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Moses stages a comeback

by Hannah Niemeier

“Raise your hand if you recognize the name of the composer,” said Jeremy Rhizor, standing at the pulpit of Corpus Christi Church in Manhattan before an oratorio performance on Sunday.

A couple hundred audience members looked down at their programs: Giovanni Antonio Gianettini? “Not one,” Rhizor laughed. But this lack of notoriety didn’t bother Rhizor. As the director and first violinist of the Academy of Sacred Drama, his career is all about rediscovering forgotten music. The Academy of Sacred Drama declared 2018–19 the “Year of Moses,” and, following that concept, their season includes oratorios by Vincenzo de Grandis and Bernardo Pasquini, along with a program of French Baroque cantatas, about the Old Testament prophet.

La creatione de’ magistrati had its premiere in Modena, Italy, in 1688—and then wasn’t heard again for more than three hundred years. Gianettini (1648–1721) had recently moved to Modena from one of the most prestigious musical positions in Italy as the organist at Venice’s Church of San Marco and a bass singer in its choir. But after being passed over for the position of *maestro di cappella*, he was lured to Modena by the hefty salary of 396 *lire* per month, and by what was essentially a blank check for staging oratorios.

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As *maestro* at Modena, Gianettini met another artist with high ambitions. The Duke’s private secretary, Giovanni Battista Giardini (b. 1650), was writing libretti for an eight-part oratorio series about the life of Moses. *La creatione de’ magistrati* (the creation of the magistrates) was the sixth of these. Gianettini composed the music for one other Giardini oratorio, and Colonna and Pasquini provided music for other scenes: Moses in the bulrushes, the Passover, the crossing of the Red Sea.

Rhizor has found a fascinating place on the map of music history, one that is easy to overlook. To outsiders, Modena looks like just another small town in northwestern Italy, certainly no center of culture like Venice, Milan, or Rome. But for a brief time in the seventeenth century, it had one of the most generous patrons of music in the country: Francesco II d'Este, the Duke of Modena and nearby Reggio from 1662 to 1694. On Sunday, the music historian Alice Jarrard described Francesco's musical milieu in a mid-concert lecture in place of the sermon that divided the halves of Baroque oratorios.

Francesco's passion for music was whole-hearted, expensive, and (some in his court believed) a distraction from politics. While Gianettini traveled the country to find singers for a program that stretched to almost sixty oratorios a year at its height, rumblings began around the court that perhaps the Duke should spend some of this time and money in searching for a wife. Francesco began playing the violin as a child, and by the time he was a teenager, he had revived the court orchestra and was staging regular concerts in his estate's chapel. With its intimate size and octagonal shape, the chapel was the perfect place for ensembles, choral performances, and, most of all, oratorios, whose small casts and minimal costuming and staging requirements made them more affordable than operas. They could also, arguably, be performed in church seasons like Lent, when opera was considered inappropriate.

Members of the Modena court got creative in their hints to the Duke, whom they believed spent too much time playing music and partying with his cousin Cesare Ignazio. They must have caught the ear of the librettist Giardini; *La creatione de' magistrati* is an extended musical conversation between Moses, Sefora (Zipporah), and Getro (Jethro) on balancing the duties of marriage with those of governance. If the Duke didn't interpret this as a piece of personal advice, there must at least have been a few raised eyebrows in the audience in 1688.

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Four years later, in 1692, Francesco finally married. When he died of gout shortly afterward, in 1694, Modena's brief musical Renaissance ended. But Modena went on to make its name elsewhere: Francesco's sister ruled England as Mary of Modena from 1685 to 1689. The second section of the *La creatione de' magistrati*, in which Sefora begs her father,

Getro, not to leave her with Moses to return to Midian, must also have resonated in Modena.

Early music has been undergoing a renaissance in New York. Music Before 1800, the host organization for Sunday's concert, was one of the first groups to begin resurrecting music like Gianettini's, and it is now in its forty-fourth season.

The challenge of resurrecting obscure music is to keep it breathing after one removes the life support of the "grand revival." *La creatione de' magistrati*, an oratorio with only three voices and

seven instruments, focuses on an intriguing moment in Moses's life, and one with the potential for well-framed musical drama. In the libretto, based on Exodus 18:6–27, Getro is returning to Midian after the marriage of his daughter Sefora and Moses, and he pauses to offer some final advice for Moses as a husband and a politician.

Headly stuff, and a real achievement for a librettist and a composer who can get an oratorio on this subject off the ground. Unfortunately, *La creatione de' magistrati* devolves almost immediately into a musical lecture: Moses and Sefora bemoan their woes, Getro preaches to Moses (or Francesco) in long recitatives, and the orchestra limps along at a tempo that is more than a few metronome marks too slow to keep the audience's attention. The music was new to all the performers, and this showed: singers' eyes scanned for their places in the music, and the instrumentalists fell out of step with one another. Rhizor could have led more assertively with the violin. When this became painful, watching Arash Noori on the theorbo, a seventeenth-century sort of lute, was a welcome diversion.



Sara MacKimmie Tomlin as Sefora. Photo: Harold S. Levine.

But Sara MacKimmie Tomlin, in the part of Sefora, sang valiantly, always finishing strong in those typically Baroque flourishes at the end of arias. Daniel Moody gave Moses an appropriate air of youth with his clear and agile countertenor. He could jump between moods and dynamic markings at will—a skill that would have been better served in a more dramatic musical score. And the bass-baritone Peter Walker as Jetro had the vocal power—and the imposing beard—of a commanding Old Testament character.

Rhizor played up the “drama” of the oratorio's message about political leadership, but *La creatione de' magistrati* was unconvincing narratively, musically, and politically. Gianettini and Giardini offer

no sense of the story's narrative until minutes from the end, when at the oratorio's delayed climax, Sefora begs Getro, "Hush, delay, o Father . . . If to a daughter/ who implores of a father/ such a small reward is denied,/ either he has no love,/ or my afflicted heart/ none doth deserve."

For all the anticipation of a musical revival, *La creatione de' magistrati* offered a small reward. Rhizor's Academy of Sacred Drama is a promising project with a coherent theme, capable musicians, and propitious supporters in the veteran Music Before 1800 concert series. One can only hope that their "Year of Moses" has brighter musical days in its forecast.

Hannah Niemeier was the Hilton Kramer Fellow in Criticism at *The New Criterion*.