



REVIEW: RECORDING

## Attilio Ariosti (1666–1729) La Profezia d’Eliseo nell’assedio di Samaria

Marie-Sophie Pollak, Marta Redaelli, Alessio Tosi, Mauro Borgioni, Matteo Pigato (soloists) / Ensemble Lorenzo da Ponte / Roberto Zarpellon (conductor)

Fra Bernardo 2104397, 2020; two discs, 104 minutes

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The works of Italian composers of the Viennese Hofkapelle in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries – Antonio Draghi, Francesco Bartolomeo Conti and Antonio Caldara, among others – still have a hard time being considered for recordings. Austrian conductors and ensembles (and also scholars), in so far as they have engaged with the Viennese Hofkapelle at all, have tended to limit themselves to the music of Johann Joseph Fux and Johann Heinrich Schmelzer, and Italians, understandably, are more eager to get to know the music slumbering in the archives of the Apennine Peninsula. Fortunately, Italian conductor Roberto Zarpellon and his Ensemble Lorenzo da Ponte prove an exception to the rule in their recording of *La profezia d’Eliseo nell’assedio di Samaria* (The Prophecy of Elisha during the Siege of Samaria; the score and libretto are in the Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Vienna (A-Wn) Mus.Hs.16295 (score); 406747-B.AdL.28 (libretto)). This Viennese oratorio was penned by Attilio Ariosti (1666–1729), one of those Italian composers who, like Giovanni Bononcini, is much more famous for his proximity to George Frideric Handel in London than for his service to the emperors in Vienna.

Ariosti, a Bologna-born clergyman of the Servite Order, came to Vienna in 1703 after having served as *maitre de musique* to the Electress of Brandenburg, Sophie Charlotte, in Berlin. During his seven-year stay in the Habsburg capital he wrote one opera, five serenatas, a variety of cantatas and three oratorios for the Emperors Leopold I (1658–1705) and Joseph I (1705–1711). *La profezia d’Eliseo* was first performed in Lent of 1705 at the imperial chapel. The libretto by Giovanni Battista Neri had already been set to music in 1686 in Modena by Giovanni Paolo Colonna. One might assume that it was Ariosti’s idea to use the twenty-year-old text, since he had previously worked together with Neri, on the opera *L’Erifile* (1697). Similarities regarding Ariosti’s and Colonna’s settings, for example the fanfare-like gestures of the opening *sinfonia*, furthermore suggest that Ariosti knew not only Neri’s libretto but also Colonna’s score.

The libretto of *La profezia d’Eliseo* narrates a rather drastic episode from the Old Testament’s Book of Kings (II, 6.24–7.20), in which the Assyrian army besieges the city of Samaria. This subject was presumably the reason why the text was chosen for a Viennese performance. During the first decade of the eighteenth century, which was overshadowed by the War of the Spanish Succession, the Viennese court displayed a penchant for librettos (especially those for serenatas) centring on sieges; these alluded to ongoing military conflicts over cities like Barcelona, Madrid, Turin, Lille or the fortress city of Landau. A typical example is Silvio Stampiglia’s triptych *Napoli ritornata a Romani* (1707; set by Carlo Agostino Badia), *La presa di Tebe* (1708; by Antonio Bononcini) and *Il campidoglio ricuperato* (1709; by Marc’Antonio Ziani).

The siege of Samaria in Neri's libretto causes a huge famine in the city. In the first scene two desperate women, simply called 'donna prima' and 'donna seconda', decide to kill their babies and devour them to allay their hunger. Only one of them, 'donna prima', sticks to the pact, the other's maternal feelings proving stronger than her hunger. The first woman then denounces the second one to the Samarian King Joram and even leads him to believe that her opponent was responsible for the murder of her child. Joram is shocked, but far more concerned with his city's misery and his belief that the prophet Eliseo (Elisha) is responsible, as he did not intercede with God. Eliseo, however, prophesies that from the next day on prosperity shall reign and that the king's captain, who derides the prophet's predictions, will no longer be alive to enjoy this sudden abundance. The next day everything turns out to be as Eliseo had said: the Assyrians flee, believing that the Egyptians and Hethites are on their way to help the Samaritans, and leave gold, silver and grain on the battle fields; the captain is killed in the tumult of the hungry crowd. Praise the Lord.

