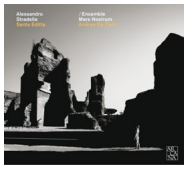
Alessandro Stradella - Santa Editta (2015)



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piè"Veronica Cangemi 1:33 41. Recitativo "Qui tace la reina"Gabriella Martellacci 1:54 42. Terzetto "A notte breve"Francesca Aspromonte, Gabriella Martellacci, Fernando Guimarães 2:23 43. Recitativo "Di profeta real s'odan gli accenti"Claudia Di Carlo 0:30
Santa Editta Verónica Cangemi - soprano Nobilità Francesca Aspromonte - soprano Humiltà Claudia Di Carlo - soprano Grandezza Gabriella Martellacci - contralto Bellezza Fernando Guimãraes - tenor Senso Sergio Foresti - bass Ensemble Mare Nostrum Andrea De Carlo - conductor

Many oratorios were written in Italy in the second half of the 17th century. In recent years some of these have been brought to the surface and are available in recordings. The oratorios by Alessandro Stradella are among the best-known and some of them are regularly performed, such as San Giovanni Battista and La Susanna. They are about characters, who were quite popular in the baroque era. That is very different in the case of the oratorio, which Andrea Di Carlo has recorded with his Ensemble Mare Nostrum.

The full title of this oratorio is Sant'Editta, vergine, monaca e regina d'Inghilterra (Saint Edith, Virgin, Nun and Queen of England). It refers to Edith of Wilton, who was the daughter of King Edgar of England, nicknamed 'the Peaceful' (c943-975), who ruled from 959 until his death. Edith and her mother withdrew to live in Wilton Abbey. When her father and her half-brother died, she was to succeed Edgar, but turned down the crown and preferred to stay in the Abbey. She was just over 30 when she died and soon she was venerated as a saint. Stradella set a libretto by Lelio Orsini, who was also the author of two other librettos, which Stradella used: San Giovanni Cristostomo and Ester. One wonders why Orsini turned to the character of Edith and why there was any interest in an English character, who likely was completely unknown to Italian audiences.

Arnaldo Morelli, in his liner-notes, states that it seems likely that the writing of the libretto and the composition of this oratorio were the result of a commission. The occasion could have been the wedding of Maria Beatrice d'Este, sister of Francesco II, Duke of Mantua, and James Stuart, Prince of York and the future King of England. The wedding took place in September 1673, but only after long negotiations, because Maria Beatrice preferred to devote herself to convent life, with the support of her mother. It was Pope Clement X who urged her to accept the marriage proposal. This was all part of the Counter Reformation: a Catholic queen in England could turn England into an ally of the Catholic cause. Louis XIV, King of France, also strongly supported the marriage. For Maria Beatrice's mother, the resistance against the marriage was a way of taking a stand against Louis XIV, thereby maintaining the little Este duchy's political equidistance between the great powers of Spain and France.

The libretto seems to support the suggestion that the oratorio reflects this time of indecision and deliberation. It is not a dramatic piece, but falls into the category of the morality, like Cavalieri's Rappresentatione di Anima e di Corpo or Handel's Il trionfo del Tempo e del Disinganno. In this case, the opposing forces are not evil, as some in those pieces are. Here Nobility, Humility, Grandeur, Beauty and Sense try to convince Edith not to give up the throne, a clear deviation from the historical truth. As was common at the time, the oratorio comprises two parts and consists of a sequence of recitatives and arias; in addition there are some duets and trios. There is no chorus: the moral is summed up at the end of the oratorio in a trio of Nobility, Grandeur and Sense: "Following a night of suffering that soon disappears comes a day of eternal peace and serenity. Whoever longs for joy in heaven never fears human suffering. All our grief and our pain, they are short-lived, giving way to the supreme good of just reward." Humility ends the oratorio with a short recitative: "The voice of the royal prophet can be heard. She who sows pain harvests delight".

The arias are rather short; they never take more than two and a half minutes and there are hardly any dacapos. Traditionally, oratorios were scored for five singers: two sopranos, alto, tenor and bass. That is the case here as well; one of the sopranos took care of two characters. There are no independent instrumental parts; only the viola da gamba takes a more concertante role once in a while, but otherwise the singers are only supported by the basso continuo. Because of that there is no sinfonia to open the oratorio; it begins with an aria by Humility.

It is not surprising that Stradella's oratorios are quite popular. He was a singer himself - and a quite famous one at that - and knew very well how to write for the voice. This explains why the vocal parts of his oratorios are always interesting and melodious. The most of the arias here are given to Saint Edith, but the other characters certainly have good arias to sing as well. The duets and trios are also of fine quality. It is telling that single arias from Stradella's pen have been found in manuscripts across Europe, bearing witness to the popularity of his compositions.

This is the third production in a Stradella project of Andrea Di Carlo and his ensemble. I was impressed with the first two discs, La forza delle stelle (http://www.musica-dei-donum.org/cd_reviews/Arcana_A377.html) and San Giovanni Cristostomo (review). I have nothing but praise for the present performance either. The singers are all outstanding; Verónica Cangemi deserves special praise for her outstanding interpretation of the title role. The voices blend perfectly and, as a result, the duets and trios come off beautifully. The basso continuo part is lively and the variety of instruments gives colour to this part, which is also played with great rhythmic flexibility. The inclusion of a harp is particularly nice and useful; it is in line with a practice of the time, which is still too often neglected.

This is a most delightful disc and I am looking forward to the next instalment. ---Johan van Veen, musicweb-international.com

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