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LA SENNA FESTEGGIANTE RECONSIDERED:
SOME POSSIBLE IMPLICATIONS OF ITS LITERARY TEXT

There are four things concerning the serenata *La Senna festeggiante*, RV 693, about which there is general agreement. First, we do not know exactly when and why it was composed. Second, we do not know exactly when and where it was performed. Third, we do not even know *if* it was performed: the absence of any documentary evidence has raised the possibility that it never *was* performed. And, fourth, we do not know why Vivaldi retained the presentation copy of the work among his own manuscripts.

The aim of this article will be to examine the text of the serenata and to present a new hypothesis, intended to provide a probable answer to the questions raised by these four points.

Several years ago Michael Talbot and Paul Everett argued that the work was probably composed for a performance in Venice in August 1726.¹ They made three points that are essential for any consideration of the origins of the serenata. They identified the date of composition as between early 1724 and late 1726.² They analysed and emphasized the French elements in the work and commented that Vivaldi included an “unusually heavy concentration ... of French (or supposedly French) traits, including a surprisingly high incidence of accompanied recitative employing strings in addition to continuo”.³ And they drew attention to the connection between Vivaldi and the Venetian cardinal Pietro Ottoboni, at that time the Cardinal Protector of France, and suggested that Vivaldi might have composed the work for Ottoboni.⁴

If we begin with these three points, then any attempt to understand *La Senna festeggiante* needs, as Talbot and Everett have also pointed out, to relate the work to developments in France, and at the French Court, between 1724 and 1726. The

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¹ MICHAEL TALBOT and PAUL EVERETT, *Homage to a French King: Two Serenatas by Vivaldi (Venice, 1725 and ca. 1726)*, introduction to: *Antonio Vivaldi. Due Serenate*, Milan, Ricordi, 1995, pp. IX-LXXXVI. See particularly p. LXXI.

² *Ibid.*, p. LXIX.

³ Quotation taken from Michael Talbot, booklet accompanying the CD recording of *La Senna festeggiante* and *Gloria e Imeneo* (RV 687) by the King's Consort conducted by Robert King (Hyperion Records, 2002), p. 10.

⁴ MICHAEL TALBOT and PAUL EVERETT, *Homage to a French King*, cit., pp. LXX-LXXI. For the details of Ottoboni's visit to Venice in 1726, see MICHAEL TALBOT, Introduction to: *Antonio Vivaldi. Le 12 sonate "di Manchester"*, Florence, S.P.E.S., 2004, pp. 9-53: 50-52.

most significant event during that period was certainly the marriage of King Louis XV to the Polish princess, Marie Leszczyńska, which took place during the summer of 1725, mid-way through the time span they have proposed. This may prompt us to ask a relevant question: what did Cardinal Ottoboni do, as Cardinal Protector of France, to celebrate the marriage of King Louis XV in 1725? Given the realities of Roman society during the 1720s, he must have done something. The event was much too important for him to have ignored it. Yet no festivities or celebrations are known to have been organized by him.⁵

This point needs further explanation. In Rome during the 1720s there were two men representing French interests. They were the French ambassador, Cardinal Melchior de Polignac, and the Protector of France, Cardinal Ottoboni. We know that Cardinal de Polignac celebrated the marriage of Louis XV by employing a Venetian composer who was well known in Rome, Francesco Gasparini, to write a serenata entitled *Senna, Fama, Amore e Imeneo*.⁶ What, then, did Cardinal Ottoboni do? He too would probably have organized a musical celebration. Might he not also have commissioned a Venetian composer who was well known in Rome, such as Antonio Vivaldi, to write a serenata in honour of the wedding of Louis XV? And is it not possible that the librettist of Ottoboni's serenata might have tried to emulate Polignac's serenata by likewise referring to *La Senna*, the river Seine?

But, it might be said, if Ottoboni had done so, then surely we would have some documentary evidence of its performance. As there is apparently no such documentary evidence, we might be tempted to reject such an hypothesis. But that would mean that Cardinal Ottoboni apparently did absolutely nothing to celebrate the wedding of the King of France. Given the social and political situation in Rome during the 1720s, that is hard to believe, particularly as Ottoboni is known to have organized so many musical entertainments. Is it not possible that he *did* commission a serenata from someone, such as Vivaldi, but that for some reason, which would need to be explained, he decided to cancel its performance? Such an hypothesis, if correct, would at least have the advantage of providing a possible explanation of why Vivaldi kept the presentation copy of his serenata. And, incidentally, it would also explain other elements of the manuscript which Michael Talbot and Paul Everett have discussed, but which they agree they have found difficult to explain.

