Introduction: *Erminia*

During the lifetime of Alessandro Scarlatti (1660-1725) large cantatas for more than a single voice, accompanied by various instruments, were customarily performed in celebration of an important aristocratic event, such as a wedding, birthday, name day celebration, royal visit, etc. During the warm months of summer, such a concert was often given outdoors in the evening, and was called a serenata. Unlike the impromptu serenata of the renaissance, the aristocratic serenata of the seventeenth and early eighteenth century was a carefully composed work of art music employing many of the same musical and literary devices heard in opera and oratorio. Like many an oratorio, a serenata of this era was sometimes composed in two parts. In the case of the oratorio, a sermon was customarily delivered between parts one and two, whereas the pause between parts one and two of the serenata was dedicated to the consumption fine food and beverages.

For many years Alessandro Scarlatti's serenata *Erminia* was thought to be unfinished, for only the music for part one of this two part serenata has survived. But today we know that the work was completed by the composer. The *Gazzetta di Napoli* reports its performance in June 1723 in the palazzo Stigliano (today the palazzo Zevallos Stigliano at Via Toledo 185—in 1723 it was given in an internal courtyard (*cortile)* of the palace which lacked a roof) for the wedding celebration of Maria Luisa Caraccioli, ”de’ Principi di Santobono,” with Ferdinando Colonna, Principe di Stigliano. The noble guests at this performance were presented with a printed libretto to commemorate the occasion, attested by the survival of a single examplar of the libretto in the Biblioteca Casanatese, Roma.

ERMINIA
Favoletta Drammatica
Da Cantarsi

In occasione delle felicissime
NOZZE
Degl ’illustriss.mi Ed Eccellentiss.mi
Signori
FERDINANDI
COLONNA
Principe di Stigliano;
E
MARIA
LUISA
CARACCIOLO
De’ Principi di Santobono.
IN

NAPOLI
MDCCXXIII.
Per Francesco Ricciardo Stampatore di Sua
Eminenza
il Signor Vecerè.
Con Licenza de’ Superiori.

Given its date, *Erminia* may well be the last major work completed by Alessandro Scarlatti, perhaps the most distinguished Italian composer of his generation. Intriguing mysteries still surround the serenata. Three closely related manuscript scores (in the Naples Conservatory Library, at Montecassino, and in the Royal College of Music, London) preserve the music for part one. But where is the music for part two? And who was responsible for the text of the serenata? The composer, Scarlatti, is named in the *Gazzetta di Napoli* and also on page five of the libretto, but the poet's name is nowhere found. This is particularly curious, for printed libretti often fail to name the composer of a work, but rarely lack the name of a poet.

Perhaps this indicates he (or she) was a member of the nobility. Several circumstances surrounding the performance of *Erminia*, however, suggest to the distinguished scholar Roberto Pagano that the young Pietro Metastasio may have been the poet. Both the *Gazzetta* and the libretto name the singers who

performed the serenata. Of particular interest is the fact that the eighteen-year-old castrato Carlo Broschi, better known as Farinello, sang the role of Erminia. Much later in life Farinello and Metastasio had the habit of referring to one another as *caro gemello.* Farinello explained to Charles Burney that Metastasio and he were twins of public favor, and entered the world at the same time, he having performed in that poet's first opera. In fact, the work in question was not an opera, but rather Porpora's setting of the serenata *Angelica*, heard in Naples on 4 September 1720 on the occasion of the Austrian Empress Elisabeth Christine's birthday. It appears to be Metastasio's first text set to music and Farinello's first public appearance as a singer.

But what of other youthful collaborations between the two? The close bonds of friendship evinced in Metastasio's letters to Farinello, although dating from much later in their lives, suggest an intimacy the result of youthful, shared endeavor and personal contact which cannot be entirely accounted for by the few known facts of their early careers. After finishing *Angelica*, Metastasio is known to have written three other occasional poems set to music in Naples: *Endimione* (1721), *Gli Orti esperidi* (1721), and *Galatea* (1722). In the spring of 1723 he extensively revised D. David's text *La Forza della virtù*, which was heard as *Siface* in the teatro San Bartolomeo, Naples, just a month before the performance of *Erminia.* Farinello sang in none of these. The suspicion remains, however, that Metastasio may have written other works during this period that he never acknowledged, perhaps even suppressed, and in which Farinello sang.

