

## Azioni teatrali

Shorter than the *feste teatrali* but clearly of larger proportions than the specifically designated *componimenti drammatici* are the *azione teatrale* which are written for both amateur and professional singers for performance in smaller spaces than the *feste*, with less spectacular scenery and where celebrations of more modest proportions are intended. Musically, in comparison to the scoring of the *feste*, the *azioni* for professional performers remain similar while those for amateur performers are usually set with a lighter instrumental accompaniment.

Four works of a seemingly *azione* type were written and set for professional singers between 1735 and 1739. Of these works, two: *Il sogno di Scipione*, performed in recognition of Emperor Charles VI's birthday, and *La pace fra la virtù e la bellezza*, written as an encomium to the heir apparent, Maria Theresa, on the occasion of her name day are appropriately identified as *azione teatrali*. The former was given at the Favorita Palace and the latter in the Grand Antechamber of the *Hofburg*. *Il Parnaso accusato e difeso* and *Astrea placata*, however, performed in successive years in the Gallery of the Favorita in honour of the Empress Elisabeth's birthday, are labelled *componimenti drammatici*. Since these two works equate so closely to *La pace fra la virtù e la bellezza* and are at such distance from such *componimenti drammatici* as *Amour prigioniero* and *Il vero omaggio*, it would appear that the genre differentiation simply reflected a difference in status between heir apparent and Emperor on the one hand, and emperor's consort on the other. All four have been listed among the *azioni* on this website.

A reverse situation arises with Metastasio's identification of his first three works written for amateur performers – the Archduchess Maria Theresa, her sister Maria Anna, and a young lady of the court. All three works are listed in a letter to Mattia Damiani dated 16 June, 1736 in which Metastasio mentions having written *tre piccole feste teatrali* (three little *feste teatrali*), immediately identifying *Le cinesi* as a *componimento drammatico* leaving *Le Grazie vendicata* and *Il Palladio conservata* as “little *feste*” which is not only a characteristic of the *azione teatrale*, but also the designation assigned to both these works in the Hérissant edition. In length and layout, *Le cinesi* and *Le Grazie* are identical, with each character allotted one aria and all three uniting in a final trio. In other respects, however, they are sufficiently different to beg differentiation. In performance, *Le cinesi* exploited the ambience of the Mirror Room of the *Hofburg* for a presentation in exotic costume of a comical, satirical piece with contemporary plot before a general gathering of the nobility assembled for a Chinese ball. *Le Grazie* (and, indeed, *Il Palladio*), on the other hand, were performed in modest settings in the private apartments of the Favorita Palace whereby moral, philosophical, even political issues were brought forward in mythological-allegorical plots before an intimate noble gathering, with encomia appropriate for the two imperial birthdays they celebrated. Together, these three pieces provided a progression in performing experience for the three amateurs who performed them – from the light-hearted *Cinesi* through the more serious *Le Grazie* to *Il Palladio*, in which recitative is reduced to allow the two archduchesses two rather than one aria apiece, the third character retaining one. As Metastasio's first *azione*, *Le Grazie* thus remains close in its proportions to the his first *componimento*. In recognition of the obvious distinction, however, it seems reasonable to list it, along with *Il Palladio*, with the *azione teatrali* with the word “modesto” added as a qualifier.

If the identification of *Le Grazie vendicata* and *Il Palladio conservata* as *azioni teatrali* suggests one set of criteria for works performed by members of the royal household and another for works written for professionals, *Il natal di Giove*, Metastasio's fourth and final work for Maria Theresa and Maria Anna, puts an end to that notion. Laid out in nine scenes and with a chorus and a cast of 5, this *azione teatrale* from 1740 equates readily with the five *azioni* that were to follow: *L'isola disabitata* (1753) for professional performance in Madrid, an expanded version of *Le cinesi* (1754), for professional performers at Schloss Hof, and the three *azioni* for Maria Theresa's offspring, the ill-fated *Atenaide* (written in 1762 but not performed), and the highly successful pair for four of the young Archduchesses, *Il Parnaso confuso* (1764) and *La corona* (1765).

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