⁵ I have consulted the *Diario Ordinario*, published in Rome by Chracas; FRANCESCO VALESIO, *Diario di Roma*, vol. IV, 1708-1728, ed. Gaetana Scana, Milano, Longanesi, 1978; the correspondence of Baron von Stosch (London, National Archives, SP 85/15); and the following two articles in *Intorno a Locatelli: Studi in occasione del tricentenario della nascita di Pietro Antonio Locatelli (1695-1764)*, ed. Albert Dunning, 2 vols, Lucca, Libreria Musicale Italiana, 1995: STEFANO LA VIA, *Il Cardinale Ottoboni e la musica: nuovi documenti (1700-1740), nuove letture e ipotesi*, vol. 1, pp. 319-526; and FRANCO PIPERNO, "Su le sponde del Tebro": *eventi, mecenati e istituzioni musicali a Roma negli anni di Locatelli. Saggio di cronologia*, vol. 2, pp. 793-877. According to Piperno, there are no public musical performances known to have been organized by Ottoboni between March and 30 December 1725 (pp. 874-877).

⁶ FRANCO PIPERNO, "Su le sponde del Tebro", *cit.*, p. 876.

For example, they have argued that the serenata “was conceived for a performance at which Vivaldi did not expect to be present, or else one in whose rehearsal and musical direction he knew he would have no involvement”.⁷ As Vivaldi was apparently in Venice during the summer of 1726, that does seem an unlikely venue. If, however, the performance was planned to take place in Rome during 1725, we can at least say that Vivaldi is not known to have been in that city during that year.

It will be helpful at this point to make a comparison with what definitely did happen in Rome four years later. From a dynastic point of view the two most significant developments within the French royal family at that time were, first, the marriage of the King, which took place in 1725 and, second, the birth of an heir to the French throne, a Dauphin, in 1729. Louis XV and Marie Leszczyńska did not have any children until 1727 – a point to which we shall return. But the Queen then gave birth to twin daughters, who could not inherit the throne. When she finally had a son, the two cardinals, Polignac and Ottoboni, both still in Rome, responded by preparing musical celebrations.

Cardinal de Polignac commissioned Leonardo Vinci to write a serenata, *La contesa de' numi*, which was performed at the French embassy in November 1729. Cardinal Ottoboni followed this one month later with a more spectacular musical celebration. It was a setting by Giovanni Costanzi of Ottoboni's own opera libretto, *Carlo Magno*, performed in the theatre of the Palazzo della Cancelleria in December 1729.

We should not ignore this pattern of events in 1729 when considering what happened, or might have happened, in 1725. If Ottoboni arranged the performance of *Carlo Magno* in the Palazzo della Cancelleria to celebrate the birth of the Dauphin in 1729, is it likely that he did nothing in 1725 to celebrate the marriage of Louis XV, an event of greater significance? Is it not possible that he *did* in fact plan a musical celebration, but that it had to be cancelled? Is it not at least possible that that celebration involved a serenata by Antonio Vivaldi entitled *La Senna festeggiante*, whose origins have remained mysterious precisely because, in the event, it was never actually performed?

Given the absence of documentary evidence, we therefore need to pay special attention to the text of *La Senna festeggiante*, because it contains some interesting clues. Or rather, it contains within it two major problems that need to be identified and resolved.

The text of *La Senna festeggiante* concerns the return of two allegorical characters named *L'Età dell'Oro* and *La Virtù* to a royal palace (*reggia del piacer*) beside the river Seine, as we are specifically told at the beginning of the work (line 8). Yet Louis XV had recently (in 1722) *left* his royal palaces beside the Seine (i.e., the Tuileries and Louvre) and moved his court back to Versailles.

⁷ MICHAEL TALBOT and PAUL EVERETT, *Homage to a French King*, cit., p. XXV.

Why, then, should the Seine rejoice? Surely the river should have been lamenting the *departure* and continued *absence* of the king, and regretting that he had no desire to return?

