

## **COR16208: Orazio Benevoli – Missa Belevola – Album Notes**

**ORAZIO BENEVOLI (1605-72)** was French by birth, his father a confectioner from Lorraine who Italianised his surname Venouot on settling in Italy. Orazio was a chorister at San Luigi dei Francesi, the French church in Rome, famed for the sumptuous forces it assembled to perform polychoral music on major feast days. He was presumably taught there by multi-choir composer Vicenzo Ugolini, and became a choir maestro for the first time when only nineteen, later, in 1630, succeeding Allegri at another Roman church before returning as maestro to San Luigi's (1638-44). He then moved to Vienna to serve as Kapellmeister to the emperor's brother, Archduke Leopold Wilhelm, before returning to Rome where after a series of prestigious appointments, he finally became maestro of the unrivalled Cappella Giulia, the Julian Choir at St Peter's. He was the leading composer of what is now called the Colossal Baroque school but a pupil of his wrote that lifelong poverty stunted his reputation.

For full information about Benevoli and performance practice for his multi-choir masses for each album in this series, please visit [www.ifagiolini.com/benevoli](http://www.ifagiolini.com/benevoli)

### **ORAZIO BENEVOLI – Missa *Benevola***

Benevoli wrote eight masses for four choirs. The one on the present recording appears in manuscript sources with two titles: Missa *Maria Prodigio Celeste* (Mary, celestial prodigy) and Missa *Benevola*. The second hints at a particular connection with the composer (his own affection for it, or other people's) but it could also mean 'benevolent', referring to the nurturing character of the Virgin Mary.

'Prodigio Celeste' inevitably evokes the 'great sign' of the Book of Revelation: a woman clothed with the sun, the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars upon her head. This image would a little later become closely associated with the Immaculate Conception, but that feast was given scant prominence in early-17th-century Rome. It could equally well be associated with the feast of the Assumption (15th August), which was celebrated with elaborate pomp in the basilica of S Maria Maggiore, where Benevoli was maestro (simultaneously directing the Cappella Giulia of St Peter's) from 1646 until his death in 1672. The mass may have been composed for the Assumption in S Maria Maggiore in his later years.

**Kyrie 1** introduces each of the four choirs in turn, a procedure used elsewhere in the mass, but this does not reflect lack of imagination. The four choirs, so favoured for major feast days, may have symbolised the four Evangelists, the passing of entries through Choirs I, II, III, IV (the sequence so often repeated), perhaps mirroring the circling cosmos as the music revolved clockwise around those lucky enough to be placed in the middle of this aural feast.

Choir 1 opens with a theme worked polyphonically, very much in the old style – *stile antico* – of the much-revered Palestrina. Choir 3's entry modulates to a new key while Choir 4 takes us back home. The second set of entries is quite different: quick chordal volleys, a 'doubles match' moving at greater speed. The third entries are no longer old-style but rather something resembling later Baroque music and all four choirs come together for the first time in a luxurious cadence. The **Christe** (as was the convention in Roman multi-choir masses) is for combined upper voices, playing with soft dissonance – a sorbet to the richness of the sixteen parts. **Kyrie 2** is much busier than stately Kyrie 1, the speed at which the harmony changes (the harmonic rhythm) twice as fast. At the halfway point Renaissance polyphony gives way to Baroque swagger as Benevoli exploits a dramatic device known as 'tenere la mula' ('holding the mule') or simply 'la mula', which

was much favoured by – and unique to – Roman composers of the 17th-century triumphalist Counter-Reformation.

