

TRIONFO

Georgetown musicologist resurrects a long-lost Italian oratorio with a Jesuit connection



by Anthony R. DelDonna

AS I STARED at the growing stack of bound eighteenth-century manuscripts being placed before me in the famed Library of the Conservatory of Naples (San Pietro a Majella) in Spring 2008, I resolved to be meticulous and judicious. I had been led to these scores, most of which were being prepared to be catalogued (not unusual in many Italian archives), by my colleague and dear friend Dr. Antonio Carocchia, an assistant in the library. The heat was climbing on the fourth floor of this once-vibrant monastery, now a renowned musical archive, yet the mood as always was light, as the sounds of afternoon traffic in Naples rang through the open windows.

My eyes were drawn to one manuscript in particular; the gold-embossed title on its spine read *Trionfo*. I opened it to the title page and found the name

I had been on the hunt for since 2007: Nicola Ceva.

The page contained a description, *Oratorio a Quattro Voci con violini*, and the full title of the composition: *Trionfo per l'Assunzione della Santissima Vergine*, "Triumph of the Assumption of the Most Blessed Virgin," along with a date, 1705. The score was bound in a dark-emerald cover with gold inlay, and the pages still had evidence of the sand used to dry ink, which was now rust-colored with a hint of mildew. The pages, however, were in impeccable condition. Ceva's hand was steady, precise, and easy to read.

Ceva, a contemporary of Alessandro Scarlatti and among the musical elite of early eighteenth-century Naples, had a close association with Jesuit institutions there. His name, compositions, and professional life, however, had long been forgotten. Not even his year of birth or death is known; only a fleeting

period of his activity is certain to modern historians.

I pored over the music of the oratorio, singing parts here and there whether vocal or instrumental. In the course of the next two hours, the beauty of the music and its narrative became apparent. I enlisted several colleagues to help "sing" some parts with me, and I photographed the manuscript.

My knowledge of Ceva and his music came from two principal sources: the *Gazzetta di Napoli*, which was the periodical of the Kingdom of Naples, and the four-volume study of Neapolitan conservatories by historian, lexicographer, and poet Salvatore DiGiacomo, written in the early twentieth century.

The *Gazzetta*, a meticulous documentation of life in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Naples, was rife with accounts of cultural events. My focus had been on the activities of the Jesuits and their interaction with the

renowned musical culture of the city. This research had begun with the organization of a conference (with my colleague Anna Celenza) in Fiesole, Italy, in 2008 on the theme of “The Jesuits and Music: Scholarship, Patronage and Performance.”

Surviving copies of the *Gazzetta*, in Naples’s Biblioteca Nazionale, was the logical point of departure for this study, given the newspaper’s breadth and attention to detail. Its copious references to the Society were a reflection of the long history of the Jesuits in Naples and their considerable patronage of the arts on the Italian peninsula and in France and Germany.

It was in 1552 that Jesuits, led by Alfonso Salmeron, one of Ignatius’s earliest companions, established the first

conservatory, who came to the city to rule as viceroys.

One particular institution created by Jesuits, the Collegio dei Nobili, was an important center of culture. Its students came from the kingdom’s nobility. The school had a vibrant artistic life; students and professionals performed operas, oratorios, cantatas, and other genres of dramatic music.

It was in accounts about the school that Ceva’s name repeatedly appeared; information about his life and work began to come together. Of particular interest was Ceva’s attribution as the *maestro di cappella* for one of the famed local music schools, the Conservatorio dei Poveri di Gesù Cristo. In addition, Ceva was the *maestro* for a Marian confraternity, the Congregazione dei Mercanti. Ceva’s predecessor as *maestro* for this confraternity had been none other than Scarlatti, among the most famous opera composers in Europe at that time.

The Congregazione dei Mercanti had close ties to the Collegio dei Nobili, often sponsoring the creation of music for the school; it is the most likely sponsor for the creation and performance of *Trionfo*. This fleeting information led me to DiGiacomo’s tome, an invaluable resource as it was based on documents that have since been destroyed.

