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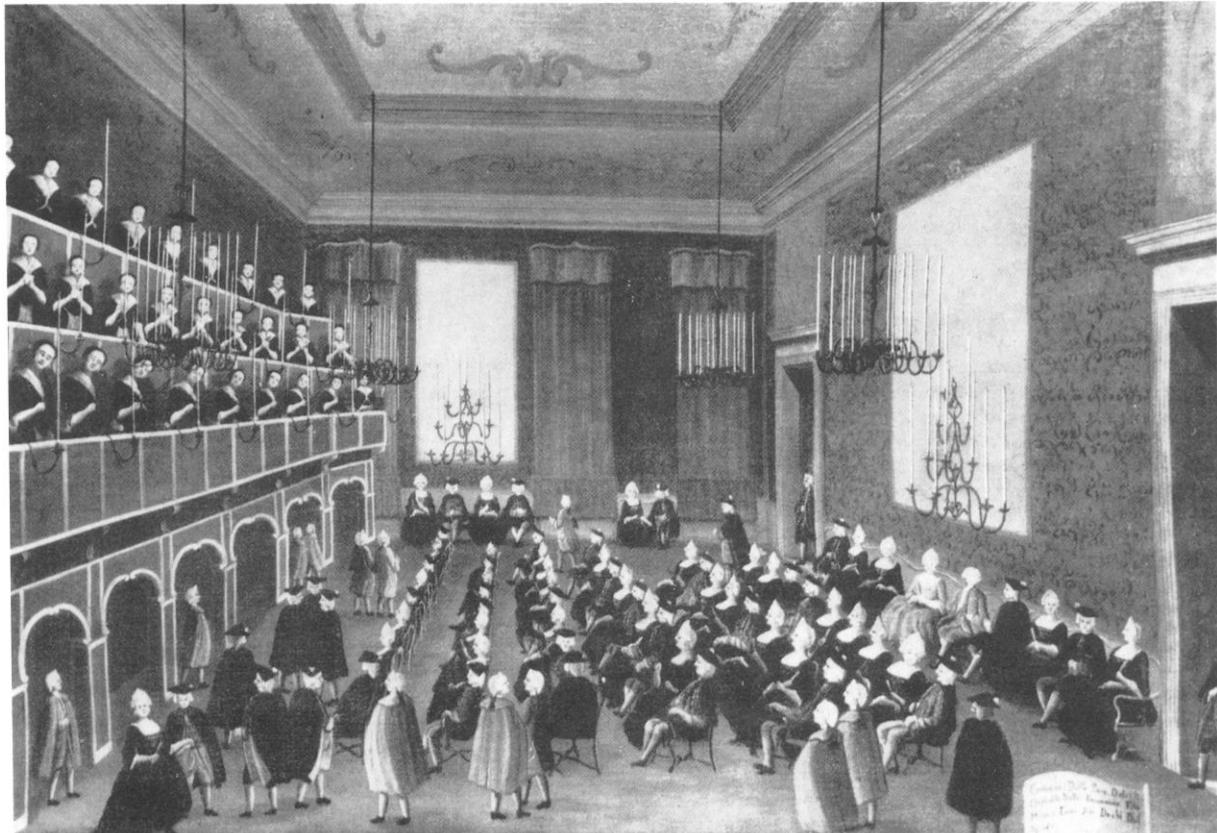


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Eleanor Selfridge-Field

Italian oratorio and the Baroque Orchestra



1 Concert in the hall of the Filarmonici, around 1782; painting by Gabriele Bella (Venice, Pinacoteca Querini-Stampalia)

The role of Italian oratorio in the development of the orchestra is tacitly regarded as minimal. Yet recent investigations into the performance of oratorio in Baroque Italy give reason to ask whether, by analogy with the external form bestowed on the symphony by the sinfonia of the opera, it was not the case that the instrumental colour and mass, and thus the special acoustical fabric of the orchestra, were endowed to a certain degree by the oratorio. To understand the context in which such a consideration might be made, we might first examine existing instrumental practices,

and the influence of political, social, religious and intellectual factors on their development. This should enable us to see that the Italian oratorio was a synthetic expression of its time and place.

