



When Farinelli met Monteverdi

The voice has always exercised great fascination: an instrument with which we are all endowed, it is at the same time very easy to use in our everyday singing and very difficult to fully master in art music. The encounter evoked by the title is an opportunity to offer a vocal string of pearls that allow us to explore different aspects of 18th-century vocality. Only one of the vocal pieces presented this evening is by the *Divin* Claudio, and only one of the arias can be traced back to Farinelli: all the rest is an itinerary that flows among different authors, styles, genres and first performers. It is a varied and changing cross-section of the musical imagination of the time, combining, two by two, and contrasting, vocal and orchestral pieces. These latter not only provide a pleasant variety but also allow a more pragmatic rest for the voices. An aesthetic point of view and the possibility to compare vocal and instrumental productions of the same era and/or by the same author are certainly taken into account. Thus Monteverdi's musical *scherzo* is juxtaposed to *La Sinfonia della Poppea*, to Caldara and Scarlatti we can compare Corelli's posthumous concerto op. 6, and to Vivaldi simply his own concerto RV 121.

In addition to the human voice, Vivaldi himself (1678-1741) is the great protagonist of the evening. We begin with '*Agitata da due venti*', Costanza's aria from *Griselda* (II/2; Venice 1735), the workhorse of all 'baroque' sopranos in the mood for vocal acrobatics. Costanza was performed by the virtuoso Margherita Giacomazzi; yes, a woman: because the 18th century was also a century of great female singers. The aria proposes a simile that is as overused in operatic texts as it is effective in music scores: the inner conflict that agitates Costanza is compared to the raging storm that makes the inevitable '*terrified helmsman*' fear shipwreck. However granted is the text, the intonation, with its well-established topoi, is enthralling, highlighting the conspicuous vocal skills required of the interpreter. Very wide intervals, agility, trills, very fast repeated notes: a handbook of difficulties concentrated in an aria of great impact, where, in addition to Giacomazzi's skill, Costanza's regal character emerges, as she is torn between the faith of a bride sworn to King Gualtiero and the passion of womanhood that binds her to Roberto, whom in this very scene she decisively banishes.

With a backward leap of a hundred years, we arrive at the lightness of Monteverdi's *Scherzi musicali* (Venice 1632). *Quel sguardo sdegnosetto* consists of three stanzas of eight verses, the last two of which, although not identical, serve as a refrain. The bass continues repeating substantially the same, allowing the voice to interpret the text differentiating the melodic solutions and moulding them to the words (strophic variation). Short instrumental refrains resound between the stanzas, the second of which takes up the very popular *ciaccona*. The voice flows fluidly and lightly, and takes advantage of both the freedom granted to a '*scherzo*' and the presence of words that offer themselves to agility ('*sdegnosetto*', '*vola*', '*ardo*', '*nembo*'), without renouncing other topoi, such as the dissonances on '*asprissimo*' or the excitement of the call '*all'armi*'.

The second pair of arias features ‘*Vanne pentita a piangere*’ by Antonio Caldara (1670-1736) close to ‘*Torbido, irato e nero*’ from Alessandro Scarlatti's *Erminia* (1660-1725), representing the worlds of *oratorio* and *serenata* respectively. The first is taken from the *Trionfo dell'innocenza*, perhaps written around 1700 for Venice or Mantua and then performed in Florence and several times in Rome in the 1610s, when the composer was in the service of Prince Ruspoli. The protagonist, Saint Eugenia, disguised as the monk Eugenio, becomes the object of Melantia's lust. When she openly declares herself, the supposed Eugenio reprimands her severely with this aria, characterised by the descending arpeggios of the first violins in the refrains and by the insistence on repeated notes as accompaniment for the voice, sustained only by the strings without basso continuo and with the cello remaining in a medium-high register. It is a composed rebuke, that of the first stanza; the passage in minor with a long chromatic descent of the bass, the harmonic restlessness and the presence of the basses make the B section contrasting, where Eugenio/a declares his own firmness and promises Melantia only his ‘*eterno rigor*’. Truly ‘eternal’: in the last repetition this word stretches over a D of four and a half bars.

