

## Francesco Feo - Passio Secundum Joannem (2010)



1 *Jesus Arrested: I.* 3:40 2 *Jesus Arrested: II.* 4:52 3 *Jesus Arrested: III.* 2:39 4  
*Peter's Denial I* 1:59 5 *The High Priest Questions Jesus* 3:39 6 *Peter's Denial II* 1:43 7  
*Jesus Before Pilate: I.* 2:40 8 *Jesus Before Pilate: II.* 6:36 9 *Jesus Before Pilate: III.* 6:15  
10 *Jesus Before Pilate: IV.* 2:42 11 *Jesus Sentenced to Be Crucified* 3:10 12 *The*  
*Crucifixion* 5:40 13 *At the Cross: I.* 2:16 14 *At the Cross: II.* 1:53 15 *At the Cross: III.*  
4:04 16 *Jesus Dies* 3:14 17 *Jesus Pierced by the Lance* 3:55 Krystian Adam (Tenor)  
Barbara Schmidt-Gaden (Mezzo Soprano) Doron Schleifer (Countertenor) Mirko Guadagnini  
(Tenor) Varese Chamber Chorus La Divina Armonia (period instruments) Lorenzo Ghielmi –  
conductor

Francesco Feo (1691–1761) is one of those many composers active in Naples who eschewed the limelight and preferred to remain as teachers and mentor. This in turn generally made their music, almost all written for local use, disappear into the archives with scant hope for resurrection. Feo began his career as a promising opera composer in 1713, and by 1723 he and a young librettist, Pietro Metastasio, had teamed up to begin writing opera seria. The same year he became the head instructor at the Sant'Onofrio Conservatory at the Porta Capuana, a position he maintained for a decade and a half before going on to the Poveri di Gesù Cristo Conservatory. After a few more years he tired of this and wanted to resume an international career as an opera composer. He received a number of commissions from as far away as Spain and Bohemia, but by that time he had long been overtaken by ambitious students such as Nicolò Jommelli. Thus, he remained a footnote to music history, mainly being noted for his vain attempt to get his prize pupil, Giovanni Pergolesi, to stop obsessively working and regain his health. (Pergolesi didn't follow the advice and died at the young age of 26.)

As far as his own achievements are concerned, Feo is one of those seminal figures in the development of the Neapolitan musical style, which in turn was so influential in the formation of the music of the Classical period. He, along with colleagues such as Leonardo Vinci, Nicola Porpora, and Leonardo Leo, introduced a more lyrical, triadic, and homophonic music, where

the focus was on good contrasting form and a flexible structure, as well as interesting harmony. It is a shame that so little of his music has been revived; the only other disc is a recent 2009 recording on cpo of a Mass and a motet, both of which are quite fine pieces. This production of the St. John Passion by La Divina Armonia provides a nice sequel to that initial work.

When one thinks of a Passion according to John, the most immediate forerunners that come to mind are the German works by people such as Johann Sebastian Bach and Georg Philipp Telemann, the majority of which have a narrative portion interrupted by the usual choral expostulations and dialogue (generally Christ and other principal characters in the well-known drama), and contemplative moments with chorales and various arias. The Italian Passions, of which the bulk remain undiscovered, are something quite different. For the most part, they are in Latin taken directly from the Vulgate, and they don't always follow the entire story. This Passion begins with Jesus' arrest, trial, and the denial of Peter, ending with the Crucifixion and the piercing of the side of his corpse by a soldier's spear. The bulk of the musical material is narrative, originally probably performed by a castrato but here by countertenor Doron Schleifer, which weaves in and out of secco and accompanied recitative. There are two larger arias, one by Feo himself and another by Francesco Gasparini, that have been interpolated, though it doesn't say whether this was conductor Lorenzo Ghielmi's decision or whether the source actually contains them. Both do provide a nice diversion from the recitation, although I find the Gasparini quite Baroque in style, a rather stark contrast to the more modern Feo. Bit roles, mostly the dialogue, are done by tenors Krystian Adam and Mirko Guadagnini as Jesus and Pontius Pilate, respectively, though neither really has the stage for more than an expostulation or two. This music is quite different from what one might anticipate, in that the bulk of the instrumental parts, for strings only (and the inevitable continuo), are rarely used for more than background accompaniment. Feo has a good sense of outlining the text with certain brief orchestral effects. For instance, as Christ is crucified the section opens with decisive hammer strokes, like nails being pounded into the cross. As Jesus is arrested, there are various musical sighs, like the acceptance of the inevitable, along with some rather nice, pungent harmonies. This is truly dramatic mood music of the 18th-century Neapolitan sort, and very appropriate for Lent.

The performances are excellent. Schleifer gives a solid and well-nuanced account of himself, making the narrative flow smoothly and gracefully. Even the ornamentation in the opening melisma or the cascading torrents as Christ is arrested is handled with ease. Ghielmi's small ensemble is nicely coordinated, with good phrasing and never overbearing in its short, often descriptive ritornellos. The remainder of the larger Varese chorus and the characters are also well performed, but their parts are quite limited. The disc is embedded within a thick booklet, where the text and colorful photographs of the statuary at the Church of Santa Maria del Monte in Varese abound. My only peeve is that the text itself is rather difficult to follow, as the original Latin appears in the third column, making the reader search for it. If you are French, you're out of luck here, for you'll have to go to the back to find your version, completely separated from the rest.

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In short, this is a great disc to have if you are a fan of Italian Classical or Neapolitan music. Moreover, it is a good contrast to the plethora of German Passion s that abound in the recording world, in that it shows that the Catholics, too, had a specialized genre that they used every Lenten season. Feo's work is solid, harmonically interesting, and in many cases quite moving. Given the fine performance by La Divina Armonia, this is a disc that is recommended. ---  
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