In the second part of the serenata *La Senna*, *L'Età dell'Oro* and *La Virtù* all go to visit Louis XV at the Château de Versailles. Most of the text of the long final recitative is missing, precisely at the point when we might have expected a polite reference to the king's Polish wife, who has not previously been referred to. Why then is there a reference, immediately after the missing folios (three lines from the end of the last recitative), to *figli tuoi* when Louis XV and Marie Leszczyńska did not yet have any children? And why, for that matter, does *L'Età dell'Oro* refer in the first part of the work to breast-feeding a little child, a *pargoletto* (line 96)?⁸

If we could resolve or explain these two problems, then the text might help us to understand when and why the serenata was composed. It might also help us to understand why the music was composed in an obviously French style. This point is significant because Vivaldi's Wedding Serenata, referred to as *Gloria e Imeneo*, which we know was composed to celebrate the marriage of Louis XV, and which was performed at the residence of the French ambassador in Venice, does *not* contain French stylistic elements. As Talbot and Everett have noted, "Although written for an occasion celebrating an event at the French royal court, it makes no stylistic concessions towards the fact".⁹ So why should Vivaldi have decided, or rather been instructed, to make *La Senna festeggiante* as French as possible? To quote them again: "Why has Vivaldi, who included no accompanied recitative at all in the Wedding Serenata, been so lavish with it in *La Senna festeggiante*"?¹⁰ Put another way, who, in the expected audience, was he trying to please?

Let us then sum up the situation. What we need is an hypothesis that will explain:

1. the reference to a return of someone to a royal palace beside the river Seine;
2. the references to the *figli tuoi* and a *pargoletto*, given that Louis XV did not yet have any children; and
3. the French musical style.

To be convincing, the hypothesis must also provide us with an explanation of:

4. what Ottoboni might have done in Rome to celebrate the wedding of Louis XV;
5. why we have no evidence that *La Senna festeggiante* was ever performed; and
6. why Vivaldi kept the presentation copy of the serenata among his own manuscripts.

⁸ Talbot and Everett have made the significant point that "whereas all the words sung by characters in an opera (outside soliloquies) are addressed to the other characters on stage with them, those in a serenata are addressed overtly or implicitly to a third party – the person or persons in whose honour the performance is taking place" (*Ibid.*, p. LXXI).

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. XLIV.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. XLVI.

We shall now examine each of these six points in turn.

1. In addition to the Tuileries and the Louvre, there was only one other French royal palace beside the river Seine: the Château de Saint-Germain-en-Laye.¹¹ During the last twenty-five years of the reign of Louis XIV, which men like Ottoboni and Polignac regarded as *L'Età dell'Oro*, it had been occupied by the court of the exiled King of England. At first this was James II, who had been deposed by William of Orange. Then, after 1701, it was his son, known as James III.¹² Louis XIV had supported them because they were Catholic. His policy involved France in a war against England but had the blessing of the Catholic Church because Louis was believed to be upholding both legitimacy and true religion. His policy could fairly be characterized in Rome as *La Virtù*.

The death of Louis XIV, however, had resulted in a reversal of French foreign policy. The duc d'Orléans, Regent for Louis XV, then only a little boy, had turned against James III and forced him to leave France, then Lorraine and even the Papal enclave at Avignon. James had been obliged to take refuge in the Papal States, at Pesaro and subsequently at Urbino (both of which are referred to, in lines 10-11, as *spiagge deserte* and *erti colli e solitarii lidi*), and finally in Rome. There, in a palazzo lent to him by the *Camera Apostolica*, he had been living since 1719. James had married a Polish princess, Maria Clementina Sobieska, and had done, and was still doing, everything he could to return to France as the first step towards an eventual restoration to the English throne. In the meantime, he and Maria Clementina were treated by the Papal Court as the legitimate King and Queen of England. Their close friends included Cardinal Ottoboni and Cardinal de Polignac (both of whom disliked the new French foreign policy), and also the families of Prince Borghese and Prince Colonna (both of whom are known to have had contact with Vivaldi).

Here, then, we have someone living in Rome who had previously lived in a French royal palace beside the river Seine and always found there (as the text puts it in lines 39-40) "happy lodging, sweet nourishment and peaceful air" (*lieta stanza, dolc'esca, aer sereno*). If it could be shown that in 1725 people in Rome considered that there was a real possibility that James III might return to Saint-Germain, then the first problem raised by the text would have been overcome.

