



REVIEW: RECORDING

L'Altra Venezia

Scaramuccia

Snakewood Editions SCD202301, 2023; one disc, 77 minutes

Guido Olivieri

University of Texas, Austin, TX, USA
olivieri@austin.utexas.edu

If today one often identifies eighteenth-century Venetian music with Antonio Vivaldi, it is because of the great popularity that the Red Priest's vast output has enjoyed over the past hundred years. This view, however, ignores the wider Venetian artistic landscape, overshadowing the significant productions of a host of musicians who occupied prominent positions in the Lagoon City and who were celebrated in their time. With this recording, appropriately titled 'L'altra Venezia' (The Other Venice), the ensemble Scaramuccia looks at another facet of the musical activity of this prominent European capital and introduces listeners to a repertory by composers who are almost completely forgotten today.

This is not the first time that Scaramuccia – which has been releasing albums under its own label, Snakewood Editions, since 2018 – has undertaken recording projects that include the modern premieres of rediscovered works. The ensemble's interest in the revival of overlooked historical repertory has arisen from research carried out by its own members, particularly by violinist Javier Lupiáñez. (Incidentally, just shortly after this recording was made, he identified and recorded another unpublished violin sonata by Vivaldi.)

The appeal of this recording is made even greater by the accompanying liner notes, written by that leading scholar of eighteenth-century Venetian music Michael Talbot, who places Venetian music of this time into context by describing its main features, providing listeners with essential information on the works and composers featured on the disc. Also attractive is the image – both in the booklet and in the inside case – of a 1640 map of Venice ('Piano elevato dell'inclita città di Venezia') showing the venues associated with this repertory. The particularly bright sound quality of the recording derives from the use of an ECA microphone technique that enhances the 'complex tonal character of the sound of gut strings' (27).

The CD opens with a lovely sonata attributed to the Benedictine monk and amateur musician Diogenio Bigaglia (1678–1745), who became *priore* of the abbey on the island of San Giorgio Maggiore in 1713. Alongside his extensive production of sacred music and cantatas, Bigaglia's output includes a published collection of twelve sonatas for violin and continuo (1722). The work included on this recording, though, comes from a newly discovered manuscript source, now in Dresden, that had once belonged to the celebrated violinist Johann Georg Pisendel, who most likely copied it during one of his visits to Venice. It is perhaps Pisendel's legendary virtuosic playing that has inspired Scaramuccia's interpretation of this sonata. Particularly in the fast movements, the ensemble offers an energetic performance, enriched by sparkling ornamentation in the repeats and culminating in the introduction of a brief cadenza for the violin in the last movement. Contrasting with the brilliant fast tempos, however, is the cantabile quality of the slow movements, foremost among them the second Largo, with its lilting siciliano rhythm. Both violin and cello capture the serene expressivity of this movement that reveals Bigaglia's notable experience as a vocal composer.

Virtuosic and dazzling performance appears in general to be a quality of Scaramuccia's interpretation of this repertory. The florid ornamentation that characterizes Lupiáñez's approach fits perfectly with the exuberant sonata by Antonio Caldara (1670–1736). Probably belonging to his early period – prior to the musician's departure to enter the service of Emperor Charles VI in Vienna – this fine Sonata in F major features fast passagework, string-crossing, double stops and three-string arpeggios, making it one of the most elaborate sonatas included on this recording, akin to later Italian violin repertory. The cadenza introduced by Lupiáñez in the sonata's already brilliant fourth movement makes it clear that Scaramuccia's model is what Talbot defines in the booklet as the 'cult of *solismo*', one of the main traits of Venetian music. This 'cult' is characterized by the 'individual expression' of the performer and 'virtuosic effects' that were mostly influenced by 'the nascent solo concerto' genre (18).

