

## **JÓHANNES ÁGÚSTSSON & JANICE B. STOCKIGT: RISTORI IN DRESDEN**

Until recently, the Italian court composer in Dresden, Giovanni Alberto Ristori (1692/93–1753) has received much less attention than his more illustrious colleagues, Hasse, Heinichen, Zelenka, Pisendel and Quantz, with only a handful of studies having been dedicated to his work. And yet for nearly forty years he served the Saxon Elector and Polish King August II (1670–1733), and his son and successor, August III (1696–1763) in various capacities, writing operas, serenatas, intermezzi, cantatas and sacred music, while playing the organ in the Catholic court church and the keyboard in the opera and chamber concerts in the royal palace.

Ristori arrived in Saxony in December 1715 with a glowing reputation following the overwhelming success of his opera *Orlando* in Venice in 1713–1714. For the next couple of years Ristori, in his official role as *Compositeur de la musique italienne*, was based in Warsaw where he composed intermezzi and music for the comedies of his father Tommaso and his troupe of Italian comedians. Ristori's first opera for Dresden was the well received *Cleonice* (1718) and this was later followed by two comic operas, *Calandro* and *Un pazzo ne fa cento, ovvero Don Chisciotte* in 1726 and 1727. Thanks to *Calandro*, Ristori's name has entered the history books. At the beginning of 1731, the composer travelled to Russia when August II sent his father with his troupe of comedians and a select group of singers and musicians from Dresden to amuse the Russian Empress Anna. *Calandro* was in Ristori's luggage and it became the first Italian opera performed on Russian soil. The empress was so impressed that she offered Ristori the position of Kapellmeister and the opportunity to establish the first Russian court orchestra – an offer Ristori accepted, according to letters written by the Saxon envoy to Russia. The composer even tried to make arrangements for his wife Maria to travel to Moscow; before this could happen, he was recalled to Dresden in December 1731 and speculation about his future ended.

Wide-ranging changes to the musical establishment were made in Dresden following August II's death on 1 February 1733, and the succession of his son. Ristori's salary fell from 600 to a mere 450 thalers. With a large family to feed – Giovanni Alberto and Maria had six children, five of which survived infancy – he suffered. Twice in the mid-1730s he petitioned for a rise and gradually his wages were increased to 800 thalers thanks, no doubt, to his very effective role as music teacher of the young Saxon princesses, the eldest in particular, Maria Amalia. A two-year period from 1735 saw a flurry of activity, with the composition of the much admired *Divotti Affetti* (sacred duets), and the earliest known *Stabat Mater* setting from the pen of a Dresden court composer. Three serenatas were composed for Warsaw when August III and his consort Maria Josepha were based there between November 1734 and August 1736. When the royal couple returned to Dresden, Ristori's *Le Fate* was performed to welcome them back. Two months later his *Arianna* was premièreed on the king's birthday.

In January 1738 it was announced that Maria Amalia was to marry Charles, the King of Two Sicilies. After the celebrations in Dresden, where the 13-year-old Saxon princess married by proxy, she left for Naples on 12 May accompanied by her brother, Crown Prince Friedrich Christian. Ristori was not a part of Maria Amalia's entourage, but his 18-year-old daughter Cecilia was, having travelled as the chamber maid to the young queen. Sometime during the autumn, the Dresden court decided to send the composer to Naples where two operas of his were performed at the newly built San Carlo theatre: *Temistocle* in December 1738 and *Adriano in Siria* one year later. Both works were praised by members of the Neapolitan court and local press alike but – despite these musical triumphs – Ristori's time in Naples was largely a miserable one. Only sporadically was he allowed to continue his music lessons with Maria Amalia, and except for the payments for the two operas and a single new set of clothes, he received no salary from either the Dresden or the Naples courts. To make things much worse, his daughter Cecilia became involved in a huge scandal when she married a Viennese-born Italian count, whose father was far from happy with the arrangements due to the obvious differences of rank and birth. Remarkably, during the sojourn in Naples Ristori acted as a secret correspondent for the Dresden court when reporting on Maria Amalia's difficult first few months as queen, thanks to his free access to the royal palace and first-hand information from his daughter. Numerous letters, illustrative of his lively character but also describing his hardship, are held by the Saxon State Archives.

When Ristori returned to Dresden in the summer of 1740 he took up his former occupation of teaching the young Saxon princesses – all of whom became accomplished musicians – and he also supplied the Catholic church with fresh music from Naples. Claudio Bacciagaluppi's landmark research on the reception history

of Neapolitan sacred music north of the Alps demonstrates the small but important part Ristori played in the dissemination of the compositions of Giovanni Battista Pergolesi and Leonardo Leo. Ristori's oratorio *La sepultura di Cristo*, performed in the Catholic court church in Dresden during Easter 1741, and three masses dated 1744, including the beautiful *Messa per il Santissimo Natale*, show that – as in the mid-1720s – he was actively involved with the sacred music at his court. Indeed, soon after his colleague Zelenka died in late December 1745, Ristori was appointed church composer alongside Johann Michael Breunich. When Zelenka salary of 800 thalers was split between the two of them, Ristori became one of the highest paid musicians in Dresden. His formal appointment as Vice-Kapellmeister in 1750 placed him next in command to Hasse, and confirmed the high regard in which he was held by his court.

Ristori died on 7 February 1753 of 'inflammation' in the house of cabinetmaker Mangelsdorff in Kleine Brüder Gasse. His widow sold his manuscripts to the court and these were later deposited in the archives of the Catholic church. Reports of performances of Ristori's music in Dresden after his death are few and far between, and although his sacred music was still heard in the Catholic church for some years, it was deemed outdated by the 1770s.