Kyrie 2's fugal theme is now monumentally slowed down, and presented in immensely long notes by all four soprano parts in unison, while beneath them the lower three voices of each choir toss vigorous phrases one to another. Tension builds inexorably, to be eventually resolved in a massive tutti cadence that brings the entire Kyrie to the most impressive of climaxes. This is a typical (though comparatively restrained) use of the *mula*. The female mule (in English, a hinny) was the preferred mount of senior Roman clergy, and though its temperament was gentler than that of the male, it shared the universally recognised mulish characteristic of extreme stubbornness. A hinny would sometimes quite suddenly stand stock still and refuse to move, resisting all coaxing by its rider. Plump cardinals will often have been seen in this embarrassing quandary on the streets of Rome, and the notion must one day have struck some musical wit that the newly fashionable fantastically extended lines of the *cantus firmus* (CF: 'fixed melody') were the musical counterpart of mulish stand-stills: as though (in the case of Benevoli's Kyrie II) all four soprano parts were declining to present their CFs in the traditional manner, contumaciously holding onto each note as long as they possibly could.

Despite the jocular sobriquet, the *mula* device was entirely serious. According to the greatest of Benevoli's successors as director of the Cappella Giulia, Giuseppe Ottavio Pitoni (1657–1743), another notable composer of four-choir masses and Magnificats, it was the late-16th-century composer Rinaldo del Mel, probably a pupil of Palestrina, who had pioneered longer-note CFs. His were usually mere breves, and usually placed unobtrusively in a tenor part, but just as Roman Baroque architecture can be seen as a hugely expanded and more ornate take on Renaissance classicism, so Baroque church music in Rome seized on such Renaissance features and expanded them to daring extremes. Not by chance was a full-blown *mula* usually deployed at the end of a movement, for its primary function was to screw up the tension to a calculated climax, rather like the coda to a movement of – say – a Mahler symphony.

The musical *mule* was long-lived, and the species was still alive and kicking during Handel's Roman sojourn in the early 18th century. An unmistakable echo of the device is to be heard in the 'King of kings' section towards the end of his Hallelujah Chorus, where the slowly rising soprano line has the same ever-intensifying function as many a *mula* by Benevoli or Pitoni.

The **Gloria** opens not with the burst of energy that begins later Baroque Glorias but with a gentle setting of 'peace on earth' for each choir in turn, followed by a reflective full choir 'bonae voluntatis' ('goodwill to men'). Faster movement follows, and then a striking harmonic change at 'Adoramus te' shifts three steps down from G to E major – a 'tertiary shift' (a great favourite of Monteverdi). The setting of these words include high bass suspensions that inject real drama. Benevoli doesn't let the full 16-voice texture outstay its welcome but brings it back for the crucial text of 'Jesu Christe' at both its iterations. Otherwise the speed of the handover from one group to another gets steadily faster until a full-choir Amen.

Having set out his main compositional devices, Benevoli uses them more freely in the **Credo**. Renaissance-style polyphony is eschewed for quickfire exchange between the groups and different combinations of them. He introduces triple time with frequent hemiola cadences ('I'd like to / be in A – / me – ri – ca). A falling phrase to depict Christ's descent from heaven ('descendit de caelis') is tossed around with sheer joy in the sonic geography, while the mystery of the Incarnation is embodied by slow-moving but striking harmony, run through with individual decorative flourishes: ornate ivy around pillars.

It was traditional in Roman multi-choir masses to write the central *Crucifixus* for reduced forces, here four soprano parts. These singers were highly accomplished readers: normally castrati, but possibly boys if singers from the Cappella Giulia were co-opted. But if one considers the difficulty of the spatial separation between the choirs, the fact that each singer was reading from a single sheet of just their own part, plus the tricky time changes and considerable virtuosity of this passage (higher-pitched than elsewhere in the mass), one starts to imagine the adrenaline of the occasion where simply to end together in the right place would have been an achievement, especially after Benevoli's little joke (a feature of his masses) where the music for 'non erit finis' ('shall have no end') is spun out in intriguing variations.

'conglorificatur' ('is worshipped and glorified'). As so often, the text 'Holy Catholic Church' is given special treatment followed by a run-away passage for 'the remission of sins'.

**Sanctus** and **Agnus Dei** are both short and re-use previous ideas. (The *Benedictus* was not set in 17th-century Rome but replaced by an *Elevation Motet*, and there was always a single 'Agnus Dei' petition, so that a mass setting did not end with the usual 'dona nobis pacem'.) But from nowhere, the words 'miserere nobis' receive striking chromatic treatment, and full forces achieve a gloriously rich ending: as with Christ's water-into-wine miracle at the wedding in Cana, the best has been saved until last.