In Europe at large the kinds of instrumental bodies that existed in the first years of the 18th century were usually constituted according to custom or convenience. Town bands, which had existed for centuries, were on the wane. The size and composition of church ensembles were often determined by the liturgical importance of each respective feast. Theatre

orchestras responded to the literal details of a libretto, with violins to represent love, trumpets to represent patriotism, and the like. Court instrumentalists, somewhat akin to the minstrels of the Middle Ages, seem to have been deployed in groups of relatively few players who could be engaged to provide music for dances or a host of other entertainments. An instrumental group could range in number from one to 100. The concept of a normative practice is a notion of the later 20th century that ill suits the task of describing an epoch in which variety and spontaneity were highly prized and intentions of conformity unknown.

The emphasis within instrumental groups varied from country to country. To a rough approximation, Italy was known to excel in the quality of its string playing, while woodwind instruments, particularly the bassoon and predecessor of the oboe, had found consistent patronage in France. Brass instruments had a long tradition in German civic bands. Opera was an important force in the homogenization of these disparate traditions in the early 18th century, because whereas church and court musicians could spend a lifetime in one post, the soloist, who was usually a singer but could be an instrumentalist, went on tours of several months' duration. By the 1730s there were a few instrumentalists who could boast of having played in theatre orchestras throughout Europe, from England to Russia, from Sweden to the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies.

Another factor that encouraged the convergence of national and local traditions was the rise of Austria as a world power. Through the Catholic faith, Austrians followed the musical practices of Italy and (to a degree) of Spain. (Relations with France in the early 18th century were periodically cool.) Through its geographical situation, however, Vienna was an increasingly important intersection in land travel, and subject therefore to exposure to many foreign customs. Like Italy, Austria offered a large variety of settings in which to perform instrumental music.

Austria's rise was inextricably bound up with the final flowering of the Counter-Reformation. Although we normally think of the late 16th century as its apex and look to the masses and motets of Palestrina as its chief musical manifestations, there was a resurgence of Counter-Reformation mentality in the last two decades of the 17th century. The formation of the Holy League (1684) linked the fortunes of Rome, Venice and Vienna not so much in the defence of Catholicism as in the defence of Christianity. This religious fervour

was expressed variously in the far-flung domains of the League, for their traditions were distinctly separate.

In matters of musical style, the Church was generally a conservative force. The fact that Italy was an entirely Catholic country may therefore suggest that its likely role in the development of the orchestra cannot have been other than negligible. Papal dictates of the 17th century forbade (with varying degrees of effectiveness) the use of numerous wind instruments. Opera, through its sinfonia an ostensible forebear of the symphony, was essentially prohibited in Rome, although it was pursued with great vigour in Venice, which cultivated political independence from Rome, and with polite respect in many intervening cities.

Intellectually, the first years of the 18th century constituted an era of great respectability for inventiveness. The rise of learned academies, which even while paying lip service to the greatness of ancient civilizations focused interest on some of the challenges that were to spawn the industrial revolution of the 19th century, was substantial, particularly from 1690 to 1730. Among the voluminous papers left by academicians one finds designs for what can most readily be described, albeit anachronistically, as typewriters and automobiles. The impetus was for speculative rather than practical inventions. The fortepiano, built in the first decade of the new century, was an invention of this sort—a theoretical model brought to fruition for the inspection of academic investigations of acoustical control particularly among Florentine intellectuals. Noblemen who frequented learned gatherings respected the mechanical ingenuity that it represented, but its acceptance by musicians had to await an era more oriented toward practicality. The rapid refinement of reed instruments between 1700 and 1730 owed something to this quest for inventiveness that is marked also in the musical repertory by the collective titles of such volumes as Bach's *Inventionen* (1723) and Vivaldi's op.8 concertos, which were otherwise entitled *Il cimento dell'armonia e dell'invenzione* (1725).

In general, the theatre and the chamber were the two settings that most consistently indulged the innovative whims of composers. It is therefore assumed that it was in such places that the exploration of new instrumental capabilities engendered by the rise of mechanical technology was most commonly pursued. While this cannot be disputed, it must be acknowledged that the role of instruments in sacred

oratorio is an important exception.