The Scarlatti aria is the only one sung by Farinelli (1705-1782) who, at the age of 18, performed the eponymous role of the *serenata*. We are in Naples in 1723; Carlo had already debuted on stage in Rome and Naples and had also performed the very famous musical duel with the trumpeter reported by Charles Burney. On June 13, on the occasion of the wedding of Ferdinando Colonna and Maria Luisa Caracciolo, he performed *Erminia*. The ‘*Gazzetta di Napoli*’ reported that ‘*it was sung by the four best virtuosi that are to be found in this city*’, including ‘Carlo Broschi (known as Fariniello) soprano, who performed the part of Erminia with much applause’. An Erminia agitated by love: the thickening of the metaphorical thunderstorm mixes with the frenetic, very fast fluttering of ‘*Amor di qua e di là*’. What better textual pretext to enhance the young castrato's pyrotechnic vocality that an aria of such great technical commitment?

The third vocal section lets us explore two different technical and expressive registers within Vivaldi's production. The famous aria from *Giustino* (Rome 1724), ‘*Vedrò con io diletto*’ (I/8), for the emperor Anastasio (the castrato Giovanni Ossi), is a farewell to his beloved wife Arianna, before leaving for a decisive battle. The very sweet melody (tender *Larghetto* in B minor) expresses all his yearning for the distant ‘*caro oggetto*: Vivaldi was evidently inspired more by the second strophe (‘*sospirando, pensando ogni momento*’) than by the idea of the beloved's ‘*contento*’ expressed in the first stanza. The introductory refrain, with the chromatic descent in repeated notes of the bass supported by string accompaniment, immediately defines this atmosphere.

With ‘*Quall'augellin che canta*’ there is a return to agility, but in a different sphere than before. Here it is not the fury of nature that is the occasion to infuse the score with impervious technical elements, but an equally popular and widespread topos: the imitation of birdsong. *Silvia*, after all, is a pastoral drama (produced in Milan in 1721 for Empress Elisabeth Christine's birthday). Margherita Gualandi sings this aria as the protagonist, undoubtedly a worthy interpreter of such a prestigious homage. The aria is characterised not only by the vocalism typical of this kind of piece, but also by the presence of a violin part that concerts with the voice; the very brief B section contrasts with A in terms of vocal profile and the support of the basso continuo alone.

The last juxtaposition re-proposes Scarlatti and Vivaldi. The former's aria is completely different from the previous Farinellian whirlwinds: ‘*Caldo sangue*’ appears in the oratorio *Sedecia re di Gerusalemme*, dedicated by the boards of the Roman Seminary to Cardinal Ottoboni in 1706, and is sung by Ismaele, Sedecia's son, dying at the command of Nabucco, who thus intends to strike his father. The musical transposition of the text is transparent: the mournful descending movement of the bass and vocal lines, the repeated notes, the chromaticisms, the fading of the voice on the word ‘*esangue*’, and, in contrast, in the B section the temporary shift towards a different expressive register on the words ‘*Forse un dì risorgerà / per vendetta / della man che mi saetta*’.

The programme closes by recalling the atmosphere of the aria that has opened it. ‘*Anch’il mar per che sommerga*’ is taken from the pasticcio *Bajazet* (in the score) or *Tamerlano* (in the libretto), performed in 1735 in Verona. On that occasion, the aria was sung by the castrato Giacomo Manzoli, known as ‘il *Succianoccioli*’, who interpreted Idaspe. It was originally found in the *Semiramide* written for Mantua in 1731 and intended for the role of Oronte, played by another castrato, Mariano Nicolini. We are back to the rutilant and imperious ‘*maritime*’ vocalism: again swirling scales, fast ribattute notes, leaps and trills; all barely mitigated by a rapid and moderately contrasting B section, which gives the singer some rest before embarking on a demanding *da capo*.

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