

## An Easter Extravaganza at the Palazzo Bonelli

By Ellen T. Harris

On Easter Sunday, April 8, 1708, Handel's Italian oratorio *La resurrezione* (The Resurrection) had its premiere at the palace of the Marquis Francesco Maria Ruspoli (titled Prince of Cerveteri in 1709). The topic is not typical today of Eastertide music performances, which tend to focus either on the passion story of Christ's crucifixion or on settings of the mass text that pass directly from the crucifixion to the resurrection three days later ("crucifixus etiam pro nobis sub Pontio Pilato, passus, et sepultus est. Et resurrexit tertia die..."). *La resurrezione* tells the story of the intervening days: from the Harrowing of Hell on Easter Saturday, when Christ and the angels did battle with the devil and his demons, conquering death, to the discovery of the empty tomb on Easter morning by Mary Magdalen and Mary Cleophas (the "other Mary" in the Bible).

The action takes place on two planes: the supernatural battle between an Angel, who opens the work with a demand that the gates of Hell be opened, and Lucifer, who rages against this intrusion, and the human sphere, where the two Marys and St. John the Evangelist mourn Jesus in Part I and learn of and rejoice in his resurrection in Part II. The vocal ranges portray this expansive cosmological space. Falling between the heavenly Angel (coloratura soprano), who is never specifically identified but I assume must be St. Michael the Archangel, defender of the Church against Satan, and Lucifer (low bass), the humans inhabit the middle ground of earth: Mary Magdalene (soprano), Mary Cleophas (contralto), and the evangelist St. John (tenor). In the original cast, the roles of the Angel and Mary Cleophas were taken by male castrati, but the role of Mary Magdalene was given to the leading female singer in Ruspoli's private musical establishment, Margarita Durastante. Alas for Ruspoli, the size and grandeur of the performance had, in the view of the Catholic Church, moved the performance into the realm of the public. As women were forbidden in Rome from performing in public, this earned Ruspoli a papal reprimand, and the role was, presumably, shifted to a castrato. This gender-bending casting has been reversed in modern times. Whereas in Handel's time the two Marys were sung by men (to abide by the regulation against women singing in public), in performances today the male role of St. Michael is always taken by a woman (to accommodate the range of the vocal line in a natural voice).

One has to admit that the Church had a point about *La resurrezione* being a public event. Ruspoli had spared no expense in the preparation of an elaborate temporary theater in the Palazzo Bonelli for its performance. Originally planned for a large room on the ground floor, in which the first of three public rehearsals was held, the performance needed to be moved to a larger space on the *piano nobile* (first floor) to accommodate the size of the audience.

Detailed records of the construction and expense involved in preparations for the performances survive in Ruspoli's account books in the Vatican Secret Archives. The Grand Hall was set up with quantities velvet, damask, and lace, including on the chairs of the musicians. A large taffeta curtain used during the performance was raised and lowered by

means of seven pulleys. Twenty-eight new music stands were newly carved out of poplar, half depicting the coat of arms of Ruspoli, the other half of his wife. Although by convention the oratorio would not have been acted, a backcloth painted by Michelangelo Ceruti depicted the resurrection and included all five characters—the angel sitting on the tomb announcing the resurrection to the two Marys, St. John in the distance near a mountain, and demons plunging into the abyss. It was “installed with difficulty and many men”; there was also a painted tablet giving the title of the oratorio that was “fixed over the beam at the front of the said tiered stage.” And, of course, there was the cost of dismantling all of this afterwards. Ruspoli had 1,500 librettos printed and bound in “wave-pattern German paper,” which given the five presentations--three open rehearsals and two performances—amounts to 300 per performance, which seems about right. (Of these 1,500 printed librettos, I am aware of only two surviving copies.)

Of course, no expense was spared on procuring the best singers and musicians. The large orchestra of about forty-five musicians was led from the first violin by Archangelo Corelli. The score includes parts for recorders, flutes, oboes, bassoon, trumpets, solo violin, viola da gamba, theorbo, and strings (the violins numbering at least twenty-two and divided in one aria into four separate parts), as well as continuo. The paid performers also included a trombonist, who probably doubled the bass line. Both the opening “sonata” and the instrumental “introduzione” at the beginning of Part II are taken from the overture of *Il trionfo del Tempo e del Disinganno*, an oratorio Handel had written the year before to a libretto by another one of his Roman patrons, the Cardinal Benedetto Pamphilj. Some have argued that this borrowing suggests (or even indicates) that *Il trionfo* was never performed, but it seems to me more likely that the performance of *Il trionfo* in 1707 remained successfully private as *Il risurrezione* did not. According to anecdote, Corelli also led the orchestra for this earlier work.

