

# *Tafelmusik*

## **Let Us All Sing! Tafelmusik Chamber Choir at 35**

PROGRAM NOTES

By Charlotte Nediger

### **HANDEL *LAUDATE PUERI***

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George Frideric Handel arrived in Rome from his native Saxony at the age of 22, in 1707, and was immediately embraced by the Romans. Although he had come to Italy with opera foremost in his mind, the fact that his sojourn began in Rome, where opera was forbidden by papal decree, meant that the first music he composed in Italy was in fact sacred choral music. It is extraordinary, and proof of Handel's remarkable talents, that the young Lutheran was able to procure so swiftly the enthusiastic patronage of three cardinals (Ottoboni, Pamphili, and Colonna) and a marquis (Ruspoli)—and that he was permitted to play the organ at one of the great churches of Mother Rome soon after his arrival.

Cardinal Colonna was the first to commission music from "il Sassone," asking him to provide music for a very Catholic occasion, the 1707 festival of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, celebrated each July in the Roman church of the Carmelite order, S. Maria di Monte Santo. The feast was in honour of the Virgin Mary as patroness of the Carmelites, and the major services were First Vespers on the eve, and Mass and Second Vespers on the day. The music, which includes the virtuosic *Laudate pueri* for soprano, choir, and orchestra, was exceptionally lavish and was entirely financed by Colonna.

### **STEFFANI *STABAT MATER***

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While in Rome, Handel would undoubtedly have met Agostino Steffani, who was in the city in 1708/09 and sang in concerts at Ottoboni's palace. Steffani's earliest reputation was as a gifted boy soprano, taking him from his native Venice to the Electoral court in Munich at age thirteen. He did not pursue a singing career after his voice broke (the Roman performances twenty years later were an exception). He instead took up composition, and all of his music is marked by a strong sense of vocality, and a compelling expression of the text, undoubtedly informed by his early experience as a singer. Vocal music dominates his worklist, including several operas written for posts held in Munich,

Hanover, and Düsseldorf. Steffani's German employers recognized another talent in their court composer, sending him on diplomatic missions, many of a rather clandestine nature. By the turn of the century, his duties were mainly political. He had been ordained as priest in Munich in 1680, and his various diplomatic efforts led to a series of increasingly important appointments in the church, culminating in that of Apostolic Vicar in northern Germany, based in Hanover. He returned to music on occasion, seemingly often as solace when political work proved frustrating or disappointing.

At the end of his life there was particular interest in his music from England. His previous employer in Hanover had become George I, and took several Steffani scores with him (they are still in the Buckingham Palace library). The Academy of Vocal Music (later known as the Academy of Ancient Music) named him honorary president, and in return, he sent them a number of old and new compositions: among the latter, a setting of the *Stabat mater*. Steffani himself described the *Stabat mater* as his last and greatest work, and it is often cited as a musical representation of his religious fervour. In our first exploration of the works of Steffani on the Tafelmusik stage, we excerpt six movements of this beautiful work.



Agostino Steffani

## **LULLY CHACONNE FROM *AMADIS***

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Louis XIV's powerful court composer, Jean-Baptiste Lully, devoted a great deal of time and care to creating a truly French opera. From 1673 until his death in 1687, he composed an annual opera, most of which were settings of *livrets* by his close collaborator, Philippe Quinault. The verse, painstakingly and masterfully set by Lully, is given more prominence than in Italian opera, as is the chorus and the dance. Many of the operas end with the beautiful spectacle of a grand chaconne or passacaille, music built over a simple repeating bass line that starts with an extended ballet, to which is then added chorus and soloists in alternation. The chaconne that ends *Amadis* is a wonderful example, and its text "*Chantons tous en ce jour*" inspired the title of this week's choral celebration. *Amadis* is one of three operas by Lully and Quinault on a chivalric rather than mythological theme, apparently on the advice of the king himself. In *Amadis*, the fidelity of Amadis and Oriane, mirrored in the lovers Florestan and Corisande, is tested in a fantastical tale, complete with good and bad sorcerers and sorceresses. Love, of course, prevails in the end.

The costumes for *Amadis*, designed by Jean Bérain, inspired a fashion for the “amadis” sleeve: a close-fitting sleeve, sometimes with a slightly puffed shoulder, ending in a tight, buttoned cuff at the wrist.

### **RAMEAU IN *CONVERTENDO DOMINUM***

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According to the baroque French lexicographer Sébastien de Brossard, “motet” is the name given to “all pieces written on Latin Texts on any subject whatsoever, a musical composition which is fully figured and enriched with all that is finest in the art of composition.” The *grand motet*, for solo voices, choir, and orchestra, was a staple of the Concert Spirituel, a Parisian concert series meant to provide entertainment during Lent and on religious holidays when the opera was closed. The surviving autograph score of Rameau’s *In convertendo Dominus*, a setting of Psalm 126, was prepared for three performances at the Concert Spirituel in 1751. Jean-Philippe Rameau was at the height of his career as the leading opera composer in Paris, and the news of the upcoming motet performances kept “all Paris occupied with this novelty for fifteen days.” In the end, his colleagues were dismayed that he deigned to present an “old motet of about 40 years ago.” Indeed, the original version of *In convertendo* is thought to have been composed as early as 1713, and performed in 1717 in Clermont-Ferrand for ceremonies celebrating the installation of a new bishop. Although pieces composed 40 years ago are still considered quite “modern” today, in the eighteenth century they were veritable antiques. The criticism, however, was quite shallow. Although the score of the original version has not survived, it is clear from the 1751 manuscript that Rameau did extensive revisions, rewriting entire sections, and imbuing the work with many of the instrumental and vocal colours found in his “modern” operas.

### **ZELENKA *MISSA DEI FILII***

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The Bohemian Jan Dismas Zelenka first arrived in Dresden in 1710 to take up the job as double-bass player in the renowned court orchestra. His talents as composer were soon recognized, and the Elector sent him for an extended period of study with Fux in Vienna, appointing him as composer of church music upon his return to Dresden. The Catholic court church in Dresden was established in 1708, when the Elector transformed the former opera house into the Katholische Hofkirche. His Protestant subjects were eventually drawn to the splendour of the music at the church, written in the virtuoso Italian style popular at the court, and sung and played by the leading musicians of the day. The *Missa dei Filii*, possibly an incomplete work with settings of only the Kyrie and Gloria, is Zelenka at his best, a work full of complex counterpoint, lyricism, and exuberant virtuosity, and a fitting finale to this week’s celebrations.