

## GIOVANNI BONONCINI

(Modena, 18 luglio 1670 - Vienna, 9 luglio 1747)

### BIOGRAPHY

Giovanni Bononcini was the elder and more famous among the sons of Giovanni Maria Bononcini (1642 – 1678).

Giovanni's artistic career, marked by very precocious talent on his instrument (he was a cellist) and at composing, is not extraneous to his father's fame.

The latter, a violinist, composer and theoretician, had in fact largely contributed to modernizing the instrumental music of his era. His treatise *Musico pratico* (1673) was widely used until 1725, and his influence on musicians of the eighteenth century is well supported.

#### Modena and Bologna

In 1697, the year of death of Lorenza de La Cerda wife of his patron Filippo Colonna, Bononcini left Rome.

There he studied counterpoint with Giovanni Paolo Colonna; at the age of 15, he published his op. 1, 2 and 3, and became a member of the *Accademia de' Filarmonici* on 30 May 1686.

Again at Bologna, for the two years after that, he was cantor and cellist at San Petronio, and in 1687 he was nominated choirmaster at San Giovanni in Monte as successor to Giuseppe Felice Tosi.

He composed two Oratorios for Lent (1678 – 1679) for San Petronio, and four *Missae breves* for double choir (1688, op. 7) for San Giovanni in Monte.

#### Milan, Rome

On an appointment by the Duke of Modena Francesco II d'Este, Bononcini spent a year in Milan with the task of writing an oratorio, *La Maddalena ai piedi di Cristo* (1690), for his patron. The same year, he was hired by the orchestra of the Roman cardinal Benedetto Pamphili. When he returned from Milan, the young composer then moved to Rome in 1692, in the service of the Colonna family.

The stay in Rome marks a turning point in Bononcini's career: he met Silvio Stampiglia (already in the service of the Colonna since 1680), who became his main librettist.

Their collaboration resulted in six serenatas, an oratorio and five operas, which made Bononcini famous in Italy and abroad.

Two works stand out in Bononcini's career: the *Xerse* (1694), which was used by Georg Friedrich Haendel in his *Serse* in 1738, and *Il Trionfo di Camilla* of 1696.

According to Geminiani, in listening to *Il Trionfo di Camilla*, what "struck the musical world was

the distance from that arid, flat melody that their ears had been accustomed to up to that point". In October 1695, Bononcini became a member of the Congregazione di Santa Cecilia and in 1696, he was one of the musicians designated among the founders of a performing ensemble of the Accademia d'Arcadia.

In Rome, he was the teacher of many young musicians: the sonnet that Giuseppe Valentini dedicated to him and his teaching is evidence of this.

## Vienna

In 1697, the year of the death of his patron Filippo Colonna, Bononcini left Rome.

After a year spent in Venice, he moved to Vienna in 1698, where he was appointed court composer in the service of Leopold I of Habsburg, becoming the favourite composer of his heir Joseph, who rose to the throne in 1705.

Many of his works that were composed in Vienna, for example *La Fede pubblica* (1699), were dedicated to Joseph or his wife. Thanks to his fame and his excellent financial conditions, Giovanni brought his brother Antonio Maria (1677 – 1726), cellist, composer and conductor, to Vienna, as well as Silvio Stampiglia, with whom he again took up their profitable collaboration. Nevertheless, the political situation (the war with France) often interrupted musical life at court, and in that period Bononcini took various trips to Italy, to Rome, Padua, Bologna, Parma and Modena.

Between 1702 and 1703, he was invited by Sophie Charlotte of Hannover to the court of Friedrich I of Prussia in Berlin: he became a leading figure on the daily musical scene, and composed two "petites bagatelles", *Cefalo and Polifemo*.

In 1706, Bononcini was already famous all over Europe. Raguenet, who in 1698 had attended a production of *Il Trionfo di Camilla* in Rome, stated that in 1705, more than 200 cantatas by Bononcini were well known in Paris, where for that matter, he was already considered "modèle pour le gracieux".