The librettist, Carlo Sigismondo Capece (1652-1728), after an international career in law and government, had returned to Rome around 1700 as poet to Maria Casimira, widowed Queen of Poland, earning renown as a librettist and dramatist. *La risurrezione* benefits from Capece’s operatic experience in terms of the distinct characterization of the principal roles and its dramatic pacing, both of which were tremendous gifts to Handel. Following convention, the oratorio is divided into two parts (rather than three acts), and although there are no subsequent divisions by scene specified, the shifts are readily apparent in the text and easily recognizable in performance. In Part I, for example, which portrays the harrowing of Hell, the first “scene” depicts the confrontation at the gates of Hell between the Angel and Lucifer. The Angel demands the gates be opened, but Lucifer rejoices in his apparent victory over Christ. In scene two the prospect shifts (imaginatively) to Jerusalem. The two Marys mourn the death of Jesus, but St. John reminds them of the promise of resurrection and urges them to return to the tomb. Scene three returns to the gates of Hell, now open, with the Angel calling forth the blessed souls, beginning with Adam and Eve, who have died and are raised to life.

Part II begins the morning of the resurrection in Jerusalem. In the first scene, St. John describes the sunrise (beautifully depicted by Handel). Believing the resurrection has taken place, he rushes off to seek the Virgin Mary. The scene shifts to Lucifer and the Angel. The Angel's celebration of victory leaves Lucifer distraught, but he swears he will prevent the world from learning of his defeat. In the third scene, Lucifer fails to stop the two Marys from approaching the tomb and howls (Handel writes this as a recitative that plunges precipitously down two octaves!) that he must "flee from Heaven, from Earth, from all the world, and fall once more into the lowest depths of Hell." In scene four, the Angel meets the two Marys at the tomb. Learning that Christ has risen, they hasten to go find him. In scene five, Mary Cleophas tells St. John what they learned from the Angel at the tomb, and he informs her that Jesus has already appeared to His mother. Mary Magdalene enters excitedly to report that Jesus has appeared to her. The three celebrate the freedom from sin and join a final chorus in praise.

So how did Handel respond to a lavish theater being constructed for the performance of his music, the employment of the best and most virtuosic musicians and singers, and a dramatic libretto by a leading author? *La resurrezione* is one of his most lavish scores, stunning in its characterization and with an instrumental palate that exceeds any work he wrote before or after. The story begins with the Angel—as I imagine, wings extended, sword thrust in front of him—flying like the whirlwind from the heights of heaven to Lucifer's domain with the demand that the gates of hell be unbarred ("Diserratevi, o porte d'averno!") and accompanied by the heavenly host of strings, oboes, and trumpets. The opening vocal line rushes down an octave and a fifth, nearly creating the kind of Doppler effect one experiences with a siren as an emergency vehicle passes by at speed. Lucifer, as yet unaware of what is approaching, meditates on his deluded self-image, that although fallen, he has not lost any of his strength ("Caddi, è ver"). Significantly, unlike the powerful orchestration of the Angel's aria, his accompaniment is reduced to unison strings. In a delightful detail, this aria begins on the exact note that ended the Angel's plummeting first line, and that also ends the entire aria, extending it down yet another octave, as if Handel was depicting the cosmos with the entire gamut of musical space. When he realizes the full extent of what the Angel tells him, Lucifer calls up the powers of darkness and the serpent-haired furies, their rage and hissing clearly portrayed in Lucifer's bass voice and, once again, the tellingly limited, orchestration of unison stings.

Following this scene, the listener can be forgiven for breathing a sigh of relief as the scene changes from the supernatural conflict to humans on earth: the sonic change is immediately obvious. Mary Magdalene, sitting up through the night following Christ's death, asks for sleep to fold its wings and not cover her eyes ("Fermi l'ali"). This luscious pastoral setting introduces the sounds of two recorders and viola da gamba with muted strings set over a sustained bass note lasting for thirty-nine measures, during which the harpsichord is silent. The stillness is palpable.

