

Per la festività del Santo Natale ('For the Celebration of Christmas'). Libretto by PIETRO METASTASIO, first set by Giovanni Battista Costanzi (1728, Rome).

INTRODUCTION: The Celestial Spirit and his entourage appear on a cloud machine that represents a transparent royal palace. The Spirit bears glad tidings regarding the light of the world, of redemption, of hope for individuals, kingdoms, and empires, and of a world united in peace. With the Introduction concluded, the cloud machine rises to reveal an amphitheatre made ready for the following cantata.

PART 1 Divine Love leads a discussion between himself and his two companions, Faith, and Hope, expressing from the outset his delight in being the primary force behind the Incarnation. Faith and Hope also rejoice, the former, previously shrouded in metaphysical belief, now sees such trust made manifest, and Hope, as the substance of things hoped for, has the satisfaction of having secretly nurtured the mounting anticipation of this event. The descending of the Eternal Word to free the world from servitude is a matter over which Hope claims to experience the greater delight, since he has always been the faithful companion to those in trouble, as with Noah and his family huddled together during the flood, Abraham called to sacrifice his son, and Moses defiantly leading his people from Egypt. In acknowledging Hope's satisfaction, Divine Love draws parallels between these past events and the present – the bonding of the faithful, God's sacrifice for human salvation, and evil foiled by humanity's release into freedom. Through such deeds can the intangible be understood. Though in full agreement, Faith now adds the example of Jacob's prophesies to his sons, with special reference to the holy birth [through the direct line from Judah] He warns that only with his guidance can the import of such hidden mysteries be fully grasped beyond the limitations of human thought. Divine Love declares his companions equal in both their felicity and their merit, and both agree, as they respond to the gift sustained by Divine Love, that their pleasure is increased by the happiness of the other. The earth in peace rejoices, the tyrant weeps, fear and sorrow have fled.

PART 2 Signs of well-being abound: the seasons follow in order as does the day upon the night, the smith refashions the weapons of war into implements of agriculture, martial combat no longer disturbs the shepherd in his fields, and children cling to their mothers in love rather than fear. Hope sees the present time as the genuine Golden Age, repudiating the mythical Golden Age of Greece (described in Hesiod's *Works and Days*, ll.109-120 and reflected in Ovid's, *Metamorphoses*, bk.1, ll. 89-112) as puerile beside the impact of this divine event. Such significance Divine Love now expands upon with a reminder that God as man chose to enter a land oppressed by imperial rule and that he lead him to the sacrificial altar where the Incarnate offered himself for the benefit of all humanity. He, however, turned that altar into a table from which the offering became the very food of salvation. Faith immediately sees his convictions on that subject spread widely by messengers of divine understanding whose message, with his aid, will challenge tyrants and pierce the breasts of bold and timid alike. Hope will gladly kindle souls towards receiving that message. Divine Love recalls the fisherman who received the keys of heaven at the time of the resurrection and took the message from shore to shore. He will always guide such journeys, supported by Hope and enriched by Faith, who also points out that the leader must extend a faithful hand. Prompted by Hope's desire for a line of such leaders, Divine Love begins a final encomium to Benedict XIII, Pope at the time of the performance, praising his humility and his work. All three vow to uphold the Pontiff.

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La festività might be seen as an anomaly in that it contrasts immediately with the seven *azioni sacre* (sacred dramas or oratorios) Metastasio wrote for performance during Holy Week in the Imperial Chapel in Vienna. With its Christmas theme, it was elaborately staged at a private theatre (albeit that of Cardinal Pietro Ottoboni in the Palace of the Papal Chancellery in Rome), and unlike the Vienna works that centre upon the interaction of biblical characters (with a single hageographic exception), the four characters in *La festività* are allegorical and are involved solely in theological discourse or proclamation. *La festività*, therefore, has a far closer relative in *La contesa dei numi* (q.v.), another festival piece staged in Rome the following year. Contemporary commentators, however, refer to it simply as a cantata, somewhat in line with the stage directions that follow the Introduction in the libretto. The performance took place on January 2, 1728 following two rehearsals at the Chancellery on 24 and 26 of the preceding December. The occasion was the annual gathering of the Accademia degli Arcadi for which the work provided the climax to a somewhat exceptional evening as may be gleaned from entries in both the *Diario di Roma* of Francesco Valesio (26:12:1727 and 02:01:1728) and the *Chracas, Diario Ordinario di Roma* (no. 1627, 10:01:1728). The palace illuminations

and the quality of the refreshments gain special mention, as does the glittering array of cardinals, church dignitaries, members of the nobility and finely dressed ladies. Adding motivation for such splendour was the presence of Violante Beatrice of Bavaria, Grand Princess of Tuscany, widow of Ferdinando de' Medici and Governor of Siena who had been invited by Maria Giulia Boncompagni, Duchess of Fiano, and widow of the cardinal's uncle, Marco Ottoboni. As for others assembled, the Arcadians were witnessing a commissioned work with text by an exceptional protégé of Gianvincenzo Gravina, one of their most eminent founding members: a protégé whose works continued to define their own literary aspirations. For Ottoboni, it was an opportunity to promote a rising celebrity – the godson he had baptized nearly thirty years beforehand, and for Metastasio, not simply a prestigious exposure around the corner from where he was born and so near to where he once extemporized as a child, but a chance, beyond his already proven prowess on the secular front, to demonstrate sufficient acumen in spiritual matters as to satisfy the high level of ecclesiastical representation assembled on this occasion. His invitation to the court in Vienna came the following year. The composer, Giovanni Costanzi, entered Ottoboni's service in 1721, and produced, among other works, a successful setting of the Cardinal's *Carlo Magno* in 1729. Although his score for *La festività* has not survived, insight into its instrumentation and its reflection of the orchestral practice of the time is provided in F. Piperno, "Il componimento sacro....," *Metastasio e il mondo musicale*, 1986, 151-69. These and other insights Piperno draws from his transcriptions of documents contained in the Vatican Library.

Settings:

Costanzi (Rome 1727); Gregori (as *La natività di nostro Signor Gesù Cristo* – Lucca 1735); Mazzoni (as *Componimento sacro per il Santo Natale di Jesu Cristo* – Bologna 1735); Chiarini (Venice 1744); N. Conti (Naples 1755); Sales (Augsburg 1756); Sigismondo (? c.1761); Uttini (? c.1765); Sacchini (Rome 1779); Tritto (Naples ?1780s); ?Fioravanti (? 1822).