During the early 1720s Metastasio was engaged in the study of law at Naples and was, according to his earliest biographers, obliged to hide his activities as a poet, although today we now know of some of them. Later, as the distinguished poet Laureate of the Holy Roman Empire, Metastasio continued to conceal the details of his early career. In 1733-34 when the Venetian printer Bettinelli published the

complete works of Metastasio, the poet unsuccessfully attempted to suppress the appearance of the four works mentioned above most closely resembling *Erminia* (i.e., A*ngelica, Endimione, Gli Orti esperidi*, and *Galatea).* Bettinelli recalled the poets motive for this as his “insuperabile ripugnanza l’età giovanile, in cui gli ha composti, ed il non esserne egli stesso nulla affatto contento.” Metastasio, evidently, was particularly ashamed of the close connection of these poems with earlier masterpieces; *Angelica*, for example, is clearly based on Ariosto’s *Orlando Furioso*, as Metastasio admits in its preface. Similarly, Metastasio would surely have denied his authorship of *Erminia*, were he its poet, for part one is clearly based on Torquato Tasso’s *La Gerusalemme liberata*, while part two contains surprising allusions to Canto V of Dante’s *Comedia.*

Tasso’s epic of 1575, which tells the story of the Christian conquest of Jerusalem, had served as the basis of innumerable musico-dramatic works by 1723. Canto VII of Tasso’s poem, the so-called 'pastorale of Erminia,' serves as the basis for the text of the serenata. The action can be summarized as follows:

> The tired and frightened Erminia wanders alone in a dark forest where she has been chased by the enemy knights. Only by calling the name of her beloved Tancredi can she be consoled. Suddenly, hearing the sounds of rustic wind instruments and a chorus of youths, she sees an old man at work at the threshold of a rustic hut. He is startled at the sight of an armed knight, but Erminia quickly reveals herself as a woman and calms him. She begs for shelter and aid which he is glad to provide, for unlike those who live at court, shepherds harbor in their breast neither worry, ambitious desire, nor greed; all that life requires is provided by the flock, garden, and stream. She divests herself of the baleful

arms and, dressed as a simple shepherdess, accompanies the children as they lead the snowy flock to pasture. Polidoro, enraged at the thought that Clorinda has escaped him, enters. He questions the fair shepherdess and is soon smitten by her beauty and demeanor. Losing all thought of vengeance, he only desires to stay with her; but she must leave, for it does not become the lowliness of a shepherdess or the lovely purity of a bashful virgin to be found among warriors. Tancredi enters in search of his beloved Clorinda. He finds her arms beside the shepherd's hovel and, fearing foul play, roughly questions him. The shepherd tries to conceal the girl's presence, but at the sight of Tancredi's blade, tells where she can be found. Polidoro enters and tells Tancredi of his love for the beautiful shepherdess. Tancredi suffers the stings of jealousy, for surely she is the beautiful Clorinda. The two knights exit, Polidoro in search of lodging, and Tancredi the fair Clorinda. Part one of the serenata ends with Erminia alone beside a clear brook. She takes a measure of comfort from the beauty of nature. As she lies down to sleep, however, doubts and fear assail her. Love torments her.

Part two begins with the return of Tancredi from his unsuccessful search for Clorinda. He wishes to question the shepherd further, but Polidoro enters, and the shepherd offers both knights shelter in his humble cottage. The worn-out Polidoro accepts while the ardent Tancredi burns to continue the chase. As the sun sets, Erminia and the children gaily return with the flock. The shepherd points her out to Tancredi who is disappointed not to see Clorinda. Erminia, agitated at the unexpected sight of the hero for whom she has conceived such

an undeclared passion, swoons. The shepherd is enraged at Tancredi for causing such a change in her bearing. Polidoro attempts to console her; but only at the sound of Tancredi's voice does she revive. He questions her, and gradually she reveals her identity and, to Tancredi's dismay, her love for him. He, in turn, begs for pardon since he loves another, at which news Erminia is afflicted by such pain that she begs him to kill her. Erminia, Tancredi, and Polidoro express their perplexity in a trio. Finally, at the evidence of such fidelity, Polidoro renounces his claim to Erminia's affection and entreats his colleague to accept her. Tancredi can resist no longer; after bidding farewell to Clorinda in an aria, he gives himself to Erminia. The shepherd is overcome with sudden joy. In a vision he sees his poor home transformed into a rich, splendidly ornate royal palace from the midst of which rises a lofty COLUMN of choice white marble whose top is magnificently formed into a generous LION by the skilled hand of the sculptor. The shepherd wishes the pair much happiness and many offspring. They embrace and the serenata ends with a chorus of rejoicing.

A comparison of Tasso's text with that set by Scarlatti shows that the anonymous poet of *Erminia* worked closely from the original. Not only are characters and argument taken from Tasso, but numerous poetic images, metaphors, similes, and even entire lines of verse are borrowed. For example, at one point in Tasso Erminia asks:

. . . or che d'intorno
d'alto incendio di guerra arde il paese,
come qui state in placido soggiorno

senza temer le militari offese? (*La Gerusalemme liberata*, VII.8.1-4.)