¹¹ As can easily be seen in the contemporary French engravings, the two Châteaux de Saint-Germain were immediately above the Seine and looked straight down at the river over the celebrated hanging gardens. The only known contemporary Italian engraving, published in Rome in 1702, shows the Château-Vieux de Saint-Germain beside the Seine in the centre of Paris with the Louvre and the Tuileries (*Sacra Exequiala in funere Jacobi II, ... exhibita ab ... Carolo Sanctae Romanae Ecclesia Cardinali Parterino in templo sui tituli Sancti Laurentii in Lucina, descripta a Carolo de Aquino*: there is a copy in the F-Pn, Nc.1692).

¹² EDWARD CORP, *A Court in Exile: The Stuarts in France, 1689-1718*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004.

2. We may now move on to the references to *figli tuoi* and a *pargoletto*. These are easily dealt with. James III, who figured very prominently in Roman musical society, and who would have been in the audience, had two sons: Prince Charles and Prince Henry. The latter was still a *pargoletto*, born in March 1725, and baptized by the Pope himself in the presence of both Ottoboni and Polignac.¹³

3. So what about the French musical style employed by Vivaldi in *La Senna festeggiante*? Once again, the problem is easily solved. James III had been brought up in France, he was a great music-lover, and he was known to be particularly keen on French opera before he came to Italy.¹⁴ To commission a work in the French style was an obvious way of paying him a complement. It was not even the first time that it had been done, as both Domenico and then Alessandro Scarlatti had composed works in a French style a few years previously, for precisely the same reason.¹⁵

4. Let us then consider what Cardinal Ottoboni might have planned, to celebrate the wedding of Louis XV in 1725.

It must be remembered that Marie Leszczyńska was a cousin of Maria Clementina Sobieska and that her father Stanislas was (like James III) a king living in exile. The news that she was to marry Louis XV was greeted with excitement in Rome by all the pro-Jacobites – that is, the supporters of James III – because it was believed that the marriage presaged a return to the foreign policy of Louis XIV. The Regent had died in 1723, and the new French chief minister, the duc de Bourbon, was not expected to retain his post for much longer. Cardinal de Polignac encouraged people in Rome to expect a change of government in France, and people were ready to believe him because something similar had recently taken place in Spain.

When Philip V of Spain had married Elizabeth Farnese in 1714, she had persuaded him to dismiss his close advisers, and had then herself begun to exert considerable influence over Spanish foreign policy, in collaboration with Cardinal Alberoni. We may know today that hopes of a similar change in France were totally unfounded, but the documentary evidence of 1725 shows that

¹³ London, National Archives (hereafter, NA), SP 85/15/p. 310, Stosch to Newcastle, 6 March 1725.

¹⁴ EDWARD CORP, *Music at the Stuart Court at Urbino, 1717-18*, "Music and Letters", 81, 2000, pp. 351-363.

¹⁵ Domenico Scarlatti composed a cantata entitled *Il ritorno di Telemaco*, which was performed for James III at Castel Gandolfo on 16 June 1717. It was scored for two *castrati*, a chorus of fourteen and an orchestra of forty-seven instrumentalists, and was then apparently included in the opera *Telemaco*, performed six and a half months later at the Teatro Capranica in Rome, and attributed in its entirety to Alessandro Scarlatti. The cantata is listed as unattributed and undated by Piperno (p. 846), but the fact that it was by Domenico Scarlatti is ascertainable from *I-Rvat*, Palazzo Apostolico Computisteria 976, "Ristretti di Pagamenti fatti ... in occasione dell'Alloggio fatto nel Palazzo Pontificio di Castel Gandolfo alla Maestà di Giacomo 3^e Re d'Inghilterra nel mese di Giugno 1717", nos. 170/8 and 52, and the date of its performance from *GB-Ob*, Carte MSS 208, f. 346, the diary of James III's visit to Rome in 1717. Regarding the French style, see REINHARD STROHM, *Dramma per musica: Italian Opera Seria of the Eighteenth Century*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1997, p. 51.

people in Rome expected Marie Leszczyńska to exert a similar influence over Louis XV. They believed that the duc de Bourbon would be dismissed and replaced as chief minister by none other than Cardinal de Polignac. The latter would then revive the foreign policy of Louis XIV and invite James III to return to Saint-Germain.¹⁶

We are therefore able to deduce how the two cardinals might have planned to celebrate the marriage of Louis XV. We know that Polignac commissioned a serenata from Gasparini to celebrate the wedding itself. It is not unreasonable to suggest that Ottoboni then commissioned a serenata from Vivaldi, the title of which also referred to *La Senna*, to celebrate the expected *consequences* of the marriage, leaving the precise timing of the performance to depend on the date of Polignac's recall to France as chief minister.