It is against the background of these many fluid developments of civilization that we might view the treatment of instruments and instrumental bodies in Roman and Venetian oratorio.

In Rome the performance of an oratorio offered an opportunity for grandiosity that the prohibition of opera otherwise prevented. Although the Roman oratorio orchestra was large, its numbers could vary greatly. With few exceptions, however, it was composed entirely of strings. This conscious emphasis on strings alone respected the injunctions of the Popes Innocent XI and Innocent XII against the use in church of 'timpani, horns, trumpets, oboes, recorders, flageolets, modern harps and mandolins'.¹

While not all oratorios were performed with large orchestras, many large orchestras were convened to perform in oratorios. A representative example of the instrumental dimensions achieved would have been the performance of Lulier's *Betsabea provata* at the Casa Savelli in 1692. The treble and middle registers were served by 23 violins and seven violas. The remaining 17 instruments, which represented more than one-third of the total, were all potentially continuo instruments. There were eight cellos, five string basses, two lutes and two harpsichords.² It seems quite unlikely that the entire group performed together; it appears that the majority of instruments were used in small groups that changed from number to number. Only in the opening sinfonia and perhaps in the interlude between halves is there an actual probability that they performed as a single group.

Ensembles of similar composition but smaller dimensions seem in general to have been used for private entertainments in Rome. These were less secular than they might seem, since cardinals hoping for higher office vied with one another for the attention of other clerics and the noblemen who surrounded them, for the clergy and the nobility were closely intertwined in matters political, social and academic. A *pastorale* given at the Roman court of the Venetian nobleman Pietro Cardinal Ottoboni in 1690 involved 31 instruments in a sinfonia, although in the vocal work itself only three violins, two violas, a cello and a string bass were required.³

The social and intellectual situation of the oratorio was quite different in Venice. Although the oratorio was a work of ostensibly sacred import, its subject often masked a secular moral. The blending of sacred

and secular ends was inherent in the fabric of Venetian history. Procurators aspiring to the office of doge were sometimes among the sponsors of oratorios given in the *ospedali*, and the audiences invited to oratorio performances in these all-female institutions often included visiting noblemen. The opera theatres became symbolic of the power of certain noble Venetian families, especially the Grimani; the *ospedali* were competitive more in a collective sense, since they involved the patronage of large numbers of families. Thus it was perhaps more natural for oratorios to express in thinly veiled metaphors for current events the collective aspirations and triumphs of the republic.

From roughly 1685 to 1720 a recurrently attractive subject for Venetian oratorios was the heresy of Levantine religions. The Turkish advances westward and the formation of the Holy League were sufficient reasons for such interest to develop. Venice had had centuries of contact with the Levant and still maintained diplomatic offices in Constantinople; the *ospedali* had originally been built to house pilgrims of the Crusades and thus had a symbolic involvement with the East. In opera, Venetians could clothe their representations of the East relatively realistically. Music was part of the opulent cloth that they perceived to belong in such depictions. To the Venetian ear, a nasal-sounding reed instrument may have seemed a natural part of such decor.

To those who were accustomed to the visual extravagance of Venetian opera, the instruments available in the *ospedali* offered an aural substitute of comparable proportion. On the Venetian stage one could encounter elephants and camels retrieved from battle in far-off lands, fluttering birds, croaking frogs and rushing bands of hunters stalking real game. To improve the effect, machines produced thunder and lightning, and provided clouds on which the gods could descend. Mindful of such stupendous effects, the Venetian oratorio composer could choose from his palette such hues as varied timbre and compass offered; through their individual use he could achieve an aural particularization of the moment that compensated for the absence of visual action.

In Rome the response to the model of lavishness that other entertainments provided seems to have been to offer opulent, if static, scenery for the oratorio. This must greatly have exceeded the pleas of the Counter-Reformation for decorum. Let us consider, for example, an account of the performance in 1706 of Alessandro Scarlatti's *Il regno di Maria Assunta*,

included in a recent article by Arnaldo Morelli:

The oratorio *Il regno di Maria Assunta* by the Eminent Signor Cardinal Ottoboni, Vice Chancellor of the Holy Church, with music by Alessandro Scarlatti, was given some days earlier in the *accademia* of learned scholars and celebrated poets that he usually holds in his palace... The theatre, formed in only a few hours, was arranged in such a way that more than 100 of the most celebrated players of Rome, both of strings and of trumpets and other instruments, could be accommodated.

