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GIOVANNI BONONCINI (1670–1747), ED. RAFFAELE MELLACE  
*LA CONVERSIONE DI MADDALENA: ORATORIO A QUATTRO CON INSTRUMENTI*  
Lucca: Lim, 2010  
pp. cxi + 110, ISBN 978 88 7096 616 9

The volume reviewed here belongs to a series of critical editions of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Italian music brought out, in collaboration with various publishers, by the Fondazione Arcadia. This is a recently founded organization based in Milan and dedicated to research into that repertory, coupled with its publication, cataloguing, live performance (there is even an associated ‘Accademia d’Arcadia’ created for this very purpose) and recording. Some illustrious names in the firmament of Italian musicology, including Alberto Basso and Agostino Ziino, are represented on its editorial committee, and it enjoys the support of the Società Italiana di Musicologia. The foundation is host to a Bononcini Project (Progetto Bononcini), which is currently undertaking a catalogue of the whole of Giovanni Bononcini’s music (so far, his father Giovanni Maria and brother Antonio Maria are not included), in addition to issuing three volumes with his music, of which this oratorio is one. Giovanni Bononcini’s historical importance – for Rome, Paris and Vienna quite as much as for London – is undoubted, and his music, while not quite on the highest plane, has its distinct merits. Bononcini writes with great idiomatic understanding for voices, and less ambitiously but equally successfully for instruments. An aria in *La conversione di Maddalena* that partners a bass viol playing chords with a florid bass on cello (Bononcini’s own instrument) offers striking evidence of his aural imagination and technical grasp. His harmony has attractive twists (the present *Maddalena* oratorio contains some highly effective major–minor shifts and more than once juxtaposes minor keys a minor third apart like a Vaughan Williams *ante diem*), and his counterpoint and part-writing are fluent and inventive, even if there are occasional lapses (the worst of which might make even a student blush). There are, however, two general criticisms that one can fairly level at his music: it is economical to a fault in its use of material, which often leads to mechanical and overpredictable continuations; and it is often in too much of a hurry to reach the safe haven of the next cadence, which leaves Bononcini vulnerable to the additional charge of short-windedness.

At first sight, this looks like a model edition. It is printed on high-quality paper, has excellent pictorial illustrations, provides dual Italian and English versions of all the prefatory material and appears to tick all the boxes that the most exacting connoisseur of critical editions would wish to include. Raffaele Mellace’s Italian introduction starts well. Taking his cue from the fact that *La conversione di Maddalena* saw life initially as a Lenten oratorio at the Vienna court in 1701, he sketches the conditions of Bononcini’s employment there (with added information on his wider activities) and describes the Viennese tradition of oratorio performance. He provides interesting information, culled from a rich variety of sources, on the singers who participated in the premiere. Next arrives a discussion of the revivals of the oratorio in Florence (the score of this production survives) and Rome, both in 1708, and of a further revival, with significant alterations, in Bologna in 1723.

Mellace then examines, with thoroughness and insight, the biblical foundation of the libretto and the literary tradition of its subject from the Renaissance up to the end of the Baroque. He ponders, without being able to arrive at a definite conclusion, the identity of the anonymous librettist: it would seem, however, that it was one of the poets attached to the Habsburg court around the start of the eighteenth century, such as Pasquini, Bernardoni or Stampiglia. He dissects the structure of the bipartite work, which is utterly conventional (with an equitable distribution and efficient rotation of arias among the four characters and a sufficient admixture of duets and other ensembles), but none the worse for that. In one of the most illuminating passages of the introduction, he shows how the vocal type assigned to each role supports the characterization. Mary Magdalene, who constantly vacillates between repentance and continuation of her sinful life (not to vacillate would have made for a much shorter work, for this is really the sole dramatic



ingredient), is a flighty coloratura soprano; her older sister Martha, indefatigable in her pleas and admonitions, is a low contralto for whose deep register Bononcini writes very evocatively. The first of the two allegorical characters vying for power over Mary's soul, Divine Love, is a dulcet-toned soprano; her antagonist, Profane Love, is a *basso semibuffo*, whose grotesquely wide leaps appropriately convey sensuality.

Mellace's descriptions of individual numbers make many valid points, even if they rarely say anything beyond the obvious. I was puzzled by a remark (on page xxiv) that Maddalena's aria numbered '8b' ('b' indicating that it is the second element in a recitative–aria pair) exhibits an unusual ABB form: the score shows merely an AA structure, the same music being used for two consecutive stanzas. I also think that Mellace goes too far in proposing a single 'overall' key for the oratorio (G minor) when the evidence for this is so slender, and I was disappointed not to find any discussion of the association of key and *affetto*. The worst omission, however, is the absence of any comment on the recitative. This is especially regrettable since recitative is one of Bononcini's trump cards: his word-setting is well-nigh impeccable, and many of his more striking harmonic progressions and modulations respond sensitively to changes in mood and situation.

