

DOMENICO CIMAROSA

Gli Orazi e i Curiazi

mph  
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## Domenico Cimarosa

(b. Aversa, 17 December 1749 – d. Venice, 11 January 1801)

### Gli Orazi e i Curiazi

(1796)

#### Preface

Domenico Cimarosa was an Italian composer of the Neapolitan school, having been studying at the Conservatorio di S. Maria di Loreto since 1761. He was principally based in Naples, but spent part of his career in various other parts of Italy, composing for the opera houses of such cities as Rome, Venice and Florence, and abroad. Cimarosa wrote more than eighty operas, the best known of which is *Il matrimonio segreto* (1792); most of his works belong to the comic genre (the first was the commedia per musica *Le stravaganze*, performed at the Teatro dei Fiorentini in Naples in 1772), but he was the author of 11 titles in the genre of seria, and composed instrumental and sacred music, too. His early serious operas, including *Caio Mario* (1780) and *Alessandro nell'Indie* (1781) had their premieres in Rome at the Teatro delle Dame and the Teatro Argentina. Beyond Italy, he was court composer in St Petersburg and Vienna. From 1787 to 1791 he stayed at the court of Empress Catherine the Great (ruled 1762 – 1796), where he was probably invited on recommendation of the Duke of Serra Capriola, the ambassador to Russia of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies. On his way to the Russian Empire, he visited Livorno as a guest of Grand Duke Leopold of Tuscany, who was to invite him to Vienna after becoming Emperor in 1791, and to subsequently commission his masterpiece *Il matrimonio segreto*. Presumably in 1793 the composer returned to Naples, where in 1796 he was appointed first organist of the royal chapel. In his later years, he backed the losing side in the struggle to overthrow the monarchy in Naples (the so-called 'Parthenopean Republic'), and was imprisoned (1799) and then exiled. He died in Venice at the age of 51.

*Gli Orazi e i Curiazi* is a 'tragedia per musica' in three acts based on Pierre Corneille's tragedy *Horace* (1640), which was reduced from five to three acts by librettist Simeone Antonio Sografi (1759 – 1818). The action takes place in ancient Rome during the kingdom of Tullus Hostilius (7<sup>th</sup> century BC), notably during the war against the city of Alba Longa that was narrated by the historian Livy in his *Historiae*. The plot of the opera accounts of the epic clash between the Roman triplet warriors Horatii and the Alban Curiatii. Despite the hostility between the two peoples, these families are related one to each other by means of two marriages: Sabina (soprano), a member of the Curiazi family, has married Marco Orazio (tenor), while during a truce in the war (act 1) his sister Orazia (mezzosoprano/contralto) becomes the espouse of Curiazio (soprano castrato), who is the leader of the opposed family. The kings of the two cities, Tullus Hostilius and Mettius Fufetius, decide to settle their conflict by a fight to the death between the members of the two families. The two sisters in law grieve when they understand that they will see either their husbands or their brothers die.

In act 2, Orazia and Sabina oppose to this decision. They arrive on the Camps Martius just when the battle is going to start, and obtain the permission to consult Apollo's oracle. However, the response states that the battle must be achieved. The act closes with a scene in the cellar of Apollo's temple.

Act 3, which is shorter than the previous two, and is generally given with act 2, represents the clash between Marco Orazio and his sister, Orazia. While he is the only one who remained alive after the battle, Orazia stands against her brother, and evokes the gods' vengeance against her own motherland, for which her husband has been killed. In the end, her warmongering brother stabs her to death in the name of his love for and loyalty to the fatherland.

The opera was commissioned by La Fenice Theatre in Venice. At its premiere, which took place on 26 December 1796, it had no success, and this resulted in the composer leaving the city. However, the following performances went increasingly better, so that the opera was staged not less than 49 times during the same season. Later on, it was staged in the most distinguished European theatres, such as La Scala in Milan (in the Carnival of 1799) and at the Napoleonic court in Paris, where it was much valued by Napoleon Bonaparte. He especially enjoyed the role of Orazia performed by the singer Giuseppina Grassini (1773 – 1850), who became the Emperor's lover around 1800. Napoleon also appreciated the performances of the castrato Girolamo Crescentini (1762 – 1846), who played the role of Curiazio since the first performance. In Venice the opera was given throughout the early 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The success of the opera was also due to the interpretation of the tenor Matteo Babini (1754 – 1816) in the role of Marco Orazio. In recitative and declamation Babini excelled at mixing emotion and virtuosity in due proportion, and enchanted audiences with his physical presence: he was tall, blond and very handsome, and therefore did not disfigure at the side of the gorgeous prima donna. In this role, he introduced for the first time in the history of opera the use to dress up with costumes faithful to the staged subject and its chronological and geographical collocation, a more that was to remain constant in romantic opera, while beforehand singers wore costumes of pure fantasy, without considering the respect of historical *vraisemblance*. From the perspective of vocal style, he gave his best to perform, as a singer, the heroic character given by the composer to Marco Orazio's part: for instance, the *Largo* "Se alla patria ognor donai" (act 1, scene 7) is an early example of aria with heroic character for tenor voice, with central texture, frequent intervals upwards that give vigour and passion to the melody, short melismas or descending scales that create a grand, refined style, and intensifications of ornamentation starting with the *Allegro* "A voi tutti il vivo lampo" (act 1, scene 8).

