Il Tesoro di San Gennaro - Sacred music in early 18th-century Naples (2013)

Domenico Scarlatti (1685-1757) Sinfonia a 5 in do maggiore *1 | I. Presto 00:00:50 2 | II. Adagio e staccato 00:01:13 3 | III. Allegro assai 00:01:37*
Cristoforo Caresana (1640-1709) Canzona a 4 con istromenti “Per S. Gennaro” (Napoli 1702)
4 | Canzona a 4 con istromenti “Per S. Gennaro” 00:06:39
Francesco Nicola Fago (1677-1745) Confetibor a 3 con violini
5 | Confetibor 00:04:01
Stabat mater a 4 voci e strumenti
6 | Stabat mater dolorosa (Largo) 00:03:51 7 | Pro peccatis suae gentis (Andante moderato) 00:04:53 8 | Virgo virginum praeclara (Andante) 00:02:31 9 | Quando corpus morietur (Largo) 00:02:36
Domenico Scarlatti Sinfonia a 4 in re maggiore
10 | I. Grave 00:00:27 11 | II. Presto 00:02:15 12 | III. Adagio 00:00:40 13 | IV. Allegro assai 00:00:36
Antra, valles, divo plaudeant (mottetto a 5 voci e strumenti) (Napoli 1701)
14 | Antra valles Divo plaudant (Coro) 00:01:57 15 | Cultor nemorum Joannes (Primo solo) 00:03:19 16 | Istae praecursor magnus (Secondo solo) 00:04:07 17 | Supernae vos mentes (Duo) 00:02:02 18 | Prepotens martir et Lydus luminis (Alto solo) 00:02:58 19 | Antra valles Divo plaudant (Coro finale) 00:02:01
Gaetano Veneziano (1665-1716) Jam sol recedit (inno a voce sola con violini) (Napoli 1702)
20 | Jam sol recedit 00:03:35
Iste confessor (inno a 2 voci, 4 violini e b.c.)
21 | Iste Confessor 00:04:19
Domenico Scarlatti Sinfonia a 4 in sol maggiore
22 | I. Allegro assai 00:00:43 23 | II. Grave 00:00:46 24 | III. Allegro assai 00:00:57
Gaetano Veneziano Ave Maris Stella (inno a voce sola con violini) (Napoli 1693)
25 | Ave Maris Stella 00:04:20
I Turchini (Ensemble): Valentina Varriale - soprano Leslie Visco - soprano Filippo Mineccia - countertenor Rosario Totaro - tenor Pino De Vittorio - tenor Giuseppe Naviglio - bass Antonio Florio – director

The San Gennaro mentioned in the title of this disc refers to one of the patron saints of Naples, Saint Januarius. He was born sometime in the 3rd century and died around 305. He was bishop of Naples and is said to have been beheaded. Little is known for sure about his life and legends have been woven around him. In 1527 Naples was hit by the plague, and afterwards the Neapolitans decided to build a chapel dedicated to San Gennaro within the Duomo. The actual building started only in 1608 and was completed around 40 years later. The chapel was called the Tesoro (Treasury) di San Gennaro and was inaugurated in 1646. That same year a vocal and instrumental ensemble was founded. It was expected to provide the music for the yearly three feast days devoted to the saint.

This disc offers some music written for performance in the Tesoro during one of the celebrations for Saint Januarius. It is extended with pieces by other composers from Naples who had no formal ties with the Tesoro: Domenico Scarlatti and Gaetano Veneziano.

In 1686 Francesco Provenzale was appointed maestro del Tesoro, a post he kept until his death in 1704. However, in 1699 he was excused from his obligations due to his poor health, and it was Cristofaro Caresana who took over the responsibilities of composing music for the Tesoro. The Canzona a 4 con istromenti has the indication "per San Gennaro". In his liner-notes Dinko Fabris states that there are about 130 compositions in manuscript with such a designation. This piece dates from 1702, and Fabris suggests it could have been performed at the celebration in May of that year, "the only one for that year for which there is documentary evidence indicating payment for eight voices (two per part) and for eight instruments other then the two organists". It is rather curious, then, that this piece is performed here with one voice per part.

In 1709 Caresana died, and he was succeeded by Nicola Fago, nicknamed "Il Tarantino", after his place of birth, Taranto. He was a pupil of Provenzale and in the first decade of the 18th century he held posts as primo maestro at two conservatories. He was the first Neapolitan composer of comical operas, but it is his sacred music which has brought him fame. He composed five settings of Psalm 110 (111), Confitebor tibi Domine; the setting recorded here has survived in various sources, and was published as late as the early 19th century. His Stabat mater was probably performed on Maundy Thursday of 1719 by one of the confraternities in Naples. It is for four voices and violins in which solo passages alternate with tutti episodes. There are some passages with striking harmonic progressions, such as "dolentem cum Filio" (sorrowing with her son) and "in planctu" (in grief). The closing verse is also highly expressive: "and when my body dies, grant that my soul be given the glory of Paradise".

Gaetano Veneziano had no ties with the chapel of San Gennaro. He was another pupil of Provenzale and acted as his music copyist. He held several important positions in Naples, the

most prestigious of them that of maestro di cappella at the court of the viceroy, the Real Cappella, a post he held since 1704. Iste confessor is a hymn for two voices - soprano and alto - with four violins and bc. The instrumental scoring for four violins is a typically Neapolitan phenomenon. The two remaining pieces are two hymns in which the solo parts are rather straightforward. It is the violins which have the most engaging parts to play, with many figurations.

When Veneziano became associated with the Real Cappella he was the successor of Alessandro Scarlatti. The latter's son Domenico was born in Naples and entered the Real Cappella in 1701, at the age of just 16. From this year is a motet for five voices and instruments, Antra valles, Divo plaudant, written for the feast of St John the Baptist. It opens with a tutti section which is repeated at the end. In between are three solos and a duet. The three instrumental pieces on this disc are also from Domenico's pen: they belong to a collection of 17 sinfonias in four or five parts which is preserved in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. They are probably mostly written as overtures for operas or oratorios.

This disc offers an interesting programme of music written in Naples in a period which is not that well-known. Antonio Florio is one of the experts in this field, and has recorded many discs with music by Neapolitan composers from the late 17th and early 18th century. I have heard some of them and have been mostly impressed by the performances. That is the reason I am slightly disappointed with this disc. The instrumental performances are excellent. It is the vocal part which bothers me. The two sopranos are fine, the alto and bass adequate. The two tenors are the weak spots, especially Rosario Totaro. He is a specialist in the comical music written in Naples, and seems to have shaped his voice accordingly. I don't want to be unkind, but it reminds me of a bleating goat. It has an unpleasant sharpness and damages the ensemble. I just find his singing unconvincing in this kind of repertoire. Pino De Vittorio is a bit better, but he doesn't seem all that comfortable in the two hymns by Veneziano. The tutti sections in Scarlatti's motet don't need to sound like a pack of barking dogs.

This assessment may seem pretty harsh, but I really believe that this disc could have been much better if the selection of voices had been more critical. Even so, there is much to enjoy here, and the music is such that everyone interested in this kind of repertoire should definitely investigate it. ---Johan van Veen, musicweb-international.com

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