A great box was erected in the middle of the courtyard... Above this box there were seven triangular stairs on which the instrumentalists stood. Each pair shared a music stand in the form of a golden globe with an eagle perched on it. The music desk, which was lighted by two giant candles, was concealed between the wings of the eagle.

Rome never saw an oratorio so excellent, either in the singing or in the composition of the words, or in the *soavità* of the music and the 'concerting' of instrumentalists, who were led by Signor Arcangelo Corelli... The performance was attended by... the majority of the prelates of Rome; [by] ambassadors, Roman barons, princesses and princes; [by] ladies and gentlemen and other nobles; plus an infinity of ordinary people... After the oration, the sinfonia and concerto of instruments began.⁴

Still more extravagant reports of oratorio performances issue from Venice. The Pietà was described in 1687 in the monthly publication *Pallade Veneta* (written by a book censor for the Inquisition) as 'a seminary for young girls to learn the arts of music and of playing every agreeable instrument'. 'I do not believe,' said the author, 'that there can be another institution that can boast of having a set of better concerted or more eruditely played instruments.'⁵ This comment was offered some 15 years before Vivaldi became the string master at the Pietà.⁶

The oratorio that most dazzled the author of *Pallade Veneta* was one (now lost) by Giacomo Spada called *Santa Maria Egizziaca Penitente*, which addressed the need to humble the heathen populations of other lands. It was repeatedly given for crowds that not only filled the sanctuary of the Pietà, where Spada was the music master from 1678 until 1701, but also, we are told, listened from doorways, windows and alleys to hear at least 'an echo of the voices of Paradise'. This is the body of his account:

On the 16th [September 1687] the greatly esteemed oratorio *Santa Maria Egizziaca* was repeated in the church of the... Pietà by those most virtuous young girls with so much acclaim and applause that they could desire nothing more

for their glory. The attendance was so great that those who could not be accommodated within the church filled the streets outside, and the balconies and windows in the neighborhood were glutted with those who had to content themselves... with only an echo of the voices of Paradise.

I realize that I described this work to Your Excellency [Prince Ferdinand of Tuscany] previously, but perhaps not with that eloquence which is merited by the *passaggi*, the *trilli*, the *gorgie*, the *grazie* and the sweet *manieri* of the never sufficiently praised Signora Lucretia, Signora Barbarella, Signora Franceschina—the soul and spirit of the most graceful Sirens of this Adriatic Sea, the tiny instruments of gold on which Apollo has established all the highest prerogatives of music.

And the consequence of [combining] women who possess such angelic voices [with] the decorum and honour of the notes and of the organs [used] in this beautiful piece, besides having carried to heavenly glory these learned and erudite children, has been to place Signor Don Giacomo Spada, the author of the music, between two pillars of a *non plus ultra* on his sea of singing.⁷

Reference is also made to the theorbo and lute *ricercate* at the intermissions of this work.⁸ Three of the six soloists of *Santa Maria* were still in residence at the Pietà 30 years later when Vivaldi's *Juditha triumphans*, another work inspired by the evils of heathenism, was performed.⁹

The growing importance of the oratorio in the development of instrumental usage is documented in a *Pallade Veneta* report of 1711, holding that an audience at the Pietà was rendered 'ecstatic by the spirited harmony of that great variety of instruments' used in Gasparini's forgotten oratorio *Maria Magdalena videns Christum resuscitatum*.¹⁰

In fact Venetian theatres, for all their glitter, seem to have lacked instruments in significant numbers, and even San Marco, the ducal basilica, with an orchestra of 39 at the end of the 17th century, provided a more limited variety than the *ospedali* conservatories.¹¹ In the conservatories, however, the numbers and variety were, as in Rome, distributed throughout long works as obbligatos and ensembles. If all the instrumentalists performed together as a single group, it can only have been in opening sinfonias and intervening concertos. This, at least, is the conclusion that must be drawn from the very limited amount of documentation that is currently known.