With so much music of any period serving a quotidien function, it's rare still to uncover truly great repertoire. We hope that – along with the *Missa Tu es Petrus* – this first recording of the *Missa Benevola* will alter our view of 17th century music.

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(with thanks to Noel O'Regan)

### **GIACOMO CARISSIMI (1605-74)**

Born in the same year as Benevoli and in the same year and town as Graziani (whose attractive solo motets featured on our first Benevoli release, COR16201), Giacomo Carissimi is a more familiar name to music history than either of these contemporaries. Working initially at Assisi Cathedral and then becoming maestro of the German College in Rome (whose famous predecessor was Victoria) he was courted for jobs much further afield but stayed in Rome, partly because of his health but also because he was clearly onto a good thing. **Jephte** was written by 1648 but there is no surviving manuscript in his own hand. (Our new edition is based on the copy in the hand of his significant pupil, Marc-Antoine Charpentier.)

While Carissimi's actual job was to provide music for the liturgy, train boy choristers and also keep the very talented singers of the choir in check (the latter two of which he seems to have been quite bad at) he is chiefly remembered today for his oratorios in both Italian and Latin. Much has been written about their place in Filippo Neri's *Congregazione dell'Oratorio* – a movement that encouraged lay people to consider scripture and prayer at meetings in specially built prayer halls (themselves called oratorios). But they are also part of a more general Roman growth in non-liturgical sacred music that used highly attractive music and above all the newish recitative style.

The story of *Jephte* is taken from the Old Testament book of Judges but changes were seemingly made to make it more general and suitable to the Lenten entertainment that it surely was. The music is notable for its constant variety, from the hyper expressive main characters of Jephte and his daughter (curiously not named), to echo effects and affective small ensembles. The final

chorus is rightly regarded as a pinnacle of 17th-century choral music, its triple suspensions ('lamentamini') and pacing of harmonic tension a true marvel. A curiosity of this chorus is a few daring extra bars (beginning 21'20") that appear in no existing 17th-century source, although there *is* no source for the piece in Carissimi's own hand. They appear in Chrysander's edition of 1869, perhaps from a source in Hamburg since lost or destroyed in World War II. If Carissimi did not actually write these he surely would have *wished* he had.

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Carissimi's 'Paratum cor meum' and 'Super flumina Babylonis' are preserved in sources in Uppsala (Sweden) that belong to the earliest extant manuscripts of music by Carissimi in Europe. These works arrived with a group of Roman musicians who were recruited to the court of Queen Christina in 1652, including no less than six castratos. This initiative was clearly connected with her plans to abdicate and convert to Catholicism. The Jesuit headquarters in Rome assisted her in engaging these musicians and they left Sweden together with her after the abdication in June 1654. There is much to suggest that she tried to recruit Carissimi himself as a maestro to her court, but had to make do with his talented young pupil Vincenzo Albrici.

When, later that summer, Christina visited the Jesuit college in Münster incognito, dressed as a young nobleman, she specifically asked the choirmaster there to perform **Super flumina Babylonis**. Presumably she thought that they would have music by Carissimi in their repertoire since he was employed by the Jesuits in Rome. Interestingly, it is a piece about life in exile, mixing the lament over the Babylonian exile from Psalm 136 with the joyous praise of the Lord from Psalm 80. We know little of the original context and Carissimi's intentions behind the piece, but it appears to have appealed to Christina in this precarious transitional phase of her life, as an exiled Queen without a realm.

**Paratum cor meum** is preserved in two versions, one for soprano and one for bass, both with breakneck coloraturas. It is only preserved in one more source, a fragment in the church archives in Pistoia (Italy). It was most likely brought there by one of Christina's singers, Domenico Melani, who was from Pistoia. It is a remarkable case of the transfer of Roman music to Pistoia via Sweden!

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