. by Ladislav Šaban, Zagreb: Jugoslavenska/Hrvatska akademija znanosti i umjetnosti, 1989 and 1992.
- 6 Blagoje Bersa, *Korespondencija 1*, ed. by Eva Sedak, Zagreb: Hrvatski glazbeni zavod, 2011; Blagoje Bersa, *Korespondencija 2*, ed. by Eva Sedak, Zagreb: Hrvatski glazbeni zavod, 2012.
- 7 For further information on the Institute's collection see Nada Bezić, 'The library and collection of archive material of the Croatian Music Institute in Zagreb', *Arti musices*, XXX/1, 1999, pp. 123–132.
- 8 In addition, there are many letters by musicians in the general documentation of the Institute.
- 9 Nada Bezić, 'Ostavština Božidara Kunca', in: *Božidar Kunc (1903-1964): Life and Opus*, ed. by Koraljka Kos and Sanja Majer-Bobetko, Zagreb: Croatian Musicological Society, 2007, pp. 297–407.
- 10 Blagoje Bersa, *Dnevnik i Uspomene*, ed. by Eva Sedak and Nada Bezić, Zagreb: Hrvatski glazbeni zavod, 2010. See the list of Bersa's compositions published by Croatian Music Institute at http://www.hgz.hr/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=71&Itemid=80.
- 11 Bersa, *Korespondencija 1*, p. 8: '[...] izdavanje ukupne korespondencije jednog hrvatskog skladatelja ovaj put nije trebalo prilagoditi već postojećim standardima na ovom terenu, ali je unutar te slobode valjalo pronaći kriterije i standarde koji najbolje odgovaraju naravi i posebnostima same građe'.
- 12 Bersa, *Korespondencija 1*, p. 206: 'Vrlo poštovani gosp. Načelniče! Molim izvinite, što Vam

istom danas na Vaše c. pismo od 3./3. odgovorim. Krivnjom kazališnog portira dobio sam tek jutros Vaše c. pismo u ruke. Zahvaljujući na poverenju, s kojim me počašćujete, žirim se, da Vam javim, da se rado primam za člana žiri-a sekcije za operu. Velepoštovanjem. Vaš odani. Blagoje Bersa’.

- 13 Bersa, *Korespondencija 1*, p. 202: ‘Dragi Matz – Bio sam bolestan tako, da sam morao u Italiju. Međutim bio je ovdje jedan liječnik na prolasku, koji me je izliječio. Zato ostajem tu, ali moram da se posvetim apsolutom miru i neradu. Vi međutim možete slobodno doći, ako hoćete; pa ću nastojati, u koliko mogu, da Vam pomognem. Računati ali možete na vrlo malo, uslijed moje bolesti. Glede klavira bit će teško. Ja ga nemam. A kod tuđih ljudi nekako bi se moglo, ali teško. Evo, to su teškoće, na koje Vas unaprijed upozoravam. Vi ali ako mislite, dođite, pa ćemo viditi. Srd. pozdravom Vaš B. B’.
- 14 Bersa, *Korespondencija 1*, p. 303.
- 15 Bersa, *Korespondencija 1*, p. 125.
- 16 Bersa, *Korespondencija 1*, p. 316.
- 17 Bersa, *Korespondencija 2*, p. 279.
- 18 Bersa, *Korespondencija 1*, p. 26.