It must also be stressed that everyone in Rome would have taken it for granted that during such celebrations a particular regard would be paid to James III. As the Pope would not be present, James would outrank everyone else in the audience during these celebrations. Moreover he was also the closest blood relative to Louis XV in Rome, having been brought up almost as a brother with Louis' father, the duc de Bourgogne, who was his cousin.

To illustrate this point, let us again consider what we know about the celebrations for the birth of the Dauphin in 1729. Then, Polignac had a box specially constructed in the French embassy so that James could attend the performance of Vinci's *La contesa de' numi*.¹⁷ As for Ottoboni, he went further and gave James the keys to all the boxes in the theatre of the Palazzo della Cancelleria, so that he could personally invite the people he wanted to the performances of Costanzi's *Carlo Magno*.¹⁸

Coming back to 1725, we are specifically told by the diarist Francesco Valesio that Gasparini's serenata "fu sollicitata per la regina d'Inghilterra",¹⁹ and by Baron von Stosch that "cette fameuse Sérénade" was performed for James III and his wife, attended by eighteen cardinals and all the nobility of Rome.²⁰ Quite frankly, it would have been extremely surprising, indeed virtually unthinkable, for a musical celebration in Rome of the marriage of Louis XV not in some way to have involved an overt tribute to James III.

5. So we now need to find a reason why Vivaldi's *La Senna festeggiante*, if commissioned and planned for performance in the way that has been suggested, might have had to be cancelled. And that, like everything else in this story, is very easy to do.

At the beginning of October 1725 a shocking piece of news was received in Rome. A new alliance had been signed between the governments of Great

¹⁶ NA, SP 85/15/f. 388, f. 426, f. 428, Stosch to Newcastle, 9 June, 25 August, 1 September 1725.

¹⁷ NA, SP 85/16/f. 604 and f. 608, Stosch to Newcastle, 17 November and 1 December 1729.

¹⁸ NA, SP 98/32/f. 15, Stosch to Newcastle, 5 January 1730.

¹⁹ FRANCESCO VALESIO, *Diario di Roma, vol. IV, 1708-1728*, cit., pp. 582-583, 25 September 1725.

²⁰ NA, SP 85/15/f. 440, Stosch to Newcastle, 29 September 1725.

Britain and France, confirming that French foreign policy would after all remain anti-Jacobite. The new Queen of France had *not* acquired any political influence, the duc de Bourbon was *not* to be replaced, and Cardinal de Polignac was *not* to return to France as the new chief minister. The Papal Court realized that it had been seriously misled by Polignac and, as the agent of the British government wrote to London on 4 October, “on a parlé bien sérieusement au Cardinal de Polignac”.²¹ Under these circumstances, the text of *La Senna festeggiante* would have become totally inappropriate, and Cardinal Ottoboni would have been extremely embarrassed. The performance would have had to be cancelled. In fact, Ottoboni hurriedly left Rome and went to Albano, whence he wrote to a friend a few days later that he was accommodated “con splendore” in the palazzo of James III.²²

6. It is obvious, under these circumstances, that if Vivaldi had not yet sent off his presentation copy to Rome, then he would have had no option but to keep it, and thus it would have remained among his manuscripts, and still be with them in Turin today.

The present hypothesis not only covers the six points that have been mentioned but is consistent with everything we know about Domenico Lalli’s text and Vivaldi’s surviving manuscript. It is also consistent with the social and political situation in Rome during the 1720s.

In conclusion, it seems reasonable that we should now date the serenata to 1725, not 1726, and regard it as written for Rome, not Venice. This would mean, to put all this in a wider context, that Vivaldi composed dramatic works for three seasons in Rome: the carnival of 1723, the carnival of 1724 and the autumn of 1725.

²¹ NA, SP 85/15/f. 444, Stosch to Newcastle, 4 October 1725.

²² GB-Lbl, Add. 20,467, f. 369, Ottoboni to Cardinal Gualterio, 10 October 1725.