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EDITIONS

MASSES BY ALESSANDRO SCARLATTI AND FRANCESCO GASPARINI: MUSIC FROM THE BASILICA OF SANTA MARIA MAGGIORE, ROME

ED. LUCA DELLA LIBERA

Recent Researches in the Music of the Baroque Era 137

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The repertory of sacred works from eighteenth-century Italy constitutes a still mostly unexplored treasure trove, with much beautiful and distinguished music by composers known primarily for their efforts in other genres such as opera and concerto, among them Alessandro Scarlatti, Antonio Vivaldi, Francesco Durante, Nicola Porpora and Johann Adolf Hasse. This assiduously prepared volume, edited by Luca Della Libera, seeks to contribute to our ever-increasing knowledge of this music by presenting a generous and diverse selection of mass settings from the archive of a major Roman ecclesiastical institution, the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore. The contents include a *Messa per il Santissimo Natale* and a *Messa breve, e concertata a cinque voci* by Alessandro Scarlatti, who was *maestro di capella* of the basilica from August 1707 to February 1709, and two *Messe a quattro voci concertata* by Francesco Gasparini.

All the masses presented here are scored for double choir, a characteristic that no doubt reflects the sonic resources offered by the space of the basilica, and the practicalities of the way musicians had to be positioned. In the Introduction to the volume, Della Libera notes the construction of separate wooden scaffolds, themselves referred to as *cori*, for solemn liturgical occasions. However, only one of the four works in the edition, Scarlatti's *Messa per il Santissimo Natale*, features two genuinely individualized vocal groups; in the other three, the second chorus assumes a doubling, ripieno function and sings no material that is independent of the first chorus. The four masses thus illustrate two contrasting approaches to polychoral writing: one that is closer to an older ceremonial conception associated especially with Venice, and another that is evidently linked to the more recent emergence of the concerto grosso. Indeed, Arcangelo Corelli can be counted among the most eminent musicians connected with the history of the basilica, with his documented presence there extending over some forty years. Della Libera bases this claim on the fruits of his own archival labour, but leaves one wishing to learn more about the particulars of this association. More generally, the repertory contained in the volume, even though its chronological span is no more than about twenty-five years, has the potential to offer a more wide-ranging understanding of the adaptations and reformulations of polychoral music as new idioms and aesthetic ideals emerged over the course of a century. For example, do some of the Corellian passages in Gasparini's two masses, such as the second Kyrie of the second work, reveal a cross-fertilization between liturgical vocal music and instrumental music? What about the retention of aspects of 'Palestrina' style (to invoke another prominent figure who held an appointment at the basilica) in the Agnus Dei of the first work? Della Libera's Introduction, however, eschews for the most part consideration of the broader historical significance of the music edited here, although it is admirably detailed in its documentation of musical practice at Santa Maria Maggiore.

Scarlatti's *Messa per il Santissimo Natale*, a solemn mass in A major scored for two choirs of five and four voices respectively, two violin parts and basso continuo, dates from December 1707. It is a striking and memorable composition of the *missa pastoralis* type, suiting the liturgical season during which it was performed. Both impressively expansive and vividly detailed, Scarlatti's music unfolds within a conservative harmonic language whose most characteristic feature is a series of tonic pedal points above which the upper parts oscillate through the progression $\frac{5}{3}-\frac{6}{4}-\frac{7}{3}-\frac{6}{4}-\frac{5}{3}$. The musette-like effect of these pedal points, reflecting the pastoral genre, and the strongly plagal flavour resulting from the recurrent emphasis on $\frac{7}{3}$ over the tonic chord form the basis for the aural distinctiveness of this mass. The second work by Scarlatti in this edition,



the *Messa breve, e concertata a cinque voci*, a composition in E minor scored for two five-part choirs and basso continuo, probably written between 1704 and 1708, offers a notably contrasting example of Scarlatti's mass output. Textural weight gives way here to a highly florid elaboration of the individual parts, a trait aptly conveyed by the designation *concertata*, since the difficulty of the vocal music (including melismas that contain dotted semiquavers, as at 'Domine Deus, Agnus Dei, Filius Patris' in the Gloria) would certainly have demanded the participation of the basilica's most skilled singers. This concentration on soloistic writing, with occasional reinforcement by the second ripieno chorus, certainly demonstrates an affinity with the concerto grosso and hence a more modern approach to the composition of a polychoral mass.

The two works by Gasparini in the volume also exemplify this approach, but, in contrast to the comparatively uniform character of Scarlatti's *Messa breve*, they are relatively idiosyncratic and quirky compositions that explore a variety of stylistic idioms. Although Gasparini never served as *maestro di capella* of Santa Maria Maggiore, he nevertheless enjoyed a significant association with the institution, which extended over several decades and included a stint as music director from 1725 to 1727 of the 'Salve', an ensemble affiliated to the basilica that had been founded in the early seventeenth century by the Borghese family. According to Della Libera, the two *Messe a quattro voci concertata*, in B flat major and G major and scored for two four-part choirs and basso continuo, date from some time between 1707 and 1727. The compositional styles of these settings are refreshingly diverse and encompass not only the aforementioned Palestrinian and Corellian modes, but also a declamatory treatment of the text (as in the 'Et in terra pax' of the Mass in B flat), the use of pedal points ('Et unam sanctam catholicam', Mass in B flat), and a fully modern, colourful harmonic language featuring augmented chords ('Qui tollis', Mass in B flat) and striking turns to the flat side of the tonal spectrum ('Fili unigenite Jesu Christe', Mass in G). I should note here that an editing mishap occurs in bars 6 to 10 of the Kyrie of the B flat mass, basso part, where all of the pitches are notated a step too high on the staff.

One may offer some light criticism of the edition in terms of its rather limited guidance in locating the music within a broader stylistic context (as mentioned earlier), and in facilitating historically appropriate performances of the masses. The information provided by Della Libera in his 'Notes on Performance' is somewhat sparse. Moreover, there is little analysis of some of the valuable archival data that he presents. For example, we learn from elsewhere in the Introduction that the musical chapel of Santa Maria Maggiore consisted of five sopranos, two contraltos, four tenors and four basses during the early years of the eighteenth century; later, the number of sopranos fell to four, and by 1726–1727 it had fallen to three. Additional musicians were borrowed from other institutions for solemn observances, but the extent of the augmentation cannot be precisely determined because, as Della Libera notes, surviving lists of these musicians refer to multiple occasions. Yet although it still remains possible to suggest some patterns and trends of ensemble size on the basis of this information, Della Libera does not offer any hypotheses. For example, a list prepared in 1708 by Scarlatti himself (and reproduced in facsimile in the volume) includes five sopranos, three contraltos, one tenor and four basses. Adding these singers to the basilica's regularly employed ensemble would result in a possible chorus of twenty-eight for a solemn mass such as the *Messa per il Santissimo Natale*: ten sopranos, five contraltos, five tenors and eight basses. Such a reckoning is highly speculative, of course, but with the consideration of further documents from the basilica's archives, it may be reasonable to hope for a relatively concrete knowledge of the typical performing forces used in the basilica's services (and of other aspects of performance practice).

But these minor reservations hardly lessen the value of Della Libera's edition in making available several rewarding examples of a historically and artistically significant repertory. The quality of these mass settings indicates that more gems await rediscovery from the archives of Santa Maria Maggiore and other similar institutions. One hopes that the availability of a modern edition of works such as these will help to stimulate further investigation into this important corpus of eighteenth-century repertory, as well as more frequent performances of this music.

JEN-YEN CHEN

