The Cantatas of

Domenico Cimarosa (1749–1801)

by

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Introduction

Cimarosa’s Contribution to the Late Eighteenth Century Italian Cantata

Domenico Cimarosa (1749–1801) was one of the most active and influential Neapolitan composers in Europe at the end of the eighteenth century. The extent of his success is mirrored in the numerous contemporary essays, diaries, and letters of such famous personages as Goethe (Italienische Reise); Stendahl (Vies de Haydn de Mozart et de Mélasastase; Vie de Rossini); Grétry (Essais sur la musique); and Michael Kelly (Reminiscences...).

A vast number of Cimarosa’s scores are distributed throughout Europe, a heritage of the success his compositions enjoyed both during his lifetime and after his death. Haydn is known to have conducted at least twelve of Cimarosa’s operas at the Esterhazy Court Theatre between 1783 and 1790. Further accounts of Cimarosa’s esteem and popularity may be found in the musical critiques and review articles of eighteenth century Italian, French, Austrian, Russian and English newspapers and periodicals. Apart from the literary citations, Cimarosa’s reputation as a composer of fine melodies is perpetuated in the text of two nineteenth century French vocal compositions. A delightful song by Meyerbeer Chant de Mai, (Mélodie or Romance) on a text by Henri Blaze, alludes in the second verse to the sweetness and tenderness of the melodies of Cimarosa and Mozart:

Comme aussi le lézard,
Couche sur l'herbe ardente,
La dit à chaque plante,
Cimarosa et Mozart,
Et tous ceux que je chante,
N'ont rien fait, mon ami,
D'aussi doux, d'aussi tendre,
Et je vais vous l'apprendre
Quand sur le pré fleuri,
La lune va descendre.

After Cimarosa’s death, an opéra-comique entitled Domenico Cimarosa, extolling the virtues of his musical skill, evolved from a collaboration between the composer Niccolò
Isouard and librettist Jean Nicolas Bouilly. The opera in two acts was performed for the first time at the Opéra Comique on 28th June, 1808.

These acclamations accorded Cimarosa are good reason alone to prompt an examination of his vocal compositions, representing as they do the late eighteenth century Italian style. Cimarosa’s ten dramatic cantatas written between 1770 and 1799 provide a valuable medium in which to trace the development of vocal style and form in comparison with his predecessors.

For this study some qualifications with respect to terminology are necessary. “Musical style” will encompass the following: the contours and the motivic utilisation of the melodic line, both vocal and instrumental, and where appropriate any interrelationship; rhythmic features of the works with special reference to the application of dance forms; harmonic subtleties in modulation; musical/text relationships, and finally the spatial and textural aspects of the orchestration. “Form” will be discussed in relation to musical construction and growth, including harmonic features of the emergent classical sonata principle. In addition, an evaluation of the structural qualities of the component parts of Cimarosa’s cantatas will enable any divergences from earlier eighteenth century cantata style to be easily discernible.

The Present Status of the Italian Cantata and Cimarosa Research

In this study the Italian cantata has been traced for the first time from its inception, with the monodies of Caccini’s Le Nuove Musiche and his contemporaries to its development at the end of the seventeenth century, and its “flowering” in the mature style in the works of Cimarosa’s predecessors.

Numerous titles were given to these early monodies, which are more accurately the earliest attempts at cantata composition. The diversity of these titles will be discussed in relation to various composers and collected anthologies, including the strophic and
strophic variation techniques exemplified in the works of Paolo Quagliati, Alessandro Grandi, Giovanni Berti, Carlo Milanuzzi, Francesco Turini, Giovanni Battista Robletti, Antonio Maria Abbatini, Francesco Negri, Benedetto Ferrari, Giovanni Felice Sances, and Domenico Mazzocchi. One of the most difficult problems in writing an early history of the cantata is the lack of original sources. Many of these manuscripts were destroyed during World War II. Apart from the examples included in musical histories written before 1945, there are several incipits in the Appendices of Nigel Fortune’s Ph.D. dissertation in 1955. Gloria Rose, in The Cantatas of Giacomo Carissimi discusses early composers of monody and cantata, but omits any musical examples of their works.