His opera *Il Trionfo di Camilla* was performed as many as 64 times at the Royal Theatre Drury Lane in London between 1706 and 1709. In 1707, an attempt was made to attract the composer to the English city, and many of his arias were inserted in various pastiches performed between 1707 and 1711.

Already well-known in his homeland, Bononcini was the first Italian to achieve such great success in London: it was the beginning of international fame for this composer from Modena. Gasparini concluded his treatise of 1708 with a eulogy to the "whimsicality, beauty, harmony, artful study and creative inventiveness" of Bononcini's cantatas, about 300 of which have come down to us.

According to Benedetto Marcello, the standard piece for singers' auditions was Bononcini's cantata *Impara a non dar fede*.

## Rome, London

After the death of Joseph I of Austria in 1711, Bononcini stayed a little longer in Vienna; then left the city for Rome, where he took up residence again in 1714, staying there until 1719.

In Rome, he wrote a serenata (*Sacrificio a Venere*, 1714) and three operas, of which the most

important was *Astarto* (1714). After a Roman performance of the latter, Richard Boyle, count of Burlington, invited Bononcini and Giovanni Rolli, the librettist of

*Astarto*

, to move to London.

Bononcini arrived in London in October of 1720; he was appointed director of the King's Theatre, and through the intercession of the Count of Burlington, composer at the Royal Academy of Music, which Georg Friedrich Haendel was director of at the time.

During two entire seasons, Bononcini's works were unquestionably those that were performed most: 71 performances against 26 of Haendel's. The performance of *Astarto* was a triumph and

*Crispo* (1721) and

*Griselda*

(1722) also enjoyed enormous success.

This enormous success was the origin of the well-known rivalry between Bononcini and his German colleague. Since they were both rivals and colleagues, it is difficult to determine to what point their relations were truly hostile. In fact, they had various occasions to work together in the opera orchestra, in which Bononcini played cello and Haendel harpsichord. What is more, there are numerous citations from Bononcini in Haendel's work, which is surely evidence of his musical esteem.

Nonetheless, there was fierce competition between the two: their rivalry also became complex because it was fed by a *querelle* of a political nature (tensions between Catholics and Protestants, and between the Stuarts and the royal family): Haendel was backed by the King, while Giovanni enjoyed the favours of the Duke of Marlborough.

In effect, the death of the Duke (1722) weakened Bononcini's position, while Haendel, appointed director of the Haymarket Theatre, became well-established on the London scene. Despite these twists of fate, the Count of Westminster, Francis Atterbury, hired him to compose an anthem for the funerals of Marlborough and Duchess Henriette, daughter of the Duke of Marlborough, and director of the private concerts held at his residence.

However, his life was thrown into confusion shortly thereafter. The Duchess was a known Jacobite, and Count Atterbury was imprisoned for his Jacobite activity in 1722. Because of these acquaintances and his Catholic heritage, his fame in London soon came to ruin. The Royal Academy did not hire him for its season in 1722. His opera *Erminia* was produced in March of 1723, but it seems to have been written for a Paris production, which in effect was performed in the summer of that year in France with singers from the Royal Academy.

He stayed in Paris until 1724, cultivating the idea of accepting a job offered him by the wife of the French prime minister. The intention was side-tracked by a more economically advantageous offer from the Duchess of Marlborough, who thus managed to get him back to London, as director of her private concerts until 1731, the year in which a rather surprising episode put an end to his stay in there.

On the occasion of a musical meeting at the Academy of Ancient Music, of which Bononcini was an active member, it was noted that one of the pieces presented with the signature of the composer Antonio Lotti (Duets, trios and madrigals) was identical to the cantata *In una siepe ombrosa*

which Giovanni had written three years earlier. The dispute between the two composers became a matter of public domain, and altogether unexpectedly, Giovanni was the one accused of plagiarism. Bononcini then left England for good and went to France.