Neri's libretto is as macabre as it gets. The scenes between the two women at times seem better suited for an Italian slasher movie of the 1970s than for the musical setting of a sacred text at the outset of the eighteenth century. As the first woman tries to persuade her opponent to kill her baby she shouts 'Prendi il ferro, e del figlio sì sì /squarcia le viscere, / lacera il cor' (Take the knife, slit the son's entrails and tear his heart into pieces). It therefore only seems appropriate that throughout the piece she predominantly refers to the second woman's child as 'pasto' (meal). Neri shows himself to be a solid dramatist who knows how to keep his audience at the edge of their seats: he is proficient in writing metrically flowing plaintive verses rich in metaphors and irregularly versified wrath arias full of menacing dactylic *versi sdruccioli* alike. Most importantly, through his graphic, explicit language he inspired Attilio Ariosti to a thoroughly dramatic style of music.

In the score of his *Eliseo* the Bolognese composer shows off his versatility as a master of the stage and the church. He tries to match Neri's graphic vividness, garnishing the word 'squarcia' ('slit') with rough diminished chords (on 'Prendi il ferro') and depicting King Joram's rage ('Armati sdegno') with fierce repeated notes in the strings and uncontrolled, choleric vocal coloratura. The second woman's guilty conscience has the music swaying to and fro between panic-fuelled string semiquavers and melancholic viola da gamba cantilenas, while her fear ultimately culminates in an *ombra* scene, where eerie tremolos form a sequence of dolorous seventh chords. On the other hand, Ariosti's music can be all piousness. The fugal entries of two solo violins and the captain's alto take the aria 'Se si deve per sempre penar' to the realm of a suave sonata da chiesa, and when Eliseo sings his aria 'Chi col senso e col pensiero', his vocal line seems more like a slightly embellished chorale than the aria of an oratorio or opera. Holy music for the holy prophet.

As instrumentation goes, Ariosti's score might not be as colourful as those for some of his Viennese serenatas, where solo parts for viola d'amore, mandolin, lute, baryton, recorder and chalumeau are daily fare. *La profezia Eliseo* still has a couple of charming instrumental surprises ready, however. The opening sinfonia is repeatedly interrupted by trumpet fanfares; in plaintive arias Ariosti makes heavy use of up to three violas da gamba; and the aria 'Ai trionfi venite' is equipped with two obbligato harpsichords, a scoring rare at the time, which the composer reused in his serenata entitled *Marte placato* (1707). There are also traces of *bassoni* – that is, bass chalumeaux – found in the score, instruments that conductor Roberto Zarpellon and his ensemble obviously did not have at hand (or they thought Ariosti meant bassoons, which is tempting but wrong, since the copyist also explicitly requests 'fagotti', bassoons, in parts of the score). However, this detail doesn't mar the positive impression of this felicitous world-premiere recording. Each articulation, each swelling, each fading of the tone is well considered by Zarpellon and his musicians; they see in Ariosti a true dramatic composer and treat his music that way. The continuo group knows how to purr and snort with rage; the strings sound brilliant playing ascending martial triads and *tirate* in the sinfonia and the final chorus, feistily articulate dissonances, yearningly execute appoggiaturas and make one shudder through the proper use of bow vibrato in the *ombra* scene at the beginning of the oratorio's part 2.

Ariosti wrote his music for the leading singers of the Viennese Hofkapelle. Their names are not listed in the score, but some casting decisions are rather obvious. King Joram was most probably sung by Rainero Borrini, one of the finest bass vocalists of his time, and Eliseo by the virtuoso tenor Silvio Garghetti. Thus it is no surprise that both of the recording's singers do at times struggle with Ariosti's brilliant vocal writing. While Mauro Borgioni manages to keep his decorum while singing the breakneck role of King Joram, which mingles melismata stretching over ten bars with jumps up to a tenth – typical features of Borrini's instrumental singing technique – tenor Alessio Tosi doesn't seem all that comfortable in the title role. His coloraturas often seem shallow and forced, and lyrical passages, especially in the high register, frequently reveal intonation problems. Matteo Pigati as the king's captain doesn't sound much better. Marie-Sophie Pollak and Marta Redaelli, however, possess formidable technical skills, showcasing vocal agility in the allegros, while in the adagios the former displays a more delicate and elegant, the latter a more expressive tone. Altogether, *La profezia d'Eliseo* is an appealing opportunity to get to know Attilio Ariosti as a dramatic composer.

**Konstantin Hirschmann** is currently finishing his PhD project, which revolves around the serenata at the court of Emperor Joseph I (1705–1711) and has been funded by the Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften. He teaches regularly at the Universität Wien, publishes on Italian and German opera of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and is Fellow of the Vienna Doctoral Academy: Theory and Methodology in the Humanities.