There follows a statement of editorial method. The principles for the treatment of the poetic text, on which there is nowadays a high degree of consensus in Italian scholarly circles, are well thought out and easy to implement. Two decisions regarding the presentation of the music are more controversial, however. First, key signatures have been modernized wherever they differ from modern usage, with the addition of a flat or a sharp. This was almost orthodoxy in editions of late baroque music as recently as the early 1980s, but experience has shown that there is no gain and some inconvenience (and even risk) in doing so. The most common original justification was that performers would more easily misread notes without modernization of the key signature, but this argument flies in the face of the fact that they already cope very well with second subject groups in the dominant in sonata-form movements, even though all leading-notes there have to be separately inflected. The ever-present danger, on the other hand, is that in the process of converting from old-style to new-style key signatures, errors will occur – and, as we shall see, the present edition sadly validates that observation. In contrast, Mellace's system leaves the bass figuring of the sources unaltered with regard to accidentals: a sharp before a '6' over the note D means B $\sharp$ , not B $\natural$ . The combination of maximum intervention in the matter of key signatures and minimum intervention in that of accidentals in the figuring seems to me both illogical and confusing. It would have been far better to retain the original key signatures but modernize the accidentals of the figured bass so that they matched those of the score.

Next come a description of the sources, a Critical Report and an edition of the libretto – all scrupulously prepared and presented. Following this, we have an uncredited English-language version, fifty pages long, of everything up to this point except the illustrations.

But the translation is a total disaster. It has obviously not been undertaken or even checked by a native speaker, and is full of the most outlandish solecisms and obscurities. Reading it before tackling the Italian version, I constantly found myself struggling to make out its meaning by imagining what original Italian word had been mistranslated – and I was rarely mistaken. To give just one not particularly flagrant example among the many dozens: the Italian word 'invece' has the primary meaning of 'instead' but can also signify 'in contrast'. Time and again, the translation adopts the first solution when only the second makes sense. It would be sadistic to give chapter and verse, even of the many instances generating inadvertent humour, and I would rather offer some general reflections in the hope that this series of editions and others like it will take note.

The irony, of course, is that the special status of English as an international language gives many non-native speakers the confidence to appear in print as translators into English from their own language (something that very few Anglophones would ever dare to do in reverse). But the idiomatic, elegant and highly specialized English required for the task is extremely hard to master completely, as I know from many decades of polishing texts written in English by foreign scholars. What alarms me about this translation is not so much the awfulness of the result as the apparent fact that no one on the editorial committee



vetted it (for otherwise the existing version would surely not have been allowed to stand). I note that there is no native speaker of English among the members of that committee. Is there a connection? If so, would it not be prudent in future to employ scholars who are native speakers as translators and/or checkers?

The subversive thought occurs that it is perhaps unnecessary anyway to translate such an introduction in its entirety. A two-page summary in English plus a translation of the libretto would suffice for ordinary purposes, and I would guess that non-Italians with a vital interest in reading the full version would nearly always be able to tackle the original successfully.

In passing, I think it is a pity that the English translation of the libretto appears independently of its Italian counterpart. Since it follows the Italian text line for line, parallel presentation would have been completely practicable. Not only would this have saved paper, but it would also have helped the many non-Italian readers who possess enough knowledge of the language to make sense of it when provided with a crib. Another unexpected diseconomy occurs in the score, where in recitatives shared between more than one character each singer has the luxury of a separate staff. Provided that there is no contrapuntal opposition or overlapping between the singers' parts, a single vocal staff always suffices for a recitative movement, and indeed helps the reader better to appreciate the melodic flow as a whole. A final instance of unnecessary prolixity (or bad organization) is the duplication of whole sentences from the Introduction in the section dealing with editorial criteria.

Concerning the score, I have to be the bearer of more bad news. Almost all the way through, it is littered with wrong notes and incorrect or missing accidentals. Not all the solutions are evident from the context, so it would be unsafe to use the edition for a performance without checking it against one of the two original sources (which of course defeats the purpose of publishing a modern edition in the first place). The errors may have been present in the sources but not recognized as such; they may otherwise result from careless initial transcription, failure to take action after later changes to key signatures, inaccurate inputting into a computer or bugs in the computer program itself. I would guess that most of these factors played some part, but the essential point is that the errors should have been noticed and remedied at least by proof stage. One can have the best methodology in the world, but in the final analysis only a keen eye and alert brain (ideally, of more than one person) can ensure that an edition stays on the rails.

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ANTONIO VIVALDI (1678–1741), ED. ANDREW WOOLLEY  
*CONCERTO IN D MINOR, RV431A (IL GRAN MOGOL), CONCERTO IN E MINOR, RV431*  
Launton: Edition HH, 2010  
pp. xv + 32, ISBN 978 1 905779 64 2

As if the extraordinary quantity – almost five hundred – of Vivaldi's concertos was not sufficient, Vivaldi scholarship still frets over the ones that got away: the fish that escaped the net. The extent of the lost music of this composer remains a highly potent topic, deeply fascinating not only because new discoveries continue to be unearthed (in 2005, for example: the *Dixit Dominus*, RV807, formerly misattributed to Galuppi) but also because it is certain that Vivaldi composed significantly more music than might be inferred from the impressively great total of the surviving works. He must have composed, for instance, more concertos in the early years of his career, c1703–1715, than the few that have come down to us. Moreover, the paucity of surviving autographs of concertos from the mid-1730s onwards, in stark contrast to the number of those extant from the 1720s and early 1730s, strongly hints that Vivaldi may have increasingly sold off concerto