In Recitative 10 of the serenata Erminia speaks almost exactly the same words:

> Or che incendio di guerra arde
> il paese,
> come qui state in placido
> soggiorno
> senza temer le militari offese?

Few if any borrowings from Tasso are found in the second part of the serenata, of which only the text is known. Since *Erminia* was written in celebration of a noble wedding, the poet was certainly required to provide a happy ending. This effectively ruled out Tasso's poem as a model. As *Gerusalemme liberata* ends it is by no means clear that Tancredi and Erminia will live together happily ever after. In part two of the serenata the anonymous poet, forced with the necessity of uniting the lovers, turns surprisingly to Dante for inspiration.

In Canto V of the *Comedia* Dante is guided by the Latin poet Virgil into the second circle of Hell (Inferno). Here he encounters, in a furious storm, the souls of those damned for the sin of lust. Among them he recognizes Francesca da Rimini and Paolo Malatesta, historical figures whom Dante may have known in real life. As the storm abates Dante calls out to the couple and Francesca courteously responds, recounting the tale of their damnation and murder.

Paolo was the brother of Francesca's husband Gianciotto and a confidant of the lady. While reading the story of Lancelot and Guinevere together, Paolo impetuously kissed Francesca; and immediately the couple lost control and became illicit lovers. Gianciotto, discovering the couple *in flagrante*, murdered them with his sword. As Francesca recounts the power of their love and its painful, devastating consequences, Dante is so overcome with pity that he falls senseless. Like Francesca, Erminia too recounts the painful details of her love, in this case for Tancredi. At hearing Erminia's tale

of woe the Shepherd and Polidoro are deeply affected by pity for the maiden. But when Tancredi fails to respond to her entreaties and to renounce his love for Clorinda, his colleague Polidoro chides him for this ignoble behavior, reminding the knight that “Amore, ch’a nullo amato amar perdona.” One of Francesca’s most famous lines from the *Comedia*, it draws on the late twelfth-century treatise *De Amore* by Andreas Capellanus. The basic premise here, and a truism of *amor cortese*, is that reciprocity in love is obligatory.

At hearing these words Tancredi dismisses Clorinda from his thoughts with an aria and embraces Erminia. The Shepherd, perhaps following Dante’s example, swoons, and in a vision sees his rude countryside transformed into a splendid city, *bella Napoli,* and his rough cottage into a resplendent palace, the *palazzo Stigliano*. The serenata ends with general rejoicing. Whoever the poet of Erminia may have been, he was certainly not averse to honoring a fellow poet or delighting an audience by working a few well-known verses into his poem. The young Metastasio is one possible candidate, but there are others. For example, the Imperial poet Laureate Silvio Stampiglia was living in retirement in Naples during 1723. The identity of the *Erminia* poet remains a mystery.

Alessandro Scarlatti has been assigned by some scholars the role of founder of the Neapolitan school of opera. Clearly his influence on the younger, so-called Neapolitan composers of the eighteenth century, must have been profound. An examination of *Erminia,* however, shows that Scarlatti, unlike his younger contemporaries, remained faithful to an essentially Baroque conception of musical expression.

Scarlatti composed the role of Tancredi for the alto castrato Andrea Pacini. Aria 19, sung by Tancredi immediately upon his first appearance in the serenata, is a typical example of a favorite Baroque

convention, the metaphor or simile aria. Although the text is ostensibly about a “quick, daring stag” seeking its mate, the intention is clearly to portray and arouse in the audience the affection of ardent love that has gained ascendancy over Tancredi as he searches for his beloved Clorinda. Implicit in this aria is the likening of Tancredi to the stag. The rhythmic figure of two sixteenth notes and an eighth is one of the most salient features of the *galant* style, where it is conventionally used to end the normally short and balanced phrases of an aria. Scarlatti makes use of it in this aria at the end of the first two-measure phrase of part two. This phrase in turn is answered by a balanced two- measure phrase emphasizing the rhyme *sasso / passo* (measures 43-46). Here the notes in the continuo become more repetitious than usual as the bass abandons its contrapuntal role and causes the harmonic rhythm to slow to the rate of two chords per measure. Also worthy of note is the use of a single triplet in the voice part of Aria 19 at measure 17. In a piece otherwise dominated by rigorous duple rhythm, the triplet effectively calls attention to the word “diletta.” Despite these *galant* touches, Aria 19 remains essentially in the sphere of the late Baroque, as witnessed by the contrapuntal intertwining of the voice and instruments throughout most of the aria, the use of several melismas in the voice to set significant words (the longest on “cercando” at measures 32-36), and the affective use of the Neapolitan sixth at measure 49 on the words “più duol.”

