Aims

My aim in this paper is to suggest why the Italian baroque cantata is still regarded as a neglected genre, despite the growing availability of editions and performances on CD. The paper is based on my experience of editing and performing works mainly of Alessandro Scarlatti, the majority of them prepared for internet publications such as <Cantata editions.com> and WLSCM. I argue that performers have been the major protagonists in the recovery of the cantata genre in modern times. Three questions are considered. First, why have Alessandro Scarlatti’s cantatas not received a comprehensive edition, whereas other repertoires from this period (e.g. Vivaldi’s concerti) have been edited and performed many times? Second, is there a viable alternative to the complete edition as a means of disseminating this repertoire? Finally, I consider the role of repeat performances, and interpretations of a specific work by different performers, in creating a concept of the cantata repertoire.

Context

As recently as 2004 George J. Buelow in his *History of Baroque Music* (Bloomington University Press) portrayed the Italian cantata as a genre “unfortunately … largely unknown”, a description which he saw as particularly applicable to the output of Alessandro Scarlatti. He attributes this “significant lacuna” to the “absence of a representative edition”, dismissing as a “mere scattering of practical editions” (Buelow, 2004: 134) largely the work of performer/editors.

But is this ‘top-down’ approach necessary or effective in the revival of this elusive repertoire? It presupposes a sequence of activity whose starting point is the complete edition, organised along a scholarly plan - preferably chronological – which charts the progress of composer and genre, pointing out major milestones, so that it may be picked up by concert promoters and recording companies, and sublet to performers.

Questions of audience and performance context have decisive importance. The audience for which the cantatas of Scarlatti were composed (described by Roger Freitas, 2001) has no modern counterpart. Slipping out of the performed repertoire
even in revival-conscious England of the late eighteenth century, the secular cantata lost its lineage of performers apparently quicker than any instrumental repertoire, though Scarlatti cantatas continued to circulate in manuscript for their compositional interest.

1. The problem of editing the cantata repertoire

The scholarly edition likes chronological order, certainty of attribution, a finite repertoire, and a defined field of source material that may be readily connected to the composer – all areas that raise major uncertainties with Scarlatti’s cantatas. In many cases, the modern scholarly edition represents a critical act upon an earlier period or style of editing. For example, the Longo Edition of Domenico Scarlatti’s Keyboard Sonatas has been supplanted by recent scholarly editions, but the existence of the earlier edition brought the repertoire to generations of pianists – creating demand for an updated edition, and a rethinking of performance style.

2. Alternatives to the complete musicological edition

In the cantata repertoire, modern editions are not always necessary to generate performances: a growing number of ensembles work from facsimiles of original source material, or from their own transcriptions.

Internet publication has been another way in which it has been possible in recent years to increase the number of works available in modern editions, without imposing an order in which chronology can play only a limited role. Questionable readings and copy errors are picked up in rehearsal – just as in the case of a copy made for performance immediately after the composition. Then, as now, the role of performers is crucial in making sense of the material. Any edition that has been used in performance has been through an exacting process of proof-reading.

Such practical editions are often connected to recordings and live performances. Though few performers have the time to become expert in evaluating source materials, they readily choose works that will captivate and reward. Here the role of recordings is often more influential than that of the edition.

3. From edition to performance

The cantata Bella madre de’ fiori is an example of the complex interaction of factors in reviving the cantata genre. Published in 1969 by Luciano Bettarini, years
after the edition won first prize in a competition in Naples conducted in 1953, it was
first recorded by the remarkable mezzo Gloria Banditelli and Ensemble Aurora
(Tactus 1988): a performance evoking a sensuous sound-world that seems to dissolve
questions of authorship and chronology. In this first recording, and in Bettarini’s
Preface to the edition, uncertainty about authorship is acknowledged: it is not
included in any *Grove Dictionary* listing of cantatas by Alessandro or in Hanley’s
authoritative catalogue. However, *Bella madre* is attaining the status of a classic
within an otherwise featureless landscape of innumerable unknown cantatas: it is one
of few such works to have more than one recording, and to be programmed by notable
performers worldwide.

Whether Scarlatti is actually the composer seems to have become a less
important issue than the interpretative potential conveyed in each succeeding
performance – a situation that maybe echoes the origins of the seventeenth century
cantata. As Lydia Goehr observes about pre-nineteenth century music: “It mattered,
but not that much, who composed the music. It mattered much more that the music
satisfied or lived up to the demands of the occasion. (Goehr, 1994: 180). In the case of
*Bella Madre*, the music lives up to what is expected of a Scarlatti cantata by current
performers and audiences – a intensely sad, sustained elegy framed by richly textured
instrumental interludes.

Conclusions

The interest of performers in this mysterious work may signal the beginnings
of a new performance tradition for a repertoire long buried. Recognition of stylistic
traits is needed to guide performance choices – tempo, weight of sound, points of
emphasis, a feeling for harmonic language, key choice, dynamic shape, tone of voice.
The shape and chronology of the genre may gradually emerge through the rediscovery
of works that fascinate performers. Though this amalgam of individual efforts may
not immediately reach the radar of musicology textbooks, it will contribute new
perceptions about the richness of musical language in the Italian secular cantata.

Bibliography

Madre de’ fiori”*, “Nacqui a sospiri e al pianto”; Ritovamento, realizzazione
del basso continuo e revisione di Luciano Bettarini; Casa Editrice NazionalMusic, Milano.


Discography