DiGiacomo cites sources that note Ceva’s education in Naples, his entry into the priesthood (though it is most likely that Ceva was not a Jesuit), and associations with the Congregazione and the Conservatorio. I now had compelling links between Ceva and the Society’s principal educational institution in Naples and the city’s musical culture.

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The next step was the most important: visiting the conservatory’s library, the largest repository of eighteenth-century music in the city, to find any of Ceva’s music. My research turned up several small compositions of his, similar to chamber cantatas, but nothing of significant length or, more important, anything about these works to suggest ties to the Congregazione or the Collegio.

It was at this point that Caroccia mentioned the uncatalogued music scores, and *Trionfo* floated before my eyes. The composition celebrates the Feast of the Assumption and features three allegorical figures—*Zelo* (Zeal, tenor), *Gloria* (Glory, soprano), and *Amor Divino* (Divine Love, alto). They serve as interlocutors with the Blessed Virgin (Maria, alto) as she anticipates her ascendance into paradise.

The poetic text, laden with biblical references, is rendered in lyrical, transparent Italian similar to the content of contemporary opera. In its opening recitative *Amor Divino* proclaims, “Here is the Lord, to whom one gives sublime and precious praise.” The audience understands this announcement as the onset of the oratorio. Each soloist is featured in an introductory aria, and with the first entrance of Maria, the dramatic narrative is clear. The Blessed Virgin sings,

Mà s’eterno è il mio splendore
Yet eternal is my splendor

S’immortale è il mio mortale
If my life is immortal

Sarà vano ogni timor
All fear will be in vain

The beauty and simplicity of the work, musically and dramatically, is stunning.



San Pietro a Majella, the Conservatory of Naples, is where author and Georgetown musicologist DeDonna made his find: an oratorio by Antonio Ceva, a composer closely associated with Jesuits in eighteenth-century Naples.

of the Society’s ministries in Naples. The Jesuits quickly developed a strong rapport with the city’s political elite, whether native or the Spanish Ara-



Voices and instruments brought *Trionfo per l'Assunzione della Santissima Vergine*, a 300-year-old oratorio by Nicola Ceva, to life at a performance at Georgetown University in December.

I returned to Georgetown University with the manuscript photographed and a presentation for the Fiesole conference. I was anxious to present this work and my research to my colleagues at Georgetown and also to contemplate other ways of sharing this composition.

In December, Georgetown music students performed *Trionfo per l'Assunzione della Santissima Vergine* in Wolfington Hall, Georgetown University's Jesuit residence. The performance was the culmination of a course I teach on the Baroque period. Eight students—seven vocalists and one keyboardist—met twice a week to explore musicology and music theory and to examine music's historical, religious, and artistic contexts in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

I had transcribed *Trionfo* into mod-

ern notation (more than 200 pages!) and translated the Italian into English. I enlisted the collaboration of colleagues C. Paul Heins and Baroque specialists Jennifer Ellis Kampani (soprano) and Mark Janello (harpichord) for the musical instruction of the oratorio. Each week we led the students in rehearsals. Kampani provided individual lessons for the students and also instruction on the oratorio.

Our integration of academics and the final performance echoed traditions in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Naples that brought together students and faculty who learned and perfected their craft within the context of Jesuit education.

The oratorio's beauty and simplicity speaks to Ceva's considerable craft. I

think often about the comment of harpsichordist Janello: "This composition contains every imaginable Baroque *affect*, yet is never stereotyped or hackneyed. It is truly a beautiful composition tailored to didactic purposes. It makes me wonder, What other great music is waiting to be found in Naples?" **C**



Anthony R. DelDonna is assistant professor of musicology at Georgetown University. A native of Naples, he is a specialist in Neapolitan music, musicians, and culture. He co-edited *The Cambridge Companion to 18th-Century Opera*.