Between 1650 and 1670 the cantata comprised a series of loosely connected ariosos, arias, recitatives, and strophic variations, as evidenced in the cantatas of Barbara Strozzi, Luigi Rossi, Giacomo Carissimi, Maurizio Cazzati, Mario Savioni, Pietro Simone Agostini, Marc’Antonio Pasqualini, and Antonio Cesti. Giovanni Legrenzi differs from his contemporaries in his more symmetrical approach to distinct recitative, and aria divisions.

Accessibility to these cantatas has been facilitated by the facsimiles of manuscripts and prints contained in the series The Italian Cantata in the Seventeenth Century, released by Garland Publishing in 1986.

Alessandro Scarlatti and Georg Friedrich Händel were to determine, in their prolific cantata repertoire, the principal characteristics and formulation of the eighteenth century Italian solo cantata. Through their enormous number of solo cantata compositions it has been possible to establish that, prior to 1745, the cantata was subjected to only minor variants, such as extensions of the conventional models of Recitative, Aria, Recitative, Aria (R A R A) or Aria, Recitative, Aria (A R A).

Their principal successors Antonio Vivaldi, Tomaso Albinoni, Antonio Caldara, and Giovanni Bononcini represent the stabilisation of the late baroque Italian Cantata. Among their cantata compositions there are admirable examples of exquisite melodic phrases, melismas and word painting, personifying the melancholia of the pastoral poetry. Almost without exception the unknown protagonist soliloquises on the tragedy of lost and unre-
quieted love, or the dark depths of the underworld. A study of these cantata compositions has been facilitated by the availability of the series Recent Researches in the Baroque Era. The determination of divergences in cantata style has been facilitated by numerous studies on the Italian Cantata in the period 1700 to 1750.

However, the period after 1750 is still sparsely documented. At present there exist only two doctoral dissertations that concentrate specifically on the Italian cantatas of Jommelli and Hasse. The findings contained in these dissertations by Pattengale and Hansell, respectively, will be discussed under the section Characteristics of the Italian Cantata 1730–1777 in Chapter II, Part IV. Apart from these sources there has been an almost total neglect of the Italian Cantata after 1750, due to difficulties associated with the acquisition of primary source material from many Italian libraries earlier this century. Perhaps this may explain why Eugene Schmitz, in his 1914 Geschichte der Kantate und des geistlichen Konzerts and its 1955 revision, overlooked in his chapter on the solo cantata of the Neapolitan school the existence of cantatas by Cimarosa and Paisiello. Even the entry by Boyd on The Italian Cantata in The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians fails to mention the latter two composers as being representative.

In direct contrast to the paucity of information on the late eighteenth century Italian cantata, and the omission of Cimarosa as a representative composer of the form, is the proliferation of biographical sources which mention his cantata compositions. Most of these, in Italian, serve to commemorate the centenary of Cimarosa’s death (1901) and the bicentenary of his birth (1949). The concerned citizens and literati of Aversa, Cimarosa’s birthplace, organised celebrations and commissioned literary contributions for these anniversaries to perpetuate the honour and memory of their most famous citizen. Of these biographies written before 1949 (see Bibliography), Maria Tibaldi Chiesa’s Cimarosa e il suo tempo (Milan, 1939) is the most comprehensive. Despite many errors and the exclusion of the instrumental works, it remained the most valuable source until the 1976 dissertation, Domenico Cimarosa (1749–1801), by Jennifer E. Johnson. The latter study includes a very detailed biography which serves as a summation of previous Italian contributions to Cimarosa documentation. Johnson’s principal aim has been to correct and collate re-
cent information on source locations of Cimarosa's autographs, manuscript copies, and extant libretti. The main body of the dissertation comprises a chronology of Cimarosa's instrumental and vocal compositions. While all the works are subject to a descriptive account of their contents, the keyboard sonatas and overtures are the only forms that receive limited analysis. Johnson has been meticulous in noting Cimarosa's self borrowings in the overtures, a technique however, not unique to Cimarosa, but a typical practice of many composers throughout music history. The instances of self borrowings noted by Johnson may have arisen from a desire by Cimarosa to serve royal patrons, who needed compositions at short notice for celebrative occasions. Certainly this was the case in June 1799, when he expressed his republican sympathies at the declaration of the "Parthenopean Republic", and then had to revert quickly to royalist expressions on the return from exile of King Ferdinando IV. Cimarosa, in an attempt to appease the King, composed the cantata Non che più tieto giorno in his honour, which was not an original work, but a revision of his earlier cantata Il giorno felice. The difference in text and musical style between these two cantatas will be discussed in Chapter III.

