



COMMUNICATION: CONFERENCE REPORT

Die Tradition des italienischen Oratoriums im Wien des 17. und 18. Jahrhunderts

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Despite its very specific theme, this conference involved a wide range of perspectives on the Italian oratorios composed for, and performed in, Vienna in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and brought together twenty speakers to discuss them. Hosted in the historic Theatersaal of the Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, the event was genuinely international, with presenters coming from Austria, Germany, Italy, the Czech Republic, Canada, the United States and Australia, and the languages of papers almost equally divided between German, English and Italian.

The conference opened with a keynote address by Harry White (University College Dublin), who extended the findings of his 2020 monograph *The Musical Discourse of Servitude: Authority, Autonomy, and the Work-Concept in Fux, Bach, and Handel* (New York: Oxford University Press) to argue that, by comparison with settings of the mass ordinary, oratorio composition at the imperial court provided little scope for imaginative autonomy, because of both its stylistic conservatism and its 'generic intransigence'.

Three papers addressed Johann Joseph Fux as oratorio composer. Fux expert Thomas Hochradner (Universität Mozarteum Salzburg) provided an overview of the composer's oratorio output, with a detailed analysis of both the textual sources and the musical disposition of each of the works. Two further papers then focused on individual oratorios: Elena Abbado (Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften) investigated the origins and cultural context of the first two that Fux wrote, both with female protagonists (*Santa Dimpna, infanta d'Irlanda* (1702) and *La Regina Saba* (1705)), arguing that they are sharply differentiated in both libretto and musical style from his later productions. Alfred Noe and Alexander Rausch (both Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften) then explored in detail the composer's setting of Pietro Pariati's libretto *Testamento di nostro Signor Gesù Cristo sul Calvario* (1726).

Beyond the expected focus on Kapellmeister Fux, several other figures received welcome attention, including the Neapolitan Giuseppe Porsile, whose oratorios composed for Vienna in the 1720s were discussed by Nicolò Maccavino (Conservatorio di Musica Francesco Cilea, Reggio Calabria). Papers by Marco Bizzarini (Università di Napoli Federico II) and Luca Della Libera (Conservatorio di Frosinone) provided new insights into the performances of Alessandro Scarlatti's oratorios in the city. My paper (Alan Maddox, University of Sydney) analysed Antonio Caldara's expression of 'negative' affections in his Holy Week oratorios for Charles VI, while Angela Romagnoli (Università di Pavia) investigated the roles played by female characters in Francesco Bartolomeo Conti's *Mosè preservato*.

Although most presenters concentrated primarily on the musical features of Viennese oratorios, several instead focused on literary aspects. Adriana De Feo (Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften) addressed Apostolo Zeno's librettos for the Habsburg court, showing that the imperial poet's dramatically effective productions served a variety of ends, including as *speculum principis*

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(a 'mirror of princes' or guide to rulership) and in propagating themes of the Catholic Enlightenment. Reinhard G. Gruber (Archiv der Domkirche am Stephansdom, Vienna) and Elisabeth Theresia Hilscher (Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften) also focused specifically on the theological dimensions of the genre, providing insight into the significance of concepts such as *poenitentia* and *Gratia Dei* in Pariati's oratorio librettos. Continuing the literary theme, Marko Deisinger (Österreichische Nationalbibliothek) highlighted the often-overlooked role of Italian preachers as protagonists in the oratorio practice of the Viennese court in the seventeenth century.

The second day's keynote address was delivered by Robert Kendrick (Fondazione Bruno Kessler, Trento and University of Chicago), who focused on the importance of the oratorio as a vehicle for domestic devotion, particularly for the imperial family. Through analysis of two works from the 1680s, he showed how oratorios depicted saintly role models for members of the emperor's family to emulate, establishing a political and social context for pious court music-making which took its significance well beyond the musical means deployed.

