

Rome has long been regarded as one of the most significant cultural centers of Western Civilization, and this was no less true in the 17th and 18th centuries. It was particularly true for sacred music. As the center of the Catholic Church, Rome attracted the best and most celebrated musicians and composers of the day. Today there are over 800 churches in Rome, most of which are Catholic. The Choir of the Sistine Chapel, the Pope's private musical establishment, which was founded in the 6th century and re-organized in 1441, was widely considered the very best in Europe; and the Capella Giulia, also founded in the 6th century and re-organized in 1460, served as a training ground for the Sistine Chapel Choir while providing music for St. Peter's Basilica. In addition, music was performed in the private salons of high church officials in Rome, many of whom were significant patrons of music. Today's program offers a cross-section of the kinds of music that would have been heard in Rome in the early 18th century. Although the first two composers are from the previous century, their music remained in the active repertory of choirs all through Europe.

The Sistine Chapel Choir, in the 18th century, comprised of twenty-four men, including castrati to sing the soprano parts. The alto parts were sung by high tenors. A new member of this choir would have to be elected to the ensemble by the existing members of the choir, although the influence of the Pope or some other high church official would certainly have great weight in their being chosen. The choir sang only unaccompanied or '*a cappella*' music in the Sistine Chapel, represented on our program by Palestrina, Victoria, and Pitoni. They usually sang with only one singer on each part, except on special occasions.

Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina is the most famous composer of sacred music of his period, and he has remained a towering figure in Western music history. He was the first native-born Italian composer to thrive at a time when the pre-eminent composers were all Flemish or French. Palestrina came to Rome in 1651 and spent most of his life there. He held positions at St. John Lateran and St. Mary Major, two very important positions; in 1571, he was named as choirmaster of the Capella Giulia. Palestrina's music provided the basis of Johann Fux's treatise on composing counterpoint, *Gradus ad Parnassum* (1725), and remains so to this day. Palestrina was the first late Renaissance composer to have a complete edition of his works published, between 1862 and 1894 in Germany.

The motet *Sicut cervus* is probably Palestrina's most well-known and most often performed composition. The text is taken from the Old Roman Rite for the Easter Vigil and also is used in the Requiem service. Probably composed before 1564, it was first published in 1589 and has remained readily available in numerous editions. Modern editions transpose the entire piece up a minor third, largely to accommodate the use of female altos. Today's performance is based on the original version, sung at the lower, original pitch and it includes the Secunda Pars (second part), which is only rarely performed. The text is drawn from the first three verses of Psalm 42. Among the dozens of recorded versions of this piece, the Sistine Chapel Choir has recorded this piece twice, in 1904 and in 2015.

Tomás Luis da Victoria is one of the most highly respected Spanish composers of the late Renaissance. He came to Rome in 1565 and held several important posts, including that of Cantor at the German Church founded by St. Ignatius Loyola (1491-1556). In 1587, he returned to Spain to take up a position in the court of Philip II. Along with Palestrina and Orlando di Lasso, Victoria was one of the great champions of the Counter-Reformation among musicians. His setting of the *Nunc Dimittis*, performed today, is representative of his style and serves as an example of the music of the period.

Although only dimly remembered today, Giuseppe Ottavio Pitoni was one of the most prolific, skilled, and celebrated composers of sacred music in his day. Born in Rieti, Italy, he was trained in Rome from an early age and held various positions in numerous Roman churches. Most significantly, he was the choirmaster of the Capella Giulia from 1719 until his death. Extremely prolific, he composed largely in the style of Palestrina and was well-known for the brilliance of his contrapuntal writing. His motet, *In voce exultationis*, in four voices is probably an early work and exemplifies his mastery of the Palestrina style.

In addition to the use of unaccompanied music, the early 17th century saw the adoption of the new secular styles being adapted for sacred use. Ottaviano Catalani's motet for two voices, *Dulce Jesu Christi*, is a prime example. Probably composed in the first decade of the century, it was published in an anthology of selected motets for 2, 3, 4, and 5 voices in 1647 in Rome. Written for alto and tenor voices, it echoes the type of duet composed at the same time by Monteverdi and his contemporaries. Catalani was born in Sicily but worked primarily in Rome.

The *Falso Bordone* style of psalm singing was a Renaissance practice that was continued in Rome, especially in the Sistine Chapel, long after it ceased to be practiced elsewhere. It featured elaborate improvisations by the singers in the performance of motets and psalms. The early 17th century saw the publication of three books on the art of vocal improvisation by singers of the Papal Chapel. One of these was by Francesco Severi, a castrato soprano who sang with the Sistine Chapel choir from 1613 until his death. He claimed Ottaviano Catalani as his teacher. In 1615, he published his most important work, *Salmi passaggiati per tutte le voci nella maniera che si cantano in Roma sopra il falsi bordoni di tutti i tuoni ecclesiastici*, one of the most important sources for information on vocal embellishments and ornamentation. The title may be translated as, "Psalms with ornamentation for all voices in the style they sing in Rome over *falso bordone* in all the church modes." Today's program includes Severi's version of Psalm 112. Each voice is given the opportunity to sing two verses of the Psalm in turn, each verse beginning with a chanted section, then concluding with an elaborate decorated passage. In practice, these decorations would be improvised by the singers, but we will perform Severi's versions.

