



down the reverberation in favour of capturing a closer sound. The booklet includes some nice illustrations, but regrettably lacks an eye-catching cover – the picture used to adorn the frontispiece might have been a little more handsome or creative than a cutout of an official portrait of Carlo III. The liner notes by Michael Talbot provide a very useful introduction to Albinoni's swan-song, and we would not expect otherwise from this distinguished scholar of the Venetian *settecento*. The German translation, surprisingly, contains many inaccuracies and is often simply erroneous. Aside from these small imperfections, this recording is highly recommended to lovers of the musical elegance of eighteenth-century Venice. It is a shame that Simon Standage and Collegium Musicum 90 did not produce a complete recording of the twelve concertos, but perhaps that could be a worthy project for the future.

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FRANCESCO FEO (1691–1761)

PASSIO SECUNDUM JOANNEM

La Divina Armonia / Lorenzo Ghielmi

Passacaille, 964, 2009; one disc, 61 minutes

When Charles Burney began his article on Francesco Feo in his *General History*, he proclaimed him 'one of the greatest Neapolitan masters of his time' (*A General History of Music, from the Earliest Ages to the Present Period* (London: author, 1776–1789), volume 4, 550). Burney went on to praise the composer's music for its fire, invention, force in the melody and expression of the words. Despite Burney's accolades, however, Feo's music has been slow to enter the mainstream of recent research and performance, and it seems that the inconvenient lack of access to manuscript sources is partly to blame. Lorenzo Ghielmi's recording is therefore a welcome and important contribution to our understanding of this neglected composer who was once so revered.

There are two manuscripts, one in autograph, of Feo's *St John Passion*, held in the Biblioteca Oratoriana dei Filippini in Naples. The work is listed twice in the *Catalogo generale* as '1). Passio secundum Joannem, a più voci con quartetto, 2 copie in 2 tonalità; Partit. autogr. Parti cop.' and '2). Passio secundum Johannem, (Venerdì santo), a più voci con più stromenti; Partit. e parti in copie' (Salvatore di Giacomo, compiler, *Catalogo generale delle opere musicali: Città di Napoli. Archivio dell'Oratorio dei Filippini* (Parma: Fresching, 1918), 54). There is also a *St Matthew Passion* by Feo in the archives, and I have private hopes, now made public, that Ghielmi and his group La Divina Armonia will generously offer us a recording of this little-known work as well.

Among the several types of Passion composed in the eighteenth century, Italian Passion-oratorios were more popular than were Latin Passions. It is striking, therefore, that both Alessandro Scarlatti and Francesco Feo composed Latin Passions based on St John's Gospel. Scarlatti's *Passio Domini Nostri Jesu Christi secundum Joannem*, from c1680, written for solo alto, solo bass, four-voice choir, strings and basso continuo, was most likely the model based on which Feo imagined his own Latin Passion, from 1744, for countertenor solo (the Evangelist), two tenors (Jesus and Pilate), four-voice choir, a quartet of strings and basso continuo. Ghielmi effectively uses an Italian harpsichord, which he plays brilliantly on the recording, and an *organo di legno* (positive organ) for the continuo realization. He adds a harp to the continuo group, noting that this was a standard feature of Neapolitan baroque music. The CD booklet offers translations of the text in German, Italian, Latin, English and French (the last of which is included separately on pages 75–80) along with striking photographs of artworks chosen from the chapels of the Sacro Monte sopra Varese, northwest



of Milan, that depict the Passion of Christ. The CD booklet also includes a summary of Feo's biography, though the best information that we have on Feo is still Hanns-Bertold Dietz's entry in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (second edition, ed. Stanley Sadie and John Tyrrell (London: Macmillan, 2001), volume 8, 672–675) along with his article 'Durante, Feo, and Pergolesi: Concerning Misattributions among Their Sacred Music' in *Studi Pergolesiani* 2 (1988), 128–143.

The instrumentalists open the work beautifully and play with flawless phrasing, approaching the style of this late baroque sacred music with emotional generosity and stylistic honesty. The Neapolitan fashion for dramatic tremolos to depict weaponry, storms and the like is first seen in No. 1 at the end of the opening scene, when the Pharisees enter with their weapons. This sort of early storm gesture is common among other Neapolitan composers, as in the case of Gian Francesco de Majo (1732–1770) and his music from the 1760s. Feo especially shows his skill in instrumental writing about one minute into No. 3 (track 3), when we are treated to a gem of an instrumental fugue ripe with sequences and suspensions. The vigorous energy that the performers contribute to this number is impressive.

The soloists bring Feo's music to life in excellent and sensitive ways. For instance, in No. 5 Krystian Adam (Jesus) uses moving silences at the opening of the arioso, 'I have spoken openly to all of the world'. The angry continuation of his reply, 'Why question me?', is extremely effective. There are many other especially moving moments by this group of soloists. The countertenor Doron Schleifer (the Evangelist) sings extraordinarily well, with exquisite phrasing and intonation. At the end of No. 7, after Pilate tells the crowd to take Jesus and judge him by their own laws, the Evangelist sings Feo's word-painting on 'moriturus' with great expression. Another moving movement arrives when, in No. 8, Jesus responds to Pilate with 'My kingdom is not of this world'. Here the slow harmonic rhythm and the phrasing of the melody point towards the classic style that Feo had already used in his operas (for instance, in the aria 'Se morir' from *Andromaca* of 1730). At the end of Jesus' reply to Pilate, 'Everyone on the side of truth listens to me', Feo uses a rhetorical silence followed by chromaticism to suggest the depth and severity of Jesus' words. Feo does not very often repeat text for the Evangelist in this Passion setting as he is announcing the words of another character, but he does so here: 'Dicit ei, Dicit ei Pilatus'. Pilate then asks, 'What . . . what . . . is truth?'. Mirko Guadagnini (Pilate) and Feo work together to create a dramatically compelling moment.