A subgenre that attracted particular attention was the *sepolcro*, a special category of oratorio specific to Vienna, designed expressly for performance before the court's model of the Holy Sepulchre. In addition to the earlier papers by White and me, which addressed *sepolcri* in their primary context at the imperial court, Eugène Michelangeli (Institut für alte Musik, Universität für Musik und darstellende Kunst Wien) spoke about Antonio Draghi's *sepolcri* for Dowager Empress Eleonora Gonzaga-Nevers, another important patron of the genre. Jana Perutková (Masarykova univerzita, Brno) also placed the *sepolcro* in a broader chronological and institutional context, showing that such works were transferred to religious houses outside the court. Indeed, an often-overlooked aspect of oratorio performance in Vienna was the role of convents, including in particular the Ursuline nuns, who performed oratorios within their cloister. Janet K. Page (University of Memphis) explored the performance practices used, noting the creative solutions devised to compensate for the lack of low voices.

Jana Spáčilová (Univerzita Palackého, Olomouc), too, widened the view beyond Vienna, to discuss performances of oratorios by Viennese court composers, including Fux, in Moravia around 1730. Oratorios on particular narrative themes were explored by Milada Jonášová (Akademie věd České republiky), who investigated settings of the biblical story of Samson in Habsburg oratorios, and Matthias Pernerstorfer (Don Juan Archiv Wien), who highlighted the prevalence of oratorios dealing with Teresa of Ávila during the War of the Spanish Succession (1701–1714). A more music-analytical approach was taken by Herbert Seifert (Universität Wien), who gave a detailed exposition of the prevalence of double fugues in sacred music written for Charles VI. Seifert also brought this fascinating conference to a thoughtful conclusion with his closing remarks and moderation of a final discussion.

Amongst the many themes that emerged from the conference were the periodization of the Viennese oratorio, which had distinct characters under emperors Leopold I (reigned 1658–1705), Joseph I (reigned 1705–1711) and Charles VI (reigned 1711–1740), and, closely related to this, the gradually eroding distinction between the Italian oratorio proper and its close relative, the *sepolcro*. Also notable were the complementary contributions made by, on the one hand, source studies – notable amongst which were new findings by Luca Della Libera and Jana Perutková – and, on the other, cultural history – including the intersections of poetics (De Feo, Noe, Rausch, Abbado), theology (Gruber and Hilscher) and sacred oratory (Deisinger) which were so fundamental to the oratorio genre. The discussion of some of the many composers who worked at and for the Austrian Habsburg court was also welcome, placing renewed focus on musicians such as Porsile, Conti, Draghi, Bonno and Caldara, of whom we still hear too little, both in discourse about music and in performance.

Delegates were also treated to an excellent concert given by the historical-performance students of the Universität für Musik und darstellende Kunst, directed by Eugène Michelangeli, performing rarely heard music by Viennese court composers including Draghi, Fux and Caldara, as well as by Giovanni Bononcini, Carlo Agostino Badia, Anna Maria von Raschenau and Emperor Leopold I himself.

Amongst a wealth of fine singing and playing, highlights included striking instrumental obbligatos by Martin Ortner (trombone), Franziska Hoffman (chalumeau) and Xaver Eckert (salterio).

Warm thanks are due in particular to Adriana De Feo, who convened the conference as part of her project *Pietro Pariati: The Critical Edition of His Texts for Music*, supported by the Fonds zur Förderung der wissenschaftlichen Forschung (Austrian Science Fund). Her efficient and gracious organization of the meeting, ably assisted by Elena Abbado, made it a very pleasant as well as productive scholarly gathering. A particularly welcome feature was De Feo's initiative in booking a variety of typical Viennese restaurants for meals during the conference, stimulating collegial discussion that added substantially to the fruitful dialogue that took place in the formal sessions.

Alan Maddox is Senior Lecturer in Musicology at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music, University of Sydney. He initially trained as a singer, and his research focuses on Italian vocal music in the early eighteenth century, particularly that of Antonio Caldara (1670–1736), as well as on music and rhetoric, music in Australian colonial society, and music and intellectual history. He is President of the Musicological Society of Australia, and is active in the International Musicological Society and Society for the History of Emotions. His edited volume *Antonio Caldara and the Performance of Power* has recently been published (Vienna: Hollitzer, 2025).