

STEFFANI: DRAMA & DEVOTION

Program Notes

By Charlotte Nediger



Portrait of Steffani by Gerhard Kappers, c.1714

The intriguing biography of Agostino Steffani is unique amongst musicians: he was a gifted singer and keyboardist, composer, diplomat, courtier, politician, priest, and had a distinguished ecclesiastical career. He was clearly an intelligent man, well spoken in several languages, well read, and widely respected in all the various fields in which he worked. Letters suggest that he was an ambitious and somewhat arrogant youth, but he quickly learned the manners and politesse of courtly life, and the discretion and tact essential in his diplomatic work. He was an industrious and principled worker and advocate. His employers placed great trust in his abilities and in his character, and he enjoyed many close and long friendships.

Born in Castelfranco, near Venice, Agostino Steffani left for school in Padua and there received his first musical training. He was employed as a treble in the choir of the Basilica del Santo from age ten to thirteen. His talent was evidently exceptional, and at age eleven and twelve he appeared in operas in Venice during Carnival. When he was just thirteen, his abilities were noticed by the Elector Ferdinand Maria of Bavaria during a visit to Padua; the Elector took Steffani with him to the court in Munich, where he was to remain for 21 years. He was given harpsichord and organ lessons, and before long seems to have largely given up singing. In 1672, at age eighteen, he was sent to Rome to study composition, and a few years later was sent to Paris to learn the French style which was increasingly popular at the Munich court. Throughout Steffani's travels, he was praised for the deftness and delicacy of his harpsichord playing.

With the accession of Maximilian II Emanuel in 1680, Steffani's career in Munich blossomed. He was named Director of Chamber Music, a new post created just for him, and his first operas were produced. He also undertook his first diplomatic mission: to negotiate the marriage of the elector to Princess Sophie Charlotte of Hanover. The marriage did not come to pass, but Steffani's diplomatic skills were noted, and the Hanoverian court held him in high regard.

It was in Hanover in 1668 that Steffani took his next post, as Kapellmeister and director of the court opera. Shortly after his arrival a striking new opera house was completed, and the gala opening featured the premiere of *Henrico Leone*, one of several Steffani operas based on German history (in this case, the twelfth-century duke Henry the Lion). Steffani remained in Hanover for fifteen years, though increasing demands on him as a diplomat led to a significant decrease in his involvement in music at the court. He spent time in Vienna and Brussels negotiating the elevation of Hanover to an electorate, and was involved in the machinations that led to the War of the Spanish Succession. He turned to music on occasion, seemingly often as solace when politics proved frustrating or disappointing.

In 1703 Steffani moved to Düsseldorf, entering the service of the Elector Palatine, Johann Wilhelm, for a period of six years. Here his duties were mostly political: positions included privy councilor and president of the Spiritual Council for the Palatinate, general president of the Palatine Government, and curator of Heidelberg University. It was here too that his activities with the church increased. He had been ordained a priest in 1680, at age 26. In 1706 he was elected Bishop of Spiga, and in 1709 was appointed Apostolic Vicar in northern Germany, returning to Hannover. This prestigious post carried the responsibility of establishing and maintaining missions and building churches, and generally of gaining acceptance and tolerance of Catholicism in the Protestant north, encompassing Brunswick, the Palatinate, Prussia, and Saxony. Steffani retired to Padua in 1722, at age 68, but was pressured by the church in Rome to return to work in Hanover in 1726.

It was at the end of his life that Steffani turned once again to music, perhaps in part returning to his first love, and in part because of growing interest in his works in England. His former employer in Hanover had assumed the British throne as George I, and took several Steffani scores with him. 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; it can be seen as a musical representation of his faith and devotion.

Steffani died in 1728, but his renown as a composer lived on, as evidenced in the publication of a biography in England in 1750, written by John Hawkins. Hawkins cites Handel and Pepusch as his primary sources in recounting memories of this “great genius.” Handel met Steffani in both Hanover and Rome, and freely “borrowed” from his operas and chamber duets.

Steffani’s musical style is marked by a natural vocality and a compelling expression of the text, in both his sacred and secular works. The German writer and composer Johann Mattheson noted that Steffani carried around the librettos of his operas for some time, carefully considering the words before conceiving the music. The influence of France is strong in the instrumental movements in his operas, which owe much to Lully.

We have greatly enjoyed getting to know the music of this fascinating man, and hope that our concerts will encourage you to explore more of his music, or to read his remarkable life story.

THANK YOU

In finding the Steffani manuscripts from which we made the editions used this week, we had assistance from several people. We would like to thank **Fra Carlo Bottero**, Director of the Biblioteca e Centro di documentazione francescana del Sacro Convento di San Francesco in Assisi, for generously providing images of the manuscript of the *Beatus vir*. We are grateful to **Emma Darbyshire** of the Fitzwilliam Museum and **Prof. Colin Timms** of the University of Birmingham for providing scans of several manuscripts. Prof. Timms is a renowned expert on the life and music of Steffani: his book *Polymath of the Baroque: Agostino Steffani and His Music* was invaluable in researching this program, and he has been very generous in answering questions and providing material.