One of the few remnants of the Pietà's legacy of indulgence of instruments and cultivation of the oratorio is Vivaldi's *Juditha triumphans*.¹² It is the only

Ex.1 Vivaldi, Juditha triumphans, 'Veni, veni mi sequera fide' (opening, voice and obbligato only)

Chalumeau

Judith

Ve-ni, ve - ni, me se - qua-re fi - da A - bra a-ma - ta, spon-so or - ba-ta. Tur - tur

ge mo, ge - mo ac spi - ro in te.

Ex.2 Vivaldi, Juditha triumphans, 'Noli, o cara, te adorantis' (opening, voice and obbligato only)

Largo

Oboe

Holofernes

No-li ò ca - ra _ te a - do - ran - tis vo - to

Du - cis_ non fa - ve - re, vo - to Du - cis_ non fa - ve re.

one of Vivaldi's five oratorios that survives and one of the few from this period in Venice that is represented not simply by a libretto. In this work there is a lot of predictable but nonetheless particular symbolism. A solo violin represents the flight of a sparrow; a viola d'amore, mercy; a solo violone, sleep; a consort of *viole all'inglese*, heaven; two oboes highlight one soldiers' chorus, two *claren* another; a mandolin and four theorboes signify, in the walking accompaniment

parts of separate numbers, the inevitable passing of time; and the elusive chalumeau symbolizes faith in a *simile* aria that alludes to the turtle-dove.

The instrumental contribution that seems to have been most revered in such works as this was the mosaic effect of a series of differently constituted ensembles. However, the selective use of instruments introduced a new dimension to the existing choices for text illustration, which otherwise consisted of

meter and melodic figure. (To include tonality and harmony, however conspicuous they may be to the modern musical mind, appears in the context of early 18th-century thought to be anachronistic.)

The subtle possibilities of recombination of these elements are well illustrated by a comparison of two arias in *Juditha* that are thematically similar but instrumentally, structurally and functionally different. When Judith (representing Venice, i.e. Christian virtue and faith) beckons her servant Abra to follow her in the aria 'Veni, veni mi sequere fida', the instrumental equivalent of the turtledove to which the text alludes is the chalumeau,¹³ which is thematically independent of the voice (see ex.1). But when the drunken Holofernes (representing the Turks and the evil of the non-Christian world generally) attempts to sing of his love for Judith in 'Noli, o cara, te adorantis', his expression is highlighted by the oboe, which is thematically integrated with the voice, and is accompanied by the organ, a symbol of the Underworld since the time of the Renaissance (see ex.2). Thus the instruments betray what words fail to reveal.

For the purposes of considering the way in which

Handel and Bach dealt with the orchestra, the different approaches of Rome and Venice to the oratorio are instructive. Handel undoubtedly had the opportunity to witness oratorio performances in Venice, but it is the Roman practice that seems to have left the greater imprint on his music. The modular constructions of Corelli's *concerti grossi* and the heavy reliance on such stringed instruments are conspicuous even in some of Handel's late instrumental works, such as the *Grand Concertos* of the 1740s.¹⁴ The numbers of players he might have envisaged to perform in such works is a moot point, since he was undoubtedly influenced by the availability of players in the locations in which he subsequently worked. The garrulousness of his first oratorios, *Il trionfo del Tempo e del Disinganno* (1707) and *La Resurrezione* (1708), is, however, distinctly typical of Roman oratorio at this time.

For Bach, who never travelled outside Germany, only the concertos, in copies long divorced from the oratorios and other sacred vocal works with which they were originally associated and indeed from direct aural experience, were accessible. It seems unlikely

