



Antonio CARTELLIERI (1772-1807)

Christmas Oratorio

Libretto by Luigi Prividali

● Katerina Beronova (sop) - 'L' Amor divino';

Andreas Karasiak (ten) - John the Baptist;

Ray M Wade Jnr. (ten) - Angel of Glory);

Alexander Marco-Buhrmester (Bass) - Satan.

Chorus Musicus-Köln

'Das neue Orchester'/Christoph Spering

Recorded at German Radio, Frankfurt December 2003

● **CAPRICCIO SACD 71015** [71:05]

AVAILABILITY

Capriccio

Don't be put off by the title. This fascinating work is not just a Christmas Oratorio; it is much more. In fact Christmas hardly gets a look in. Oh yes, there is a brief mention of the Christ-child and there are some Shepherds who get entangled in a titanic struggle with Satan, but there is little more. This is a Christmas Oratorio for the more sceptical 21st century world. So why has it not appeared before and who is this obscure composer.

If you look at his dates you will immediately think of a composer who may have a little of Haydn in him and possibly some Beethoven, but it may well be more helpful to realize that he is a contemporary of Weber. His orchestral writing is powerful, colourful and is quickly able to set a scene, as at the very beginning.

Cartellieri's father was an Italian musician but he was born in what is now the heart of industrial Poland, Gdansk. He quickly drew attention to himself as a promising composer with a symphony, an opera and a cantata even featuring on the same bill as Beethoven in 1795 when the latter played his 1st concerto.

The extensive and indispensable booklet notes by Norbert Bolin outline his life. They give us a close look at the cantata blow-by-blow as it were. The libretto is discussed and we are also given a challenging short essay on 'A time for crises for the Oratorio', i.e. the period between 1740-1790 - a time when opera was strongly finding its feet.

The full and correct title for this seventy-five minute drama is 'La Celebre nativita del Redentore cantata ossia Oratorio Parole di Signi' with libretto by Luigi Prividali.

An outline of the extraordinary plot is as follows. The overture is dispensed with (quite an innovation this) after less than two minutes in favour of a choral introduction, or to be more precise a chorus of shepherds who are to feature regularly. They tell us of a desolate landscape and frozen wastes, or unhappy humanity awaiting its saviour. One is reminded that the season of Advent is a penitential period of waiting and fasting. The shepherds are confronted by Satan and comforted by 'Amor Divino'. But it is John the Baptist who has to confront Satan in scene 3 in a sequence of powerful, Beethovenian strength. This sets the pattern for the work. The philosophical concept is that the world is dark and sinful where Satan can be powerful. God's arrival in the incarnation of his son Jesus pushes Satan and his Angels into powerlessness if mankind will allow him to.

This battle, which is more psychological than physical, culminates in a grand scene, played out by Satan and his chorus of demons with his exaltation "Up, courage, to arms". But Satan is defeated so that the Divine angel can confidently sing "Now the maker of the world has descended to redeem his people". In the final chorus of angels, 'Divine love', 'The Angel of Glory' and St. John join together in 'Heaven is the Victor'. Life has become a theatre of war between good and evil, fought in the human soul and in human society.

The performance captures perfectly the full drama. The forward recording and excellent balance enhance the overall impression.

The soloists are at full throttle throughout. Each has a high spot. St. John the Baptist is quite a challenging role. Cartellieri demands a wide range and a versatile voice, exemplified excellently by Andreas Karasiak in his scene with Satan. Alexander Marco-Buhrmester as Satan is especially effective in his scene with the demons. His recitatives tumble by quickly and angrily and this makes a fine foil to the detached gentility of the recits of there other characters. Cartellieri's musical characterization is impressive for Satan throughout. The chorus work here and throughout is focused and with clear diction. The demons have an element of roughness without the tuning being disturbed.

The 'Angel of Glory' is a light but not timorous tenor in the hands of the lyrical Ray M. Wade. Listen especially to the Italianate way he tackles the aria 'Gloria in cielo al vero Deo' with its timpani and trumpet accompaniment. Remarkably this aria is preceded by a delightful fanfare introduction and a mini Oboe concerto. **The main aria for Katerina Beranova as 'L'amor Divino' is 'Del verbo incarnato' for which there is another delightful touch: the delicate introduction of three unaccompanied flutes as she descends to man, as it were. Her voice is clean, clear and lacks unnecessary vibrato, with an effortless head voice which I, for one applaud.**

So, to sum up. This is something of a rare work, and although an oratorio its subject matter and its treatment are unique. The composer is certainly of the second rank but in this piece has flashes of genius. The performance is excellent and gives the work every opportunity both vocally and instrumentally to shine.

To all concerned in the project, congratulations. I suspect however that the general musical public may well pass it by, unless there is a chance in the near future of a live and high profile performance, for example at the Edinburgh Festival or a Prom Concert. The work certainly deserves a wider audience.

Gary Higginson