Throughout the oratorio, the humans are identified with similarly inventive orchestrations and individual instrumental colors. The viola da gamba specifically defines the earthly realm. First introduced in Mary Magdalene's aria, it then pairs with the viola as a solo obbligato line in accompaniment of Mary Cleophas's aria "Piangete, sì piangete" as the two women agree to wait the night together. It is not surprising that Handel borrowed this music for the opera *Floridante* when the prima donna, not dissimilarly, awaits her lover in the darkness of a walled garden. St. John makes his entrance on the Saturday following Christ's death bringing a message of hope. His *adagio* aria partakes of the grief-laden, fragmented style Handel was to use throughout his career, perhaps most famously in "He was despised" in *Messiah*, but adds stunningly virtuosic extensions on the word "constancy," emphasizing the continuation of faith in spite of grief. The viola da gamba pairs here with the cello (again without harpsichord) creating a delicate duet with the voice. The evangelist then urges the women not to give up hope of the resurrection with a metaphor of the turtle dove who laments the death of her mate by birds of prey, but has double joy when he returns "free and in all his beauty." The quiet accompaniment consists of transverse flute, viola da gamba, and theorbo with intermittent, violent downward runs in all the strings in octaves, which surely depict the raptors attacking the nest. This striking portrayal becomes, perhaps, somewhat problematic after hearing in the middle section of the aria that the mate returns safe and sound. It even seems that, at some point in the process of creating and performing this work, the string raptors were totally eliminated, leaving a dilemma for modern performers. I'm happy to say that the Emmanuel performance leaves the raptors in!

Part II of the oratorio, following an orchestral introduction, begins with St. John watching at dawn on Easter Sunday. His aria, "Ecco il sol," is one of a number of dawn pieces in Handel's music. The slowing rising bass line that maintains a constant rhythm while still pausing to repeat notes in the ascent is a first cousin of the dawn aria sung by Irene in *Theodora*, "As with rosy steps the morn," as she puts her trust in the Lord (an aria many Emmanuel listeners will associate with the voice of Lorraine Hunt Lieberson). In both of these settings, the dawn does not burst forth but arises gradually out of the darkness, the growing light intensifying in advance of the sun itself. Following this aria in *La resurrezione*, the scene appropriately shifts immediately to the Angel announcing that Christ has risen.

In the remaining course of the oratorio, Lucifer, Mary Magdalene, Mary Cleophas, and St. John all come to grips in different ways with this news. The two Marys absorb the information slowly as they approach the tomb, see the stone has been rolled away, and are spoken to by the Angel. Handel provides Mary Magdalene with extravagant, full-voiced concerto grosso arias to begin and end this sequence. In the first, "Per me già di morire," where she admits she is fearful but says that Jesus, who was not afraid to die, has given her courage, a concertino group of solo violin, viola da gamba, and a combined "single voice" of recorders and one muted oboe are contrasted with a concerto grosso of full strings. The surety of this musical statement convinces Lucifer he has lost, and the last we hear of him is the angry recitative in

which his final words “I return precipitously to the profound depths” rapidly descend two full octaves as he sonically disappears from our “sight.” Immediately, in Mary Cleophas’s following aria, “Vedo il ciel,” trumpets return for the first time as a vocal accompaniment (but subtly) since their use in the Angel’s aria that opens the oratorio. Subsequently, both Marys respond with simple, heartfelt joy to the announcement of the Angel at the tomb, while St. John’s final aria provides another opportunity for an emotionally-weighted, fragmented aria as he reports the words of the Virgin Mary upon seeing her resurrected song to the two women. Ending this sequence is Mary Magdalene’s second large-scale concerto aria, “Se impassibile immortale sei risorto,” in which the concerto grosso of full strings is heard against a concertino of two solo oboes, solo violin, and viola da gamba. All five of the singers (including Lucifer) join in a final ensemble in which, once again, the trumpets sing out in full voice.

After the three public rehearsals and two performances, *La resurrezione* was never performed again in Handel’s lifetime. But Handel knew good music when he wrote it, and he found ways to transfer a significant number of movements to later works. He drew on *La resurrezione* for his opera *Agrippina*, performed the next year in Venice, and for his stunning *Apollo e Dafne* cantata written at about the same time. Once in London, he found places for various movements in his Italian operas, especially during the 1710s, but he returned to this work as late as 1748 in the oratorio *Alexander Balus* when he found a way to repurpose (with revision) the Angel’s opening aria as Alexander’s “Mighty Love now calls to arms!” Although Handel’s music would continue to develop and deepen, the sureness of dramatic touch, orchestral color, and virtuosity of *La resurrezione* gives us Handel already in the fullness of his powers. He was twenty-four years old.