

## PROGRAM NOTES

Far from being a fringe activity of baroque creativity, the creation of sacred-themed libretti and the performance of oratorios was a cultural pillar of the Italian Baroque. Musicologist Norbert Dubowy observed, “No one ever saw as many Alexander the Greats and Neros as Davids and Jephthes.” The new *stile rappresentativo* did not directly reach the majority of Italy through the secular entertainments of aristocratic courts and the spectacles of Venetian opera. Rather, it found its way to most people by replacing or supplementing music, dialogues, and dramas that accompanied sacred festivals throughout the year.

Many oratorios were performed in various forms over the course of decades. Whether their creation or performance was sponsored by a local trade guild, a confraternity (a pious association of laypeople), members of the episcopate, or noblemen, many libretti and oratorio scores had lives beyond a single performance. Some circulated regionally and in several cases, libretti and scores made their way across the Alps to the other courts and cultural centers of the European continent. Well over a thousand oratorios were performed throughout Italy in the 17th and 18th centuries, and yet only a handful are remembered in today’s popular consciousness.

One of the shining lights of the oratorio repertory is the composer Antonio Gianettini (1648 - 1721). Though almost entirely forgotten today both by musicians and listeners, 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.

In 1690, early in his illustrious career in Modena, Gianettini wrote music to a libretto by Francesco Torti (1658 - 1741) producing an oratorio for three voices called *La vittima d'amore, ossia La morte di Cristo*. This Passion oratorio presents a dialogue between Cristo Nostro Signore (castrati), Maria Vergine (soprano), and S. Giovanni (tenor) that emphasizes the pain of Mary and St. John in accepting the sacrifice of Christ on the cross and the universal implications of that sacrifice. The first half of the oratorio occurs prior to Christ’s crucifixion and depicts Mary and St. John asking Jesus to let one of them take his place. The discussion around Christ’s refusal sheds light on the nature of his sacrifice. In the second half, Christ ascends upon the Altar of the Cross and his nature is described as victim, priest, altar, and God. The oratorio ends with the biblical sequence of Christ’s final moments on the cross followed by a commentary by a chorus of Angels.

In 1688, only two years before, the Modenese Lenten oratorio season was one of the very best in Baroque Italy. That year Gianettini had written another oratorio with three voices, *La creazione de’ magistrati*, which merited a repeat performance in Modena in 1696. *La vittima d'amore* was also performed in Modena for a second time in 1695 with some modifications. The Academy presented the modern premiere of *La creazione de’ magistrati* last year: its performance is based on a 1704 manuscript that ended up in the Österreichische Nationalbibliothek in Austria. Surprisingly, this later musical manuscript is based on the earlier edition of the libretto.

*La vittima d'amore* as well as *La creazione de’ magistrati* are examples of the excellent oratorios that had lives beyond an initial performance and even beyond the borders of the land of their premieres. By taking part in their revival, we are privileged to encounter the well-crafted theological and musical language of an earlier age and build a greater understanding of both the musical and human landscape of baroque Italy.

—Jeremy Rhizor