

MAYR'S SETTING OF THE PASSION

by John S. Allitt

La Passione (1794) is an early work composed for Forlì whilst Mayr was establishing his career in Venice. These were the last years of Venice's glory and the scourge of Napoleon was sweeping through Europe.

1974 will see the revival of Mayr's last oratorio (he composed nine), San Luigi Gonzaga (1822) in an edition by Dr. Bauer. We shall thus be able to hear works coming from different periods in the composer's life.

Mayr considered himself to be a teacher and a composer of religious music. He wrote more operas than Donizetti, but his theatrical career was against his will. He tells us that his true love was religious music and that he was constrained to write for the stage out of financial necessity. Once his financial income was secure, sometime after 1813, Mayr virtually abandoned composing operatic music. He composed religious music right up to his last years when only blindness forbade him to work. The last compositions appear to date from about 1843. It is in the religious compositions that we hear Mayr's genuine intentions and musical genius. His influence over Donizetti in religious composition was of paramount importance. It remained with the younger man right up to the last beautiful compositions, such as the 1843 Vienna Miserere and the Paris Miserere recently edited by Alberto Zedda. We cannot fully appreciate Donizetti's genius until his operatic music is known alongside his religious compositions. There are works of far greater value than the Requiem composed for Bellini's death.

La Passione is a dramatic series of meditations on the event of Calvary. It is not the setting of Biblical Texts used in the Liturgy of Holy Week. The text is by Metastasio. Some of the arias, verses and phrases may be found in another Passion written by Metastasio in 1730 for Vienna. They are examples of a librettist's self-borrowings.

There are four characters, St. Mary (soprano), St. Mary Magdalene (contralto), St. John (tenor) and St. Joseph of Arimathea (bass-baritone). The work consists of choruses (representing the faithful, the Church), arias and a duet which concludes part one. The oratorio starts with a sinfonia. The second part begins with a short, beautiful largo. Part One is concerned with the way of the Cross; Part Two takes place at the scene of the Crucifixion. The recitative is either accompanied by organ or orchestra and develops consistently into arioso passages of great beauty. The orchestra consists of oboes, bassoon, horns and strings. The oboes, horns and violas are scored for two parts throughout. (Double viola writing is a characteristic of Mayr's and Donizetti's religious compositions.) The texture is "mozartian" but with the clearly marked qualities we associate with Mayr's instrumentation and harmonic ideas.

Towards the end of his life Mayr wrote a study on the development of the Oratorio. From this it is clear that he would have considered his oratorio as standing in a long tradition. He traces sources in the mystery plays and Franciscan rappresentazioni of the Middle Ages, and then traces the oratorio's development through Emilio dei Cavaliere, Carissimi, St. Philip Neri, etc. right up to his own day. The text is amazingly erudite. His sources appear to be mainly Burney and Hawkins. It is interesting that a footnote associates compositions like Poliuto and Les Martyrs more with contemporary examples of oratorio rather than opera.

We have remained throughout faithful to Mayr and used the manuscript copyist edition in the Biblioteca Civica, Bergamo. (The original manuscript appears to be lost.) This version has Mayr's seal of approval,

since he has often written in the text himself and rewritten (possibly quite late in life judging by the handwriting) two sections in the duet and the last aria. We were able to complete the full-score from parts that exist and also correct certain natural slips of the copiest's pen. We may honestly say, that the edition to be used at St. John's Smith Square is Mayr's own.