*Gli Orazi e i Curiazi* is generally considered the best opera seria by Cimarosa. With it, as well as with the following *dramma serio* *Attilio Regolo* (1797), Cimarosa contributed to the exaltation of the republican myths of the time of the Roman Empire. For the historiographical perspective, this opera testifies of a period of transition in the evolution of this genre in Italy, which was evolving toward romantic musical tragedy. In the 1790s Italy was experiencing reverberations of the French Revolutionary Wars that shook Europe: in 1796 the French captured Venice, which they ceded to Austria on 15 May 1797 with the Treaty of Campo Formio. The ideals spread by these epochal events exerted their influence on opera, from which the audiences began to expect the extolling of the republican virtues of ancient Rome. Subjects indeed changed from historical models of the era of Pietro Metastasio to more vivid models, which included the emphasis of strong feelings, of tense and passionate situations of a pre-romantic nature. Cimarosa's opera is consistent with fashionable neoclassical and neo-heroic tragedies with a pathetic and passionate background. It emphasizes the characters' psychological dilemmas, with heroes torn between civic virtues and private affections. Following the trend of making opera increasingly serious, this opera has no happy ending, and the intrigue ends on a brutal murder, presented directly on the scene.

This is one of the many opportunities offered by the libretto to the development of tragic-heroic situations, characterized by martial rhythms and choral interventions, but also for pathetic-sentimental scenes, such as love duets and tearful cavatinas. The opera testifies an evolution in the style of Cimarosa, while elements of tradition still coexist. The composer's musical language is grounded on the richness of melodic invention rather than on adventurous harmony. Cimarosa was well known for his comic theatre, and in this opera some elements typical of *dramma giocoso* can be heard, notably in Sabina's recitatives, which evoke those of the many servants of Italian *buffa*. However, the extraordinary expressiveness of the melodic enunciation, the rich orchestral writing and the dramatic vigour of the ample choral pages anticipate the evolution of opera style from the 18<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The formal choices deserve special mentions. Cimarosa seldom wrote stylized da capo arias: his arias are sectional, with contrasting tempos, metre and keys, which gives place to changes of mood and situations in the text. The integration of the closed numbers into wide scenic-musical blocks: For instance, Curiazio's aria "A versar l'amato sangue" (act 2, scene 12), in rondeau form, which achieves the scene "Qual densa notte", marks a decisive moment in the process of renewal of the operatic style. The narrative development characterizes also the duet between Curiazio and Orazio ("Quando nel campo armata", act 1, scene 12). This opens with the solemnity of Orazio's challenge expressed by recitative ("Tu sei albano, io più non ti conosco", act 1, scene 12), and soon acquires nuances of tenderness and emotion the two voices meeting in music when the two opposite characters appear united by private feelings ("A questi accenti adesso / degno di me ti trovo; / prendi l'estremo amplesso: / al campo or or sarò").

The composer succeeded at creating large-scale chain finales. Mainly spread in the field of comedy, these exerted their influence on the evolution of seria. For instance, one of the most achieved moments in Cimarosa's score is the grand scene in the cellar that closes Act 2: the introduction is led by the orchestra, which creates horrid and tearful impressions avoiding pure description; on this background, Curiazio and Orazia's recitative emerges, leading to Curiazio's Andantino "Ei stesso intrepido", which leads to the grand recapitulation of other solo voices and the choir in the chorus "Regni silenzio muto, profondo". This freedom from a structural mould creates an effect of spontaneity and flexibility, while introducing forms that will be developed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The solo numbers often include comments of the orchestra, a possible influence of the use of *mélodrama* in French *opéra-comique* (e.g. in the case of Curiazio's "Resta in pace idolo mio", and in Orazia's "Giusti dei!", act 3, scenes 2 and 3 respectively, but also in her "Dov'è lo sposo mio", act 3, scene 5). As far as the singing style is concerned, we have already mentioned the role of Marco Orazio. However, here also some influence of the French vocal style can be observed, so that Curiazio's part can be considered an anticipation of the many dramatic sopranos or contraltos in male roles of the 19<sup>th</sup> century: Cimarosa's vocal writing is in fact highly measured, and avoids too sharp textures, and, generally speaking, a too rich ornamentation.

Considering the fact that Italian 18<sup>th</sup>-century operas usually did not last long on theatrical seasons, and were rarely staged in seasons subsequent to their premieres, *Gli Orazi e i Curiazi* was an exception, surviving on stages also after the death of its composer. Its fortune is testified also by many parodies, such as Francesco Gnecco's *La prima prova dell'opera Gli Orazi e i Curiazi* on a libretto by Giulio Artusi, which was subsequently renamed *La prova di un'opera seria* for the staging in Venice in 1803. In modern times, the opera attracted some attention, although it is rarely performed this day. A live recording was made on the occasion of a radio broadcast in 1952, with the chorus and orchestra of Milan RAI conducted by Carlo Maria Giulini. This abridged version, with Giulietta Simionato featuring Curiazio and Angela Vercelli in the role of Orazia, is in two acts, act 3 having been included in the second. In 1983 the opera was staged at Teatro dell'Opera Giocosa in Genua, with excellent soprano Daniela Dessì featuring Curiazio. An encore performance took place at the Teatro dell'Opera in Rome in 1989, directed by Alan Curtis, with Gianna Romandi as Curiazio and Anna Caterina Antonacci as Orazia.

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For performance material please contact *Schott*, Mainz.