

PROGRAM NOTES

Giovanni Antonio Gianettini (1648–1721) is a name almost entirely forgotten in the world of music, yet at one time he was one of the most talented and respected composers of his generation. In 1686, at approximately 38 years old, Gianettini became the maestro di cappella of the Duke of Modena's court. He had previously held positions as an organist at the prestigious church of San Marco in Venice and had sung bass in that choir. His musical training was administered by musicians of note, and he had composed for prominent personalities such as the Marquis of Ferrara and the Duke of Brunswick and Lüneburg. His output prior to his Modenese appointment also included six operas for the Venetian stage. After he became maestro di capella in Modena, he returned frequently to Venice to find singers for the extensive Modenese oratorio season. His contribution to the court was highly valued, and his considerable salary reflected that.

Upon his arrival in Modena, Gianettini met the duke's new private secretary, Giovanni Battista Giardini (b.1650). Their relationship was fortuitous for oratorio. Giardini had embarked on writing libretti for a cycle of Moses oratorios that had already seen the contribution of composers such as Giovanni Paolo Colonna and Bernardo Pasquini. Gianettini was to contribute two oratorios including *La creatione de' magistrati* (1688) to an endeavor that would ultimately produce eight oratorios. Over the course of his epic project, Giardini managed to not only write all eight libretti but to secure funding from the duke for each of their performances.

La creatione de' magistrati, the sixth episode in Giardini's *La vita di Mosè*, is based on a story described in Exodus 18: 6-27. After the crossing of the Red (or Reed) Sea the author of this part of Exodus describes a repeated cycle in which the people of Israel doubt Moses, and God responds by showing them signs such as water coming from the rock at Horeb and manna coming from heaven with the morning dew. Israel is a people afraid, and Moses' authority is reestablished and confirmed in tandem with Israel's identity as a freed and chosen people. After these initial challenges and miracles in the wilderness, Exodus 18 recounts the reunion of Moses with his wife, Zipporah, her sons Gershom and Eliezer, and his father-in-law, Jethro. The oratorio starts the following day after this reunion when Jethro discovers Moses sitting to judge cases that the people brought before him from morning until evening. In the oratorio, only three voices are required: Moisè (Moses), Sefora (Zipporah), and Getro (Jethro, the priest of Midian).

Jethro warns Moses that he will wear himself out as well as the people he seeks to serve by taking on all judicial responsibility himself. He cautions that a ruler must remain constant and endure for his own sake and the sake of the people he governs. His recommendation is that he appoint in his place men who will be rulers of the people “of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties, and of tens.” The oratorio elaborates on this breakdown of society by size of population and stipulates that some will try violent criminals and thieves, others will hear civil cases, and others will administer the treasury and handle tributes. This bureaucratic meritocracy resembles less the historical administration of the newly freed Israel and more the system of governance in Baroque Modena. By linking his own circumstance and the biblical account in his oratorio, Giardini is able to intimately address the problems of his own time, imagine more domestic parts of the plot, and draw parallels between a well governed home and a well governed state.

Giardini's primary concern in the libretto is to remind Duke Francesco II and his extended audience that they must identify and appoint worthy leaders in the establishment of the ducal government. In Exodus 18, Jethro says to “choose able men from all the people, such as fear God, men who are trustworthy and who hate a bribe.” In Giradini's dedication to the duke, he writes that the Holy Spirit—through the mouth of Jethro—warns that Moses should “elect subjects of authority, fearful of God, truthful and not covetous,” and he claims that “these are the four wheels which keep steady the Triumphal Coach of Justice, and the four fundamental pillars upon which rests the machine of government” (English translation by Victor Crowther).

This is a topic which strikes close to home for modern audiences. Who should represent us in government, and does it matter if our leaders lack integrity and manipulate the truth if they promise to defend our preferred policy positions? For the people of Israel who faced challenges and witnessed miracles in the wilderness the answer was clear: yes this matters. For the court of Francesco II and the librettist Giardini the answer was also clear: yes integrity matters. And for ourselves as we witness what is likely the first performance in over 300 years of *La creatione de' magistrati*, I hope that our answer is also clear. Jethro's advice to Moses still stands. The trustworthiness and authority of our leaders will always impact the stability of government and the pursuit of a just society.

—Jeremy Rhizor

(Quotes from Exodus come from the 2006 Ignatius Version of the Revised Standard Version Bible)