On the other hand, in the word-painting that Feo uses in No. 6 to portray the rooster crowing after Peter's denial of Jesus, the melismatic coloratura is perhaps overdone, but the rooster's vocal prowess is certainly brought to life. Feo's music is usually subtler than this rooster's display. In No. 12 Feo suggests the weight of the carried cross by giving slow and heavy-laden writing to the strings and basso continuo. Ghielmi and his ensemble accentuate this extraordinary moment in the Passion. In No. 15 the blissful suspensions in the strings against the walking bass create a contrapuntal idyll introducing the solemn setting of the text 'Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother'. When Jesus addresses his mother with 'Dear woman, here is your son', the chromaticism is glorious, the silences are appropriate to the drama of the moment and the sensitivity of the performers is unmatched. Also moving is the setting of Jesus' final words, 'It is finished', and the pulsing arioso sung by the Evangelist announcing that Jesus has bowed his head and died. The alternation between harp, organ and harpsichord in the basso continuo is admirable here.

One disappointing feature occurs in two scenes, Nos 9 and 11, when the chorus is announced by the Evangelist as 'shouting'. The chorus enters both times timidly, without any sign of a shout. In No. 9 the accompanied recitative of Pilate shows his resolve not to be culpable for the verdict pronounced on Jesus. The crowd is meant to shout (but does not in this recording): 'Give us Barabbas!' The Evangelist, on the other hand, shows his disgust with the situation and expresses it on the word 'flagellavit': 'Then Pilate took Jesus and had him flogged'. In No. 11 once again the chorus does not shout when told to do so, but rather starts softly. The crescendo that follows, and the ending of the phrase, are more convincing.

Francesco Gasparini's aria 'Mi Jesu, salus mea, in ligno crucis langues!' (My Jesus, on the Wood of the Cross You Faint!) has been inserted into this performance, and it is beautifully performed. It is a fitting inclusion. Likewise, Feo's aria 'Domine, tu es veritas, vita mea et salus mea' (Lord, You Are the Truth, My Life and My Salvation) is a high point in the recording.



To hear Feo's Passion brought to life in this recording in such a consciously thoughtful manner is a complete joy. The performances of the recitatives reveal the beauty of expression in this late baroque music in greater depth than one might expect, and the interaction between the harpsichord and the Evangelist cannot be surpassed. This recording is not only flawless in its presentation of Feo's work; it is an important contribution to our understanding of eighteenth-century Italian sacred music.

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JOHANN NEPOMUK HUMMEL (1778–1837)

SONATA IN E FLAT MAJOR, OP. 13 NO. 6; SONATA IN F MINOR, OP. 20; 'LA CONTEMPLAZIONE', OP. 107 NO. 3

Susan Alexander-Max (fortepiano)

Chandos, CHAN 0765, 2009; one disc, 67 minutes

Susan Alexander-Max shows remarkable musicianship in this selection of Hummel works performed on an 1814 Brodmann fortepiano. Her playing is refined and engaging throughout, bringing out the full range of tone and colours of this Viennese instrument, which has no doubt benefited from being given a new action. Her affinity with the repertory is compelling, especially in matters of rhetoric and style.

The instrument's impressive range of possibilities is exploited from the very beginning of the recording: warmth of sustained notes, colourful staccatos, lyricism of the second subject and commanding orchestral effects in crescendos and fortissimos, all helped by the performer's strong rhythmic sense. This opening sets high standards and certainly proves that Hummel's piano works are worth performing on period instruments. Interestingly, the resonant Brodmann seems to lack the efficient damping typically found in most Viennese instruments of the time and could easily be mistaken for an English instrument. As it is, a fortepiano with both Viennese and English characteristics suits Hummel's music well.

This performance raises challenging questions about technique on period instruments. Since pianos of the time are generally considered to have less sustaining power and dynamic width than modern instruments, it is often believed that the bass cannot overwhelm the treble on these instruments. On this Brodmann, voicing does not seem so straightforward, however. Occasionally Alexander-Max allows left-hand chords to dominate (in the finale second subject of the E flat sonata, for example). Most of the time her cantabile lines are remarkably expressive, and it is clear to the listener that in these cases a particular effort is being made to emphasize the top line of the right hand, as if playing on a modern concert grand. The instrument she uses simply requires such an approach.

Another parallel with modern playing is found in Alexander-Max's projection of accents and fortissimos, which have at times a slightly percussive edge, hinting at her use of extra arm weight. With regard to English instruments of the time, however, Hummel explains that 'passages which require to be executed with strength . . . must, as in the German instruments, be produced by the power of the fingers, and not by the weight of the arms; for as this mechanism is not capable of such numerous modifications as to degree of tone as ours, we gain no louder sound by a heavy blow, than may be produced by the natural strength and elasticity of the fingers' (Johann Nepomuk Hummel, *A Complete Theoretical and Practical Course of Instructions, on the Art of Playing the Piano Forte* (London: Boosey & Co., 1828), Part 3, 64–65). Despite her use of arm weight, Alexander-Max's balancing of voices is more often than not remarkable, showing just how real a 'seamless legato' can be on period instruments.

Perhaps the whole of the Sonata in E flat major and 'La contemplazione' do not require the same degree of intensity as the Sonata in F minor, and one could choose to render them with more simplicity in slow