Table 1. Handel's published concertos

	HWV	date of earliest MS source	associated vocal work	HWV of associated vocal work	date of vocal work
op.3, no.1	312	1716–20	<i>Il parnasso in festa</i>	73	1734
	2	1715–16	<i>Il parnasso in festa</i>	73	1734
	3	1716–18	<i>Il parnasso in festa</i>	73	1734
	4	1716	<i>Amidigi di Gaulia</i>	11	1715; 1716
	5	1718–20	<i>Il parnasso in festa</i>	73	1734
	6	c.1722	<i>Ottone</i>	15	1723
op.4, no.1	289	1736	<i>Alexander's Feast</i>	75	1736
	2	1735	<i>Esther</i>	50	1718(?); 1732
	3	1735	<i>Esther</i>	50	1718(?); 1732
	4	1735	<i>Athalia</i>	52	1733
	6	1736	<i>Alexander's Feast</i>	75	1736
op.7, no.1	306	1740	<i>L'Allegro</i>	55	1740
	2	1743	<i>Samson</i>	57	1743
	3	1751	<i>The Choice of Hercules</i>	69	1751
	4	1740–46			
	5	1750	<i>Theodora</i>	68	1750
	6	1748			
	322	1746–7	<i>Joshua</i>	64	1748
	333	1746–7	<i>Alexander Balus</i>	65	1748
	334	1746–7	<i>Judas Maccabaeus</i>	63	1747

that when Bach first came in contact with Vivaldi's concertos in Weimar he could have had any inkling that such music was generally performed in a sacred setting in Italy. What he gleaned from such works were new concepts of rhythmic clarity and models of harmonic and melodic simplification—that is, intellectual fare divorced from its cultural and social implications.

Since the possible dates of composition of the Brandenburg concertos span a period of several years immediately following Bach's exposure to Venetian string concertos, it seems appropriate to observe that the diversity of instrumental conceptions encountered in these six concertos is consistent with the model of instrumental usage found in the Venetian oratorio—in the sense that each seems to have been tailored to a different occasion. Such an exhibition of variety in instrumentation and thematic development is only a problem when we permit ourselves to assume that there was some kind of prevailing 'norm' for orchestral compositions in force at the time. In fact there may have been a coincidental likeness between the secular orchestra of the Cöthen court in the years around 1720 and the conservatory orchestras of Venice in the same years.

Bach and Handel, both born Lutherans in Germany in an era of great religious consciousness, represent very different species of Protestant response to Catholic example, indeed to a range of Catholic examples that was already quite diverse. The large orchestras of Rome and the varied ones of Venice in the closing years of the 17th century and the opening years of the 18th manifested in quite different ways the extravagance that was the final flowering of the Counter-Reformation in Italy. It remained to composers such as Bach and Handel to distil from this rich repertory those purely musical traits that had the potential to transcend time and space. In all events, it is a repertory without which, however removed it was from their personal experience, their own contributions to the development of an orchestral literature would probably have been different and possibly less exalted.

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¹This list is given without documentation in P. Fogaccia, *Giovanni Legrenzi* (Bergamo, 1954), p.226. It is complemented by a statute of 1716 governing the Roman Congregation of Music, which stipulated that 'instrumentalists ... will be taken from those who play the

violin, viola and the bass, as well as other instruments': the text of this later document is presented in R. F. Hayburn, *Papal Legislation in Sacred Music, 95 AD to 1977 AD* (Collegeville, Minn., 1978), p.83.

²H. J. Marx, 'Die Musik am Hofe Pietro Kardinal Ottobonis unter Arcangelo Corelli', *Analecta musicologica*, v ((1968), p.130, doc.32.

³Ibid, p.126, doc.12. Recent work on the Roman oratorio includes the doctoral thesis of J. Johnson at the University of Chicago, and S. Mangsen, 'Corelli, Muffat, and the "Colossal" Orchestra in Seventeenth-Century Rome' (paper delivered at Canadian University Music Society, 2 June 1985).

⁴A. Morelli, 'Alessandro Scarlatti maestro di cappella in Roma ed alcuni suoi oratori', *Note d'archivio*, ii (1984), p.144, doc.7.

⁵E. Selfridge-Field, *Pallade Veneta: Writings on Music in Venetian Society, 1650–1750* (Venice, 1985), p.184, doc.45.

⁶For further information on this topic see E. Selfridge-Field, 'Music at the Pietà before Vivaldi', *EM*, xiv (1986), pp.373–86.

⁷Selfridge-Field, *Pallade Veneta*, p.188, doc.51.