### **Paris, Madrid, Lisbon, Vienna**

Bononcini moved to Paris in the summer of 1731. It seems that he was still in the service of the Duchess of Marlborough until November of the same year, a period in which he wrote a suite for the birthday of her daughter Henriette. But the following year, the separation was official from the moment that the XII Sonatas dedicated to Henriette's rival, her mother Sarah, were published.

In Paris, he wrote various works that were performed at the Concerts Spirituels, including a *Laudate Pueri*

that was published there. In 1733, he left Paris for Madrid, to then go to Lisbon, where it seems that he stayed until 1736; in both cities he performed and wrote music, but nothing for the theatre.

He returned to Vienna around the middle of 1736 and composed two operas and an oratorio for a performance in 1737. The Empress Maria Theresa commissioned a *Te Deum* from him in 1741 and on 1 October 1742 he was granted a small pension that enabled him to live the last five years of his life comfortably.

Bononcini died in Vienna on 9 July 1747.

## **WORKS AND STYLE**

Giovanni Bononcini is mainly known for his dramatic and vocal chamber production, in which the expressive intensity is contained in a simple, refined form, in which the sense of measure and equilibrium regulate the expert use of the technical and stylistic means of the period. The arias, prevalently with *da capo*, are well coordinated and never too ample. The recitativos punctually underline the flow of the language and the meaning of the words: in this respect, Bononcini shows a clear conception of the connection between words and music, as was noted in a letter to Benedetto Marcello, who answered with praise for his care in «*following through with the feeling of that divine Poetry with the expression of harmonious concord*»

and gives reasons for his success not only because of the perfect knowledge of counterpoint, but also the

«*taste "that shows a certain natural sagacity that may be produced in us by the continual, exact observation of the different dispositions that come about in the soul and the different modulations of sound to then be able to properly adapt them to the needs of the words "*»

Thus in drama, where his work is especially brilliant, chromaticism, modulations and daring harmonies accentuate the moments of tension, thus allowing a special adherence to the melody of the situation described. The plaintive tone is, however, a characteristic sign of Bononcini's

dramatic arias, as is the sweetness and richness of his melodies. Moreover, his harmonies are as original as they are natural to listen to.

Since the ability to perceive the perfect adherence to the text and feelings was difficult for non-Italians, this quality went unnoticed both in Vienna and in London, cities where the majority of his dramatic compositions were composed, from 1699 to 1737.

In this period, his arias became longer and had richer accompaniment, but nevertheless, his "Haendelian" proportions were not often supported by the same musical substance or impulses within the drama as to be able to justify the length that Haendel's works have.

When the works of both composers were performed in London between 1720 and 1727, writers at the time emphasized the vigour, heroic feelings and almost tyrannical rage present in Haendel's works, noting the opposite qualities of tenderness in rendering longed-for emotions and pastoral modes in Bononcini's.

The instrumental accompaniment is outstanding, in organic interpenetration with the voices, to which both the timbric diversity as well as the phonic contrast between solo, tutti or instrumental group parts are intertwined or alternated. In this case, the use of wind instruments stands out, in particular the horns, which Bononcini seems to have introduced in England with *Griselda*. But above all, the cello emerges, always in dialogue with the voice in a melody that is attentive to the timbric characteristics.

In the oratorios, too, everything leads back to a controlled expressiveness. In the oratorio *La conversione di Maddalena*

, the arias often show considerable variants in the reprises and the recitativos arrive at the arioso in some points.

In his sacred music production, the *Messe a 8 voci* with instruments and a *Laudate pueri* reveal a subtle ability with counterpoint; the same can be said for the numerous 5-part madrigals.

Moreover, a note of praise is due for the texts of his works: the fortunate choice of librettists by the Arcadia, in particular Stampiglia and Rolli, gave considerable stimuli to Bononcini's expressive ability, to his unquestioned way of bending his melodies to perfectly fit the movement of the text, of using with exactitude and adequacy pauses, exclamations and accents that enabled the voice to pronounce the words with an impassioned sense of involvement.