Alessandro Stradella is unusual for the time in that he made his living largely as a free-lance musician and is one of the most colorful individuals of his age. An extremely talented musician, he was also infamous for his other activities. He came to Rome in 1667 and became attached to the court of Queen Christina of Sweden. He left for Venice in 1677, one step ahead of the authorities when it was discovered that he was part of a scheme to embezzle money from the Catholic Church. He made many powerful enemies as the result of his many illicit affairs and survived several assassination attempts prompted by jealous and aggrieved husbands before he was murdered in 1682. He was, however, a prolific composer and very influential in his day. The cantata we are performing, "*Care Jesu*," is dedicated to St. Filippo Neri (1515-1595), who founded the *Congregation of the Oratory* in Rome in 1551, which became the birthplace and cradle of the musical form, the oratorio. The Oratory was a secular organization that held regular meetings that included readings, sermons, and musical settings of biblical stories, all for the education and edification of the Roman populace. This duet cantata may have been composed for such a service or for performance as part of private devotions, most likely while Stradella was still in Rome.

Part of the popularity of the new oratorio genre certainly derived from the fact that opera performances were largely forbidden in Rome in the early 18th century because they were thought to be too secular. However, many composers got around the restriction by composing 'sacred operas' or solo motets in the operatic style with sacred texts. The motet, "*Cum dominus iratus*," by Leonardo Vinci is a prime example of such a motet. Vinci was a Neapolitan composer, who was one of the founders of the Neapolitan style of opera. Largely neglected until recently, Vinci was very popular in his own day. It is most likely that this motet was written for some now-unidentified castrato soprano for performance in a private situation. As was typical of the opera aria of its time, it is composed in the *da capo* form, which features a return to the opening section after a somewhat contrasting middle section is sung. The virtuosic element is to be seen here in the wide leaps and elaborate passages sung by the soprano.

Francesco Durante is another who was widely regarded in his lifetime as being among the most accomplished composers of sacred music. He was Neapolitan by birth and training and was highly respected as a teacher; his pupils included Pergolesi and Leonardo Vinci, among others. Durante himself was a pupil of Alessandro Scarlatti and also is said to have studied with Pitoni. His *Magnificat* was famed throughout Europe during a time when most music circulated in manuscript copies rather than being published. The more frequently heard four-voice version of this piece has been incorrectly attributed to Pergolesi throughout most of the 20th century. The five-voice version heard on today's program has been edited for our performance from a manuscript written in Durante's own hand. It is not known which version came first. Durante sets the text in sections, alternating solos with ensemble sections. The use of two violins without viola as heard here is typical of Italian practice at this time, as is the use of a single singer or player on a part.

Today's program offers a glimpse of music representative of that heard in Rome during the early 18th century, including the older polyphonic style of Palestrina, along with the then more recent and fashionable style of Vinci and Stradella, as well as the glorious *Magnificat* of Durante. While much of this music would have been heard throughout Europe in other courts and cities, the importance of Rome as a musical center at this time allows us to focus on some remarkable, but often neglected, music. We are proud to present this program and hope that you enjoy it.

From manuscript to music

The existence and use of *castrati* in European music history is difficult for us to understand. The common justification for their use is based on a passage in Paul's Letter to the Corinthians (14:34), where he writes that women should be silent in church. As a result, the highest parts in polyphonic music were sung initially by boys. In the early 16th century, the so-called Spanish Falsettists appeared in the Sistine Chapel Choir. Presumably, these men sang much like modern countertenors, such as Phillippe

Jaroussky or Max Cenčič. Around the middle of the 16th century, the first *castrati* are found in the Sistine Chapel Choir, where they replaced the boys and falsettists. The best of the *castrati* were superbly trained virtuosos with voices of remarkable power and beauty, according to contemporary reports. They reigned both in opera and in sacred music, due largely to their preeminent vocal virtuosity. The last of the Vatican *castrati* was Alessandro Moreschi (1858-1922), who retired from the Sistine Chapel Choir in 1913 and made a number of controversial recordings in 1902 and 1904.

Many of the *castrati* were known for having a very wide vocal range. In opera, it was not unusual for specific singers to have arias written in both the soprano and alto ranges in the same opera. In the Sistine Chapel Choir, the *castrati* usually sang the soprano part, while the alto parts were most often taken by high tenors. In our performance today, we having the alto parts sung by a tenor in some cases and a contralto in others, depending on the particular requirements of the part.

A practical aspect of the vocal music of this period is the use of C clefs to indicate each vocal part. Originally, this was to insure that the notes of a part would be contained on the staff without going too far above or below and making it more difficult to read. As a result, it is common to encounter the following clefs in vocal music:



One thing that must often be done in preparing a modern edition is to re-write each part in either treble or bass clef to make it more accessible to modern singers. The use of C-clefs can also provide information about who was to sing each part. Tenors at that time would specialize in singing either the alto or tenor part, depending on where their voice was most comfortable. This practice can be heard in the duet by Ottaviano Catalani performed on this concert. As may be seen in the example below, the first part (Alto, on the left) is written in alto clef and the second (Tenor, on the right) is written in tenor clef, while the range and tessitura of each part clearly calls for two tenors. These pages are taken from a digital version of the original Part Books that were published in 1647.

Two pages of a 1647 Part Book showing musical notation for two voices. The left page is for an Alto part in alto clef, and the right page is for a Tenor part in tenor clef. Both parts feature a large decorated initial 'D' and Latin lyrics.