⁸Ibid

⁹Prudenza, Barbara, Paolina and Lucietta, all singers in *Santa Maria Egizziaca*, were names that recurred in references to the Pietà throughout the 1720s (demonstrating, among other things, that the *fanciulle* of the *ospedale* were not on balance predominantly juvenile). Numerous musicians are cited in G. Rostirolla, 'L'organizzazione musicale nell'ospedale veneziano della Pietà al tempo di Vivaldi', *Nuova rivista musicale italiana*, xiii (1979), and V. Coronelli, *Guida de forastieri per succintamente osservare tutto il sia riguardevole nella Città di Venezia* (Venice, 1706/R1948). A new version of the aria 'O servi volate' in Vivaldi's *Juditha* was drafted for 'Signora Barbara'.

¹⁰Selfridge-Field, *Pallade Veneta*, pp.271–2, doc.233.

¹¹For the year 1700, for example, the San Marco roster appears to have included a string section of twelve violins, four violas, three cellos, four *violoni* and a *violon grosso*. Among the winds there were two cornetts, two trumpets, five trombones and one oboe (the oboe was a recent addition, 1697). For accompaniment there were, in addition to the organs of the church, four theorbos and a harpsichord. Many of the more unlikely instruments were probably only used in special circumstances. The harpsichord, for example, was employed in the Lessons of Holy Week. These figures are derived from E. Selfridge-Field, *Venetian instrumental Music from Gabrieli to Vivaldi* (Oxford, 1975), appendix F.

The emphasis in the conservatories seems to have been, through the end of the seventeenth century, more exclusively on string instruments in all their variety. The Mendicanti bought seven viols in 1673 and in 1700 its total ensemble numbered 21, comprising six violins, four violas, four cellos, two *violoni*, two trumpets, two trombones and a theorbo: S. Bonta, 'The Church Sonatas of Giovanni Legrenzi' (diss., Harvard U., 1964), ii, p.488.

¹²Modern edition by A. Zedda (Milan, n.d.). For further information on this work see E. Selfridge-Field, 'Vivaldi's Esoteric Instruments', *EM*, vi (1978), pp.332–8.

¹³On the development, identity and use of this single-reed wind instrument see M. Talbot, 'Vivaldi e le chalumeau', *Rivista italiana di musicologia*, xv (1980), pp.153–81, and C. Lawson, *The Chalumeau in Eighteenth-Century Music* (Ann Arbor, 1981).

¹⁴The appearance of the third volume (instrumental music) of B. Baselt, *Handel-Handbuch* (Kassel, 1986) provides such a significant body of information on the dating of Handel manuscripts that some important differences between the concertos opp.3, 4 and 7 can be perceived (see table 1). The concertos in op.3 (1734) were all associated with operas and serenatas, although most were composed considerably earlier than the vocal works to which they became attached. The organ concertos that appeared in op.4 (1738) were all associated with odes or oratorios which, with the exception of *Alexander's Feast*, were performed before the independent copies of the instrumental works that now survive were made. Four of the organ concertos of op.7 (c.1747) are linked with odes or oratorios

contemporary with the independent copies of the works. The remaining two works of this collection have no demonstrable correspondences with vocal music. The profile of the three concertos for two orchestras (c.1747) is similar to that of op.7.

Only the string concertos op.6 represent a coherent collection to which some forethought for overall design, as opposed to market penetration, seems to have been given. This integrity is partially obscured by subsequent reorchestrations for oboes and strings.

A purely artistic motivation to provide instrumental pieces of unusual colour and clarity for performance in oratorios can also be documented. The Overture in B flat for two oboes and strings is now thought to have been composed originally for *Il trionfo* in 1707: A. Hicks, *The New Grove Handel* (London, 1983), p.150. The harpsichord concerto op.4, no.6 was revised from a harp concerto in *Alexander's Feast*.

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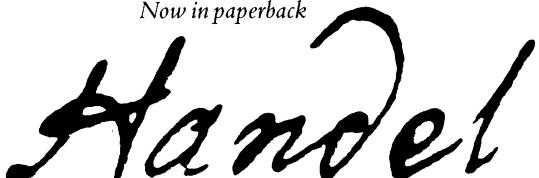
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