Neither Johnson nor Tibaldi Chiesa mention Il melodioso settecento italiano (Milan, 1935), a book by Gino Roncaglia, who devotes the whole of Chapter VII to a discussion of melody in the most popular operas of Paisiello and Cimarosa. Another substantial contribution concerning Cimarosa's appointment to the Russian Court, and musicians and artists employed by Empress Catherine II, has been embodied in the monumental study by R. A. Mooser, Annales de la musique et des musiciens en Russie aux XVIIIe siècle (Geneva, 1951). This has made it possible to construct details of the Russian performances of Cimarosa's cantatas and the names of singers and musicians involved in the productions. In Chapter II and Chapter VII it will be shown how vulnerable Cimarosa and his performers were to the social and political whims of Catherine II.

In the last decade there has been a resurgence of interest in performing Cimarosa's operas and instrumental works in the western world. Correspondingly there have been many journal articles devoted to discussions of the music, details of the libretti, and many reviews of records and live performances.
Principal Features of Cimarosa's Musical Style and Form in his Cantatas

Although this study also includes a critical biography in relation to the cantata compositions, the principal focus of the investigation is Cimarosa’s cantata style. From a comparative study of earlier Italian cantatas and Cimarosa’s cantata format (Chapter II, Parts II, III and Chapter V, Part I), it has been found that there is a remarkable expansion of the form. Cimarosa relinquished the (R A R A) Recitative Aria Recitative Aria, or (A R A) Aria Recitative Aria models, firmly established in Scarlatti, Händel, Vivaldi, Albinoni, and Bononcini, in favour of an extended composition resembling an opera seria. His cantatas were composed between his numerous opera commissions and performances throughout his career. Perhaps this may have been a decisive element in his inclusion into the cantata of forms previously confined to opera. With the integration of duets, vocal ensembles and ballets, Cimarosa’s typical cantata paralleled a medium length two act opera. Certainly, this type of cantata had the distinct advantage as being suitable for (usually cantatas were not staged) staging either as a concert performance, or a costumed production with minimal scenery, for celebratory functions in royal and ambassadorial residences. The intimacy of a private chamber performance before a connoisseur audience provided a suitable arena for Cimarosa to present his most sophisticated technique. His cantatas therefore are a unique form in which to examine the development of the aria, from the da capo at mid point of the eighteenth century, to the through composed compound ternary and binary forms, together with the influence of the newly emergent sonata style technique. Throughout the eighteenth century there is a continual cyclic metamorphosis between instrumental genres and the Italian aria. Prior to 1750, the da capo aria, which had as its basis the minuet or the two part binary form, eclipsed every other vocal movement in opera and cantata. Within this two part aria structure, the A section in the tonic expresses the overall sentiment of the first quatrains of the poetry. A modulation to the dominant in the B section allows a suitable contrast for the more specific emotional content of the second quatrains. In accordance with the da capo principle, the A section is subject to a repeat. Cimarosa reserves this conventional da capo form for his cavatinas.
The emotional impact of the fusion of music and poetry may have inspired composers to assimilate some of these lyrical vocal techniques into instrumental music. An absence of text in the three part instrumental structure, normally referred to as “first movement form” is replaced by a rich harmonic vocabulary, as well as a kaleidoscope of instrumental colour and contrast. The inner modulatory movement, a precursor of the (Development) of the mature classical style, is enriched through a shift of focus from the dominant to other tonalities of lesser intensity, such as the tonic minor, the submediant minor, and the subdominant. Other modulatory possibilities are a function of the pivotal triads of the diminished seventh, and the augmented and neapolitan sixths, all favoured techniques of Cimarosa.

