

## Giacomo Carissimi - Oratorio della SS. Vergine – Ezechias (1996)



01. La Vergine 02. canto I, canto II 03. alto 04. tenore I 05. tenore II e basso I 06. basso II 07. Historicus I, Historicus II 08. Isaias 09. Ezechias 10. Dominus 11. maestro de coro  
Oratorio della SS. Vergine: Pamela Borri, La Vergine Patricia Pace, canto I Nunzia Santodirocco, canto II Luigi Petroni, alto Francesco Sclaverano, tenore I Mario Boccardo, tenore II e basso I Aurio Tomicich, basso II Ezechias: Alla Simonichvili, Historicus I Nunzia Santodirocco, Historicus II Pamela Borri, Isaias Francesco Sclaverano, Ezechias Auro Tomicich, Dominus Mauro Gizi (Maestro del coro) Ensemble Seicentonovecento Flavio Colusso – conductor

Oratorio della SS. Vergine. This work, like Daniele, his other Italian-language oratorio, is probably an early composition, possibly written before Carissimi became associated with the Church of the Santissimo Crucifisso. It is a remarkable work, with its combination of mysticism and sensuality (like the later *Sponsa Canticorum*), secular and sacred imagery, and the meticulous craftsmanship, with special attention to the musical relations and structures. For example, the Virgin's music is written almost entirely in F major, and none of the other soloists enter this key, as if emphasizing her unique status, and she is the only solo soprano (the other soprano sections are duets without more than a few solo bars for either singer.)

The text and music mingle pagan and Christian imagery, a reminder that many elements of pagan religions have their counterpoints in Christianity and that the Christian calendar subsumed many of the Greek and Roman festivals. The Virgin and Aurora (the goddess of the dawn) are treated as counterparts, and the last section, after the dramatic description of the Virgin's despoiling Hell (based on Revelation), is nothing other than an Arcadian pastoral, complete with a madrigal-like concluding chorus, and with only one indirect reference to the Virgin.

The opening *simphonia*, with a repeated pattern of rising scales that suggests the rising sun, is followed by a duet for two sopranos that also uses the same pattern as they describe the appearance of the Virgin. The vocal lines are fairly simple, but often use a close harmony that enhances the sense of richness. The Virgin's lines, in her first solo, are written over steady chords in the accompaniment and embellished by the other instruments, and finish with her melodious refrain, "ne senza me," which occurs at the end of each solo, and is followed by a solo passage from the tenor, bass, and tenor again, respectively.

The next section opens with another solo from the Virgin, which opens with the same mystical tone as the beginning, but grows to martial fervor as she describes the victory of God over the serpent (Satan.) This is followed by a section reminiscent of the Latin oratorios, in which the opening phrase is sung by the two sopranos who opened the work and then repeated by the entire chorus with the sopranos.

The second part of the work opens with a bass solo dramatically describing Judith's victory over Holofernes, punctuated by heavy instrumental chords similar to those in the section when the Virgin describes the victory of God and in the later section describing her own victory over the serpent. The next solo returns to themes from Greek mythology, as the tenor declaims in a jubilant passage, that neither Delos or Colchis (the homes of Medea and Circe) have seen the Virgin's equal, and is followed by the bass' tense description of the serpent's trail of destruction and final defeat. The brass that accompanies this section is remarkably effective, especially in contrast to the following jubilantly pastoral trio. The pastoral mood is sustained throughout this ending, and the repeated "su, su, verginelle" is so dance-like and light that it could be put into nearly any secular work with such a scene. The closing chorus combines clarity, simplicity, and an element of dignity, as if to create a final synthesis of the first and second parts. --- Anne Feeney, Rovi

Ezechias. The story from which Carissimi drew this text is one of the many that gives Biblical archaeologists and historians steady work, as it describes the sun going backwards ten degrees. It also inspired two of Carissimi's most inspired dramatic moments.

After a brief, sober *simphonia*, the two soprano narrators and the bass singing the part of the Lord swiftly set the scene with sober recitative, which leads to Isaiah's announcement to the king of his impending death. Carissimi gave this an otherworldly feel by setting it in a

near-monotone over a deep, funereal organ accompaniment, and casting Isaiah as an alto, which in that period, would have given some gender ambiguity. The narrators' music then becomes, for the first time, emotional as it imitates sighs and tears. Ezechias' prayer, which immediately follows, is the central point, both structurally and emotionally. It is very directly written, though like all Carissimi's works, carefully structured, and vividly expresses Ezechias' despair in its arching refrain "Parce mihi, Domine, et miserere." (Spare me, Lord, and have mercy.) It has three sections, each of which is followed by a brief orchestral passage. The first two orchestral "responses" are identical, but the third is faster and almost jubilant, an indication that the situation has changed. The narrators' music is again dispassionate in the recitative that introduces the Lord's announcement that Ezechias will instead live. As Ezechias (rather ungratefully!) asks for a sign that God will in fact do this, and in a majestic passage, over the horns, God responds with the description of the sign he will give, the sun going backwards ten degrees. The narrators describe this in music which, to illustrate further this disruption of the natural order, breaks away from their thirds in which they have sung throughout most of the piece. Ezechias responds in an arioso that contains elements of the majesty that marked God's music, alternating with exultant runs. The oratorio ends with a concerted madrigal-like section for all the voices that displays Carissimi's mastery of counterpoint. --- Anne Feeney, Rovi

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