Tomaso Albinoni (1671–1751) is certainly a well-known composer, and a central figure in eighteenth-century Venetian vocal and instrumental music. Yet the two violin sonatas recorded here for the first time were rediscovered (and published) by Michael Talbot only three years ago. Preserved in an anonymous manuscript copy from Nicolò Sanguinazzo's collection, now part of the Estense collection in Vienna, they have been attributed to Albinoni based on clear stylistic and formal correspondences. Scaramuccia's playing emphasizes the brilliant and idiomatic writing that characterizes the fast movements of these works, particularly in the second movement of the Sonata in B flat major, an Allegro in the form of an *allemanda*. If some of the more melodic slow movements of these sonatas might have benefited from less dense ornamentation, the opening movement of the chamber Sonata in G minor is, however, a little gem. As Talbot reminds the reader in his liner notes, this movement has clear affinities with Albinoni's collection of *Balletti a quattro* (1728). The operatic, lyrical depth of this movement, featuring a melancholic dialogue between violin and cello, is elegantly performed by the ensemble with fine balance between the parts.

The composer represented by the largest number of works on this recording is Giorgio Gentili (born c1668; died after 1730). This musician, whose name is today almost entirely unknown, was one of the most eminent Venetian performers of the early eighteenth century, so much so that around 1709 'Giorgetto' was included along with Albinoni as among the most 'famous violinists' in Venice, on a list from which Vivaldi's name was conspicuously absent. (This list appears in a footnote to a 1709 English translation of François Ragueneau's book *Parallèle des Italiens et des François en ce qui regarde la musique et les opéra[s]* (Paris: Moreau, 1702); it was probably added by the translator (who is thought to be either John Ernest Galliard or Nicola Haym). See *A Comparison between the French and Italian Musick and Opera's. Translated from the French; With Some Remarks. To Which is Added A Critical Discourse upon Opera's in England, and a Means Proposed for their Improvement* (London: William Lewis, 1709), 51, note 35.) Gentili was in fact a violin teacher at the Ospedale dei Mendicanti, and in 1693 he became head of the orchestra of San Marco. The Capriccio in B minor, part of the collection of *Capricci da camera* published in Venice in 1707, features five movements, four of which are in fast tempos. Gentili's virtuosic and improvisational writing features a toccata-like opening, rapid passagework and swift exchanges between violin and cello, characteristics that find a perfect match in the interpretation of the ensemble in what is among the most successful performances of the entire recording.

A delightful surprise is provided by the two solo-cello sonatas by the same composer, which offer an opportunity fully to appreciate Inés Salinas's refined technical and expressive qualities, as well as Patricia Vintém's steady and stylish support. If in the first sonata, in A major, the cello often merely doubles and elaborates the bass line, thus suggesting a possible pedagogical genesis for this work, the exquisite slow movements of the second work, in G major, are played by the two performers with tender and pensive elegance.

The CD closes with the seventh sonata from the collection of *Sonate da camera* Op. 2 by Giovanni Battista Reali (c1681–1751), printed in Venice in 1712. While the debt of this almost obscure musician to Corelli's style was already evident in his Op. 1 collection, in this sonata,

Corelli's influence is on full display, especially in the second movement. Above typical Corellian bass progressions, Reali elaborates the Allegro movements by the use of rapid string-crossing and syncopated passages, thus requiring a more advanced technique and providing this work with a truly distinguishable Venetian quality.

The works included on this recording are not only a welcome addition to the repertory, but also a significant scholarly exploration of some often overlooked, yet important, protagonists and repertory of early eighteenth-century Venetian instrumental music. The CD is the result of an inspiring synergy between musicological research and performance, and it is particularly worthy of listeners' attention and appreciation.

Guido Olivieri teaches musicology at the University of Texas Austin. He is the author of *String Virtuosi in Eighteenth-Century Naples: Culture, Power, and Music Institutions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024). He has edited the volume *Marchitelli, Mascitti e la musica strumentale napoletana fra Sei e Settecento* (Lucca: LIM, 2023) and co-edited the volume *Arcomelo 2013: studi nel terzo centenario della morte di Arcangelo Corelli (1653–1713)* (Lucca: LIM, 2015). He has published articles, chapters and editions relating to seventeenth- and eighteenth-century instrumental music.