A constant desire by Italian musical patrons for novelty and innovation ensured that these new modulatory techniques would be absorbed into the contemporary aria. Indeed, by 1775 Cimarosa’s arias reveal that harmonically the da capo aria is superseded by the aria with the structural identity of the sonata. Another type of through-composed aria which shares affinity with the sonata style is characterised by the change of time signature and tempo at the commencement of the B section. It is not uncommon for this distinctive contrasting section to comprise new thematic material. In this study these new developments in the aria will be referred to as compound ternary and compound binary arias.

Although the aria was subject to many structural and harmonic advances after 1750, the instrumental ritornello remains as the most important function of stylistic unity. In its cyclic process, the aria shares many common characteristics with the newly emerging Classical Concerto. Both forms include a virtuoso role for the soloist between ritornelli or tutti passages and melodic elaboration in the form of a cadenza or vocal embellishment. A contrasting slow movement or middle section and generally a sonata rondo finale are common currency between the aria and the concerto. The sonata rondo finale enjoyed great popularity after 1770, and this vogue possibly owes its existence to the simplicity and lyrical nature of the melodic line.
Musical evidence of these developments will be illustrated by reference to appropriate arias in Cimarosa's cantatas (see Chapter VI). Cimarosa's innovations in aria form contradict the generally accepted view found in musical dictionaries, that the *da capo* aria prevailed throughout the eighteenth century. Another feature of Cimarosa's aria technique involves the virtuoso demands made on singers with respect to *tessitura* and vocal agility. It is known that Cimarosa had particular singers assigned to him when he was *maestro a cappella* at the Russian Court, and it is probable that he designed these arias with their technique and vocal capabilities as an important consideration. The contours of the melodic line, and the subtle phrasing, which carefully illustrates the poignant and dramatic moments of the text reveal Cimarosa's understanding of vocal technique. His instrumental accompaniments for the arias are deftly conceived giving particular attention to bowing, dynamics, orchestral contrasts and phrasing.

The principal foundations of the eighteenth century cantata are the companion forms of recitative and aria. Even though the role of recitative *semplice*, in the declamation of the text had not changed substantially, it is significant to note the more unified approach to harmonic sequence by Italian composers at the end of the century. Usually in Cimarosa's recitative structure, there is a succession of secondary dominants, whose harmonic movement necessitates numerous accidentals. This approach is not unique to Cimarosa: Edward Downes in his article "Secco Recitative in Early Classical Opera Seria (1720–1780)" (see Bibliography) found similar secondary dominant progressions in many late eighteenth century Italian operas. When Cimarosa resorted to this type of secondary progression he was careful to use dissonance only in relation to a heightening of tension in the dramatic situation. In the early cantatas, Cimarosa employed recitative *semplice* as an important device to approach the denouement, all the action being confined to the recitatives, with a lyrical recapitulation of the drama continued in the succeeding aria. After 1780, Cimarosa's emphasis shifted more to *strumentato* recitative, as for example in two cantatas for Catherine II, *Atene edificata* 1788 and *La sorpresa* 1790, where Cimarosa relied solely on *strumentato* recitative. However, these two cantatas are unique in their exclusion of recitative *semplice*, for Cimarosa reverted to it again in later cantatas, although
with a notable reduction in its use.