## A ROYAL LIBRETTIST: MARIA ANTONIA

In the summer of 1747 the musical life at the Dresden court received a welcome boost when Friedrich Christian married his 22-year-old first cousin Maria Antonia, daughter of the Bavarian Elector and Emperor Charles VII, and Maria Amalia, sister of Maria Josepha. When the young Bavarian princess arrived in Dresden, she was already an aspiring poet, a fine singer and a competent keyboard player and lutenist, having received solid instruction from the Munich court composers Giovanni Battista Ferrandini and Giovanni Porta. To further continue her musical education, the Dresden court lined up four outstanding composers and musicians: Hasse (composition), Nicola Porpora (singing) and Weiss (lute), while Ristori was assigned to the Hofstaat of the crown princely pair and asked to move into their Kurprinzenpalais (now Taschenbergpalais), thus ensuring Maria Antonia had constant access to the Italian composer for keyboard instruction, musical advice and accompaniment. The three years Ristori lived in this palace proved to be a fruitful period, during which he composed a large-scale cantata in honour of the crown princess (*I lamenti di Orfeo*, 1 January 1749), and set music to the three librettos of Maria Antonia which feature in this series of editions.

The earliest of the three cantatas, *Didone abbandonata*, was almost certainly conceived during the summer residency of Friedrich Christian and Maria Antonia at Pillnitz in August and September 1748. During an afternoon concert on Sunday 6 October 1748, Maria Antonia, accompanied by Ristori and a small group of virtuosi from the Hofkapelle, sang *Didone abbandonata* in the presence of the members of the court and the nobility. The correspondence of Friedrich Christian's Grand Master, Count Joseph Gabaleon Wackerbarth-Salmour, with the Saxon Prime Minister, Count Heinrich Brühl, who was then based in Warsaw with August III and Maria Josepha, records the good reception of the performance, but his postscript interestingly reveals that Friedrich Christian had tried to influence Maria Antonia's setting of the text. When Metastasio received a copy of the libretto a couple of months later, he praised it unreservedly and was astonished to see that the young crown princess could present such excellent verse. A few weeks later a teacher-student arrangement had been established between Metastasio and Maria Antonia, with the latter sending the former her texts for opinion and advice. However, their contact came to an abrupt end less than one year later when the crown princess accused the Imperial court poet of having 'cruelly mutilated' an early draft of her *Il trionfo della fedeltà*.

Before the unexpected end of his promising relationship with Maria Antonia, Metastasio had also expressed his admiration of *Lavinia a Turno*, which received its first performance on the evening of 12 November 1748. In his letter to Brühl, which was accompanied by a copy of the libretto, Wackerbarth described the 'admirable' singing of Maria Antonia, while adding that Ristori had forbidden him to disclose the author's identity. Instead, the prime minister was supposed to find this out by the 'sublime' style of the text, which of course was penned by the crown princess. After the second performance of *Lavinia a Turno* six days later, Wackerbarth praised Ristori's beautiful music and its great reception with the connoisseurs in attendance.

We do not know exactly when the cantata *Nice a Tirsi* first was heard in Dresden, but judging by a note in the score copy it must have been in 1749. Once again, Maria Antonia must have been the singer in this cantata.

## THE MUSIC

The two cantatas composed in 1748 are based upon Virgil's epic *Aeneid* which tells the story of the Trojan hero, Aeneas. From this, Maria Antonia chose two episodes: the tragic *Lavinia a Turno* tells how King Latino gave his daughter Lavinia in marriage to Aeneas who kills Turnus to whom Lavinia was promised, while *Didone abbandonata* relates the equally tragic tale of Dido's loss of her lover Aeneas and her subsequent suicide. *Nice e Tirsi* is an Arcadian *pastorella* that portrays the emotions of Nice (soprano) upon the absence of the shepherd Tirsi. The solo oboe plays only in the final movement, cast as a love duet between Nice and Tirsi, which is the most joyful and happy movement of all these cantatas.

A distinguishing feature of Ristori's settings of Maria Antonia's texts is the extent of the highly dramatic and very lengthy accompanied recitatives. The performance materials show these (as well as at the arias) to be full of extreme dynamic changes (pia[no], poco for[te]; fortiss:[imo], etc.), tempo alterations (ranging from 'Largo', 'Lento', 'poco Andante', to 'spiritoso e staccato', 'Allegro'), and fluctuations of metre. Furthermore, the intensity of these recitatives and arias is heightened with 'madrigalisms', or word painting, heard not only in the vocal parts but in performance techniques required of the instrumentalists. Johannes Pramsohler points to one such moment where, to the text in *Didone abbandonata* 'che l'ombra mia tradita turbartela saprà' (for my betrayed shadow will know how to disturb [your peace]) Ristori asks for a strascinato effect from the strings—which has been interpreted to mean a very fast bowings on the bridge (ponticello), while for the B section in the final aria of *Lavinia a Turno* a full string tremolo is required to accompany the text which begins: 'Qual cruda pena amara, che rio tormento è questo. Non hò più speme, e resto vittima del dolor.' (What a cruel, bitter punishment, what an unbearable torment it is. I have no more hope and am a victim of my grief).

An interesting account of how these cantatas once might have been heard in the context of private music making at the Dresden court comes from the English music historian Charles Burney: In August 1772, when visiting Munich, he had the good fortune to hear Maria Antonia sing. Now in her late 40s, she performed an entire scene from her opera *Talestri*. The Dresden composer Johann Gottlieb Naumann accompanied her on the harpsichord and her brother, the Elector of Bavaria, was one of two violinists. From Burney, we learn something of the style of Maria Antonia's singing, especially her manner of performing her own accompanied recitative. He wrote: 'She sung in truly fine style; her voice is very weak, but she never forces it, or sings out of tune. She spoke the recitative, which was an accompanied one, very well in the way of great old singers of better times.'