

Italian Oratorio and the Early Orchestra

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Distinctions between the sacred and secular repertoires of the Baroque era are drawn with glib facility. Take, for example, the situation of the church and chamber sonatas. Since a sonata with a series of movements in binary form and with rhythmic traits associated with a series of dances is by definition a chamber sonata, a church sonata can be defined as a work for similar resources with any set of traits not in conformity with this model. The greater rhythmic flexibility, more expanded harmonic vocabulary, diminished involvement with variation, and newer approach to diminished involvement with variation, and new sense of motivic development are not in any obvious way related to the "church", at least not in the same sense as the gavotte and minuet can be related to the "chamber." In this context, the distinction between sacred and secular is based entirely on formal attributes of a specified repertory.

A different perspective on the early history of the orchestra is implied in received doctrine about the history of the genre we call the symphony. The number, nature, and sequence of movements in the German and Austrian symphonies of the mid-eighteenth century suggested to musicologists of earlier generations, whose access to Baroque repertory was often limited to the major works of major composers, a close correlation and thus a debt to the *sinfonia* of Italian opera. This association of course has some validity, particularly when the *sinfonias* of Alessandro Scarlatti are taken to represent the Italian tradition. By extension, however, the acceptance of this notion suggests that if the symphony as a genre was a secular invention, the group that performed such a work was constituted within the secular context. Moreover, the original reason for associating the classical symphony with the Baroque *sinfonia*, a musical species normally scored for strings alone, was terminological. Those educated in the classically oriented universities of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were often quick to equate etymological with historical derivation.

These two familiar intersections of the sacred/secular dichotomy in overviews of the development of the instrumental repertory exclude entirely any assessment of the social and political dimensions of culture that differentiated one religion from another. Specifically the differences in cultural orientation between Catholic and Protestant Europe appear not only to have been substantial in themselves but also to have created for composers reared in Germany a dialectic that was itself a stimulus to frequent rethinking of the methods of compositions. The essence of this consideration was thus a functional one.

The fact that Italy was an entirely Catholic country colours our impressions of its likely role in the development of the orchestra. Papal dictates of the seventeenth century forbade (be it said with various degrees of observance) the use of numerous wind instruments that were deemed in the writings of antiquity to have antisocial connotations or in their more dexterous modern performance simply to be self-important. Opera, an ostensible ancestor of the symphony, was essentially prohibited in Rome, although of course it was pursued with great vigor and consistency in Venice and eventually in Naples.

Like all valid theories, the view that the early symphony is indebted to Italian opera has greatly eclipsed any consideration of a somewhat contradictory notion--that the formation of the early orchestra is indebted to the Italian oratorio. To explore this notion, it is essential that we review some recent findings about the Italian oratorio. Basically there are two lines of enquiry that have altered our picture of this genre.

For Rome, the oratorio offered an opportunity for grandiosity that seems to have been expressed in the assembly of large numbers of instruments. (inserts) These were almost entirely string instruments, and extensive documentation for the performance of church music of other sorts in Rome supports the notion that although not all oratorios were lavishly orchestrated, almost all lavished orchestrated works were oratorios. The performing bodies were, however, almost entirely string ones, with the occasional addition of a lute or a trumpet. Thus there was a close adherence to Papal mandate for works that were typically given under the auspices of one or another of the more eminent Cardinals.

In Venice, in contrast, oratorios were chiefly given in the all-female ospedali, which were supported in the main not by aspiring hopes but by aspiring doges. Thus they were works of sacred import that tacitly supported secular ends. The blending of sacred and secular aims was inherent in the fabric of Venetian history, and the rewards for obscuring any sense of division between them were almost always significant. It appears that this was no less true of the Baroque oratorio than of the fate of Frederick Barbarossa, of Paolo Sarpi, or for that matter of Antonio Vivaldi.

Oratorio came later to Venice than to Rome. Carissimi was dead before the earliest of the conservatory oratorios was written. The formation of the Holy League to fight the threat of Turkish advances in the 1680's brought to Venice a degree of lip-service to the Counter Reformation that coincided with the earliest performance of oratorios in the conservatories. Some of the sense of mixed religious and political motives that characterized the endeavours of the Holy League seems also to have marked this earliest group of oratorios. Unfortunately we can only judge from surviving libretti; the music itself is almost entirely lost.

There was also an important symbiosis between Venetian and Florentine oratorio, for some of the most political of these lost oratorios performed in Venice were dedicated to Florentine princes and cardinals, who on their own terrain would have seen works of a more austere character performed by all-male casts.

In the absence of surviving music, one of the most informative sources on the Venetian oratorio of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries is the journal *Pallade Veneta*, a chronicle of culture initiated in the 1680's by a Lucchese priest whose view of such enterprises was strongly colored by his responsibility as a book censor for the Inquisition. Among his most informative comments on the Venetian oratorio are those concerning a work by the San Marco organist Giacomo Spada, the oratorio *Santa Maria Egizziaca Penitente*, which to judge from its libretto had a thinly-veiled anti-Turkish thrust.

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