With the exception of one cantata *Vanne a Morte* 1781, Cimarosa enclosed the alternation of the recitative/aria combination within a structural whole. Interspersed between this combination are various duets and ensembles. Frequently dance movements are also included, suggesting that the cantatas *La felicità inaspettata* 1788 and *La sorpresa* 1790 were staged. Again the departure from the conventional cantata format occurred in works written for the Russian Court. Here Cimarosa was determined to please the extravagant Empress, whose court was one of the most illustrious in late eighteenth century Europe. From the records of the Imperial Archives of old St. Petersburg it has been established that the ballet was a vital source of courtly entertainment. It will be shown in Chapter VII how the synthesis of the French and Italian styles of dance enabled the Russians to create their own individual technique. Cimarosa would have been aware of the dance troupe at Catherine’s court, and the enhancement that could result from their employment in a ballet integrated into his cantata. The addition of ballets increased the number of recurrent dance rhythms permeating many of the individual elements of Cimarosa’s cantatas especially the arias, cavatinas and duets. These rhythms, with their compact and distinctive character, function as vital components of Cimarosa’s compositional development. The impetus for the inclusion of these dance rhythms may be attributed to the preponderance of dances serving as instructional models for performance and composition, in contemporary eighteenth century musical treatises and manuals. Cimarosa’s integration of dance rhythms in vocal forms, follows as a logical extension of the cyclic metamorphosis occurring between instrumental and vocal music during his career.

The principal features of Cimarosa’s style outlined above are examined in Volume I of this dissertation. A historical survey of the cantata from its origins to the end of the seventeenth century, based on the research of other scholars, and verified by my studies of these original editions and manuscripts in Italy, is found in Chapter II, Part I. The formalisation and the development of the Italian Cantata begins with reference to the cantatas of Alessandro Scarlatti and Händel. Original discussion and analysis of the cantatas of Händel, Caldara, Vivaldi, Albinoni, and Bononcini comprises Chapter II, Part II.
Particular emphasis is given to the cantatas of Cimarosa’s immediate predecessors, Porpora, Pergolesi, Hasse and Jommelli in Chapter II, Part III. An analysis of the cantatas of Pergolesi, together with the comparison of the other three composers, is an original contribution.

The social and political environment in which they were created is discussed in Chapter III: a critical biography of Cimarosa and his cantata compositions reveals how the patronage system in Italy and Russia may have influenced his choice of cantata text and format. Many inaccuracies in previous biographies have been corrected, for example the reference to La felicità inaspettata as an opéra-comique, and the constant reference to the cantata Aristeo in all previous biographies as Arista. For the first time information has been included on Cimarosa’s appointment and service in La Cappella Reale. Previous studies have omitted any mention of his important role as an alto in the royal chapel choir in Naples. There has never been any reference to the correspondence of the Duke of Serracapriola, the Neapolitan Ambassador to St. Petersburg, who sought sovereign protection for Cimarosa before his appointment as maestro di cappella at the court of Catherine II. Other documents substantiate that The Duke of Serracapriola forwarded numerous requests of Domenico Cimarosa from St. Petersburg to the Neapolitan court.

The major part of Chapter IV comprises the sources, librettists, and a synopsis or discussion of all the libretti of Cimarosa’s ten dramatic cantatas. No previous contribution has included a discussion of Cimarosa’s cantata libretti and librettists. Many misattributions of Cimarosa’s cantata manuscripts have been addressed under the section entitled “sources”.

Two Chapters, V and VI (based on original thought unless otherwise indicated), are devoted to analyses of the musical style and form of Cimarosa’s cantatas. Chapter V, Part I begins with the broad spectrum style of these cantatas: their vocal distribution, cantata structures, structural innovations, tonal relationships, accompaniments, modulations and rhythm. Chapter V, Part II examines the two outer movements, the sinfonia and the finale chorus.
The most important internal movements of the cantata, the recitative/aria combination, are examined in Chapter VI, Parts I and II, and the final Part III includes Cimarosa's late eighteenth century inclusions to the cantata of duets and trios. A digression in Chapter VII, Part I is concerned with information on Cimarosa's cantata soloists. Chapter VII, Part II gives a review of the developing ballet technique and style in Russia, during the late eighteenth century. Its inclusion is essential for an insight into the musical analysis of the dance forms in Part II. The choreographers and dancers, who performed in Cimarosa's Russian cantatas, are discussed in Chapter VII, Part III. Volume I concludes with a summary of Cimarosa's structural innovation and contribution to the late eighteenth century Italian Cantata.

Volume II includes appendices, documentary evidence, and musical examples, necessary to justify the discussion and analyses in Volume I.