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The diversity of the Italian cantata

Aspects of the secular cantata in late Baroque Italy, ed. Michael Talbot (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), £65

Almost a hundred years after Eugen Schmitz’s monograph on the cantata da camera (Leipzig, 1914), a collection edited by Michael Talbot has now been published on the same musical genre. The past few years have seen a variety of studies and initiatives that have renewed interest in the chamber cantata, a genre which nonetheless remains little known. Indeed, the vastness of the surviving repertory is inversely proportional to our in-depth knowledge of it. The pieces that are regularly performed and recorded form only the tip of an iceberg that is still far from being quantified, notwithstanding several initiatives to provide some essential coordinates, such as the project Clori. Archivio della cantata italiana (www.cantataitaliana.it). Currently there is a pressing need for studies of the cantata that use diversified approaches to represent the variety, versatility and even ambiguity that this repertory often conceals. Such approaches are now exemplified in the volume edited by Talbot, outstanding in its effort to embrace the multiplicity of the genre by offering a range of perspectives and methodologies.

As the editor emphasizes in his preface, a preliminary decision was made to deal with the ‘classical’ period of the cantata, roughly between 1660 and 1740, the period in which the cantata was codified as a precise structure based on pairings of recitative and aria. This is a period, moreover, when the questions concerning the terminology and definition of the genre that so torment specialists in the 17th-century cantata—and those studying vocal chamber music more generally—appear less urgent.

The volume’s strength is its diversified approach, which makes it useful on various levels. Containing twelve essays by some of today’s leading authorities on the cantata, plus a copious bibliography, the book addresses experts in the genre—who will find numerous new suggestions for tackling this repertory in original ways—as well as performers and non-specialists who are merely interested in the cantata.

One of the chapters most susceptible to different levels of understanding is Norbert Dubowy’s “‘Al tavolino medesimo del Compositor della Musica’: notes on text and context in Alessandro Scarlatti’s cantate da camera’. This can be read by those unfamiliar with the genre, thanks to the helpful overview it provides of Scarlatti’s output of cantatas. Specialists, however, will benefit from its investigation of lesser-known parts of Scarlatti’s output and its careful analysis of several cantatas. Dubowy tackles the age-old problem of the poetic texts, the identification of their authors, and above all provides a fascinating theory that regards the cantata as the result of close collaboration (often at the same desk) of musician and poet.

Giulia Veneziano, in her chapter entitled ‘Investigations into the cantata in Naples during the first half of the 18th century: the cantatas by Leonardo Vinci contained in a “Neapolitan” manuscript’, reintroduces the complex problem of what is meant by the ‘Neapolitan school’ and asks what features can establish whether a cantata is Neapolitan or not. She re-reads the cantata repertory of Leonardo Vinci in the light of new and highly interesting sources she has discovered in the archives of the cathedral at Zaragoza in Spain. These sources present a double text—sacred and secular—thus showing how secular compositions were adapted to spiritual requirements. They also testify to Italian music being imported into Spain at the start of the 18th century, in line with the previous villancico tradition that recommended the adoption of a style of performance ‘al uso del Italia’.

Some contributors offer studies of single sources, as with Colin Timms (‘A lost volume of cantatas and serenatas from the “original Stradella collection”’), who discusses a manuscript at the University of Birmingham library, containing cantatas by various authors, which he maintains is one of the volumes missing from the ‘original Stradella collection’. Often a manuscript is the sole source of information about a cantata: its eminently private nature prevents the survival of information that for other genres (such as opera) is essential for any specific historical reconstruction. Identifying the provenance and background of a manuscript by studying its material features is therefore fundamental to understanding its musical content. The Birmingham manuscript contains both cantatas and serenades, and Timms opens an interesting debate about the relationship between these two genres in the late 17th century.
Exemplifying an approach that aims to place the cantata repertory precisely in time and space is the splendid chapter by Lowell Lindgren (‘Bononcini’s agreeable and easy style, and those fine inventions in his basses (to which he was led by an instrument upon which he excells)’). This provides an extremely well-documented catalogue of Bononcini’s cantatas, placing them accurately in the different stages of his career. By carefully identifying the repertory, Lindgren traces the reception of Bononcini’s cantatas, examining the opinions on them expressed in the famous querelle between François Raguennet and Jean Laurent Le Cerf de la Viéville. Lindgren also considers the opinion given in 1716 by John Ernest Galliard, which provides the title of his essay.

