

# Opera con Brio

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## Handel and Haydn Society: From Bononcini to Bach

### A Somber *Stabat Mater* and a Vibrant *Easter Oratorio*

The Boston Handel and Haydn Society was founded over 200 years ago, in 1815 to be exact, by a group of sixteen amateur men to “introduce into more general use the works of Handel and Haydn and other eminent composers.” Happily, today this includes the likes of J. S. Bach whose *Easter Oratorio*, BWV 249, received a vigorous airing in the closing subscription concert of the 2022/23 season. It also occasionally includes the likes of lesser-known baroque masters, such as Bach’s slightly older contemporary, Antonio Maria Bononcini. His elegant *Stabat Mater* preceded Bach’s oratorio in the performance to make a fitting double bill and sequence for the Easter season: from death to resurrection – or, as the title of the informative accompanying program notes by Teresa M. Neff states, “From Sorrow to Joy.”

A further commitment of H+H today, articulated in their mission statement, is to use “historically informed performance practices that connect 21st century audiences directly with the composer’s intent.” Helping to realize this goal, with his inspired conducting, was the esteemed visiting baroque specialist, Rinaldo Alessandrini. In Bononcini’s *Stabat Mater*, his expertise was immediately on display as he shaped the subtle dissonances and expressive cantabile elements in the modest string writing. Even more compelling was his attention to the choral singing of the Latin text. As members of this chorus stated in the informative discussion available online before the performance, Maestro Alessandrini stressed that emphasis should be given to each word, and depth to each vowel; thus every word acquired richness and meaning,



Guest Conductor Rinaldo Alessandrini leads the H+H Orchestra and Chorus in Bach's *Easter Oratorio*

Photo: Sam Brewer

especially with the crisp enunciation of the words by the well-schooled chorus. For the audience this invited very attentive listening, while the cumulative emotional thrust of this approach made Mary's poignant lament before the cross especially compelling. For me his approach was a revelation.

After the intermission, Maestro Alessandrini opened Bach's *Easter Oratorio* with a glorious burst of instrumental splendor featuring three vibrant trumpets, drums, a trio of oboes and bassoons, and ebullient strings, all in the spirit of the *Brandenburg Concertos*. After the ensuing Adagio highlighted a wistful woodwind solo, the vibrant opening music returned, this time with joyous antiphonal exchanges of the chorus, capturing the essence of their opening line: "Come, hasten and hurry, ye fleet-footed paces." In a nutshell, the exciting initial sequence, from what Bach originally wrote as a secular cantata years earlier, captured what was to be a strength

of the performance - selective instrumental highlights, especially from obbligato winds, in the three upcoming da capo arias.

Bach composed the secular cantata some twenty-five years before the final version of the oratorio in 1740. Initially he had named the four soloists who meditate on the resurrection of Jesus: Mary, the mother of James, Mary Magdalene, and disciples Peter and John. Later he eliminated the names, as did H+H in their performance of this final version. (Curiously Bach omitted an "evangelist" as narrator that he typically included in such biblical oratorios.)

In the first aria (for Mary, mother of James), clarion soprano Silvia Frigato joined forces with acclaimed H+H principal flutist Emi Ferguson in an animated, expressive duet which spoke of the laurel wreath as the worthy token with which to celebrate the victory of Jesus over death. Alas, placing the

two soloists so far apart on the stage was a handicap since the vibrant, warm sound of Ms. Ferguson's baroque flute, as well as her fluid realization of the ornamented obbligato rather overshadowed the soprano.

A better balance came with the next aria (for Peter), as young American tenor Ben Bliss, a standout in this performance, sang with graceful legato phrasing a meditation on Jesus' napkin found in the empty grave. The refined singing dovetailed well with the graceful two recorders of Debra Nagy and Kathryn Montoya and delicate muted strings (without violas but with drone bass). It was one of the highlights of the performance. The other male soloist, the fine Italian baritone Gabriele Lombardi (John), was so expressive in his two short arias in the *Stabat Mater*, that I couldn't help wishing Bach had given him more than just occasional passages of recitative in the *Easter Oratorio*.

In the third aria (for Mary Magdelene), mezzo-soprano Anna Bonitatibus sings of her longing for Jesus with the hope she soon would be reunited with him. Appropriately, with this poignant aria, a new woodwind color emerged with the agitated obbligato for oboe d'amore (another fine moment for Debra Nagy). Unfortunately, the experienced Italian singer, Ms. Bonitatibus, kept her head down and in the score so much, as she did all evening as though sight-reading, that she rather fell short of any effort to "...connect 21st century audiences directly with the composer's intent." To be sure this was a

difficult virtuosic aria, perhaps a bit low for her in places. And despite her lack of connection with the audience, she sang fluidly and with warm tone, seemingly more secure than she had been earlier in the Bononcini.



Tenor Ben Bliss

Photo: Sam Brewer

With a return of the trumpets and full orchestra complement, the jubilant chorus closed with the magnificent final tableaux beginning, "Preis und Dank" ("Praise and Thanks"). Afterwards the packed audiences at both performances in Symphony Hall that I attended rose instantly with a standing ovation of praise and thanks. If I had one wish, it would be to have heard the Bononcini in the more intimate performing context of nearby Jordan Hall. Still, the Handel and Haydn Society, now well into its third century, should indeed be commended for presenting this pair of two early music masterpieces, neither performed today as often as they should be. And visiting Italian Maestro Rinaldo Alessandrini should also be congratulated for how effectively he fostered these idiomatic performances of period music; the past became the living present.