Like his first aria, Tancredi’s second aria, number 25, is composed of rhythmic elements suggesting the influence of the *galant* style. Syncopations (characteristically expressed as eighth note, quarter, eighth) are heard often in the duple-meter arias of the younger Neapolitans during the decade of the 1720s. This rhythm is very prominent in the voice part of Aria 25. But despite the conspicuous use of this *galant* mannerism, Aria 25, like Tancredi’s earlier Aria 19, remains firmly wedded to an older Baroque tradition. The voice is not consistently doubled by the violins. Vocal and instrumental lines often cross, creating an intricate polyphonic web and a relatively quick harmonic

rhythm, and affective words are treated melismatically or with striking harmonies such as the Neapolitan sixth.

The role of the Shepherd was sung by the distinguished bass D. Antonio Manna, a long-time member of the Royal Chapel at Naples and famous as an interpreter of comic roles in the *teatro San Bartolomeo.* Besides demonstrating his extraordinary vocal range, his two arias contain exceptionally well developed examples of colorful orchestration, used in this case to depict the Shepherd's cheerful rusticity.

Polidoro's two arias, number 15 and 23, were composed for the distinguished tenor Annibale Pio Fabri. The choice of the key of D major for Polidoro's conventional vengeance aria, number 15, was necessitated by the tuning of the Baroque trumpet. In this aria we find a conventional technique used to extend the length of a musical phrase, the sequential melisma for the voice. These melismas always fall upon highly affective words, *tempesta* in this case. They are never composed for purely gratuitous vocal display. Rather, they are one of the favorite techniques used by Scarlatti to define the affective content of an aria. It is interesting to note that Scarlatti often follows a long, extended phrase, such as the melisma on t*empesta*, with a brief pause and a final short (usually two-measure) conclusion. This manner of structuring the phrases in an aria, conceived as a means of expressing the affection inherent in a text, is also found in instrumental works of the late Baroque. For example, it is one of the clearly identifiable Italian devices in the first movement of J. S. Bach's Italian Concerto (BWV 971), a work for harpsichord solo.

As mentioned above, the role of Erminia was sung by the eighteen-year-old castrato Carlo Broschi, who under the name Farinello would become both a leading musical figure and powerful political

force in eighteenth-century Europe. It is eloquent testimony to his exceptional vocal prowess as early as 1723. In terms of the historical development of style, Erminia's first aria is the most progressive piece of the serenata. In it Scarlatti makes use of many of the conventional formulae found in the arias of Vinci, Pergolesi and other younger Neapolitans: syncopated rhythms (measures 16-18, 23-26, 31, 89-92, 101-102 in the voice); leaps of a sixth (measures 26, 29, 31, 89-92, 101-102 in the voice); doubling of the voice by the violins (measures 15-23 and 45-48); as well as a slow and regular harmonic rhythm, usually of two chords per measure. Despite this heavy reliance on modern musical idioms, Scarlatti never allows these techniques to become cloying or mannered, as they often seem in the works of his younger contemporaries. Here Scarlatti integrates several newly evolved *galant* procedures into an aria which nevertheless depends upon a command of late Baroque polyphonic technique for its ultimate success.

The pioneering British musicologist Edward Dent considered Scarlatti's treatment of the orchestra the most noteworthy aspect of *Erminia*. Scarlatti, indeed, handles the instruments of *Erminia* masterfully, if not in a truly forward-looking manner. Of even greater interest to this writer is the light *Erminia* sheds upon Scarlatti's relationship with the newly evolving *galant* style, just then coming into prominence at Naples. Scarlatti is clearly attempting to integrate elements of this style (syncopations, slow harmonic rhythm, static basses, and characteristic melodic formulas) into the arias of *Erminia*. Nevertheless, he seems too accomplished a composer to embrace this facile idiom wholeheartedly. Contrapuntal considerations continue to receive careful attention. Longer and more asymmetrical phrases than those seen in the works of his younger contemporaries, the result of a spinning out of motives, abound and are employed in conjunction with large- scale harmonic schemes which, although handled with remarkable ease, are more typical of late Baroque practice than the newer *galant* style. Evidently Scarlatti was still regarded in 1723 as a viable artistic force, a worthy recipient of an

important commission. In *Erminia* he brings to bear much of the best of that tradition normally considered Baroque in music, reconciling it in a unique fashion with many of the newer stylistic tendencies of the early eighteenth century.

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