The chapter by Carolyn Gianturco deals with the use of the arioso in Stradella’s cantatas, showing how his approach is marked by a great freedom and variety in formal choices, as well as being informed by his profound understanding of the logic of the poetic text. By contrast, Hendrik Schulze (‘Narration, mimesis and the question of genre: dramatic approaches in Giovanni Legrenzi’s solo cantatas, opp.12 and 14’) seeks to discover the features that make Legrenzi’s cantatas dramatic, and in particular whether their dramatic nature derives from the same techniques as found in his operas. He argues that Legrenzi’s operas and solo cantatas alike belong to the dramatic genre, albeit each with its own peculiarities. Schulze here considers a much debated problem concerning the stylistic specificity of the cantata as compared to opera. In my opinion, only a much wider familiarity with the repertory than we have at present will make it possible to identify a more diverse range of stylistic solutions within the cantata repertory, such that certain specifics can only be applied to certain sections of the repertory. At the same time, the widespread use of opera arias for chamber music, and the occasional insertion of them within cantatas, could show that such specificity is not always a given fact.

The essays by Giulia Nuti (‘“Imitando l’arietta, o altro allegro, cantato di fresco”: keyboard realization in Italian continuo arias’) and Michael Talbot (‘Patterns and strategies of modulation in cantata recitatives’) are highly technical, with the latter elucidating modulation techniques in cantata recitative with theories both bold and extremely advanced. Talbot suggests that cantata recitative may be deemed a ‘useful laboratory . . . for harmonic and tonal processes that became widely applied to closed forms’ in the second half of the 18th century. The essay by Reinmar Emans (‘A tale of two cities: cantata publication in Bologna and Venice, c.1650–1700’) is devoted to the spread of the printed cantata. We know that, for the cantata, the ratio of printed to manuscript sources is distinctly in favour of the latter. For this very reason, however, an examination of the smaller—albeit considerable—printed repertory is worthwhile. Emans identifies Venice and Bologna as the most important publication centres, provides several tables of editions of Italian vocal secular music, and paints a picture of the development of printed cantatas until their ultimate decline in the early 18th century. Emans examines a limited sample, but the issues he raises will lay the foundation for a wide range of studies, such as the forthcoming doctoral thesis ‘La diffusione a stampa della cantata da camera in Italia (1620–1738)’ by Giulia Giovani at the University of Rome, Tor Vergata.

Marco Bizzarini’s ‘The “humble” and “sublime” genres, the pastoral and heroic styles: rhetorical metamorphoses in Benedetto Marcello’s cantatas’ provides a detailed comparison, at both poetic and musical levels, between the first aria of the cantata ‘Dove fuggisti, o Dio’ by Benedetto Marcello and the first section of his setting of a paraphrase of Psalm 21, ‘Volgi, mio Dio, deh volgi’. Since the music of both pieces is almost identical, this comparison provides an occasion for discussing the extremely widespread phenomenon of self-borrowing. Similar self-quotations were made by Handel, whose cantata repertory produced during his years in Italy was a useful store on which to draw for his subsequent operas. The comparison made by Bizzarini seeks to illustrate what are seen as ‘rhetorical metamorphoses’, passing from the ‘humble’ (or pastoral) genre to the ‘sublime’ (or heroic). Apparently outside the main theme of the volume is an essay by Graham Sadler (‘The orchestral French cantata (1706–30): performance, edition and classification of a neglected repertory’), even though a digression on the French cantata may also prove useful for comparison with its better-known and more celebrated Italian counterpart.

A particularly valuable contribution is the discography that concludes the article by Roger-Claude Travers, ‘The revival of the Italian chamber cantata on disc: model and trends’. I believe that this is the first annotated discography of cantata recordings. In his essay, Travers outlines the history of recordings of the cantata and identifies three essential phases: an initial, pioneering ‘period of emergence’ (in the 1950s), characterized by partial and sometimes inaccurate knowledge of the repertory; a ‘period of analysis’ (in the mid-1970s) at a time of greater awareness of early music; and lastly, a ‘period of synthesis’ (since 1990) when recordings benefited from deeper knowledge of the repertory and from constructive collaborations between musicologists and performers.
The discography is presented in alphabetical order by composer and is certainly useful, even though it would also have been valuable to identify the CD anthologies, which are often the result of careful programme planning.

This important volume is accompanied by a bibliography based on the texts quoted in each essay and an index of vocal works mentioned in the book, besides an accurate name index. The volume’s admirable editing makes it pleasant and attractive to read. These essays collected together by Talbot stand as a milestone in modern studies on the cantata, a further essential advance in knowledge of this repertory, while we await a ‘new Schmitz’ to collect all the data that a much wider and deeper acquaintance with the repertory could provide.

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