

Serenate / feste teatrali

The only item to be designated a *serenata* in the Hérissant edition of Metastasio's works is his *Angelica* of 1720, set out in two parts and performed for a select audience in the garden theatre of a member of the Neapolitan nobility. An impressive cast of professional singers played the roles of three pastoral characters as they interacted between themselves and three others derived from Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* in a linear plot based on an incident from Ariosto's epic poem. The *Angelica* performance celebrated in Naples the birthday of the Austrian empress in Vienna to whom tribute is paid in a final *licenza*. *Gli Orti Esperidi*, written for the same occasion the following year, differs from *Angelica* only in its involvement of mythological characters in a mythological plot with the encomium to the empress integrated into the action itself, and the performance venue moved to the Royal Palace. In his suggestion that Metastasio be commissioned to write this celebratory piece, the Viceroy at the time also identifies this work as a *serenata*. The remaining two works written for the Neapolitan nobility, *Endimione* (1721) and *Galatea* (1722), also qualify as *serenate* in their sharing of the characteristics described above and listed in the Preamble.

The next work to be written in line with the Neapolitan *serenate* was *La contesa de' numi* which, although set for Rome in 1729, was to be identified in the Hérissant edition not as a *serenata* but as a *festa teatrale* according to a tradition at the court in Vienna that stretched back well into the previous century. The major difference between *La contesa* and its Neapolitan predecessors is a change in plot type from linear to an assembly of characters who justify their importance in rivalry with each other in the presence of a superior who acts as an arbitrator. This type of plot Metastasio had used in Rome just one year earlier in his Italian oratorio *La festività del Santo Natale*, and with it, set the pattern for a number of the *feste* and *azioni teatrali* he would write for the imperial capital. Interestingly, of all the *feste*, Metastasio refers to *La pace fra le tre dee*, as a *serenata* in nine different letters. As a work written for Madrid, these references somewhat reinforce the notion that the designation *serenata* had a particular, but not necessarily an exclusive Spanish/Neapolitan usage. Migliavacca's *Tetide*, for example, set by Gluck and elaborately staged in the *Großer Redoutensaal* as part of the celebrations surrounding the first marriage of Archduke Joseph, is designated a "*serenata*," not only on the score titlepage, but also in Metastasio's letter to Giambattista Martini dated 04:05:1761. Quite consistent, however, is Metastasio's reference to his *Egeria* as both a *festa teatrale* and a "*serenata a sedere*" (i.e. full-scale *serenata*) in a letter to Farinelli (26:04:1764) who, after all, was the artistic director of the palace theatres in Madrid and Aranjuez.

The one work within the *festa teatrale/serenata* group where Metastasio's genre designation seems misplaced is his identification of *Il Parnaso confuso* as a *festa teatrale*. Though highly successful at the time of its performance as part of the extensive celebrations that surrounded the second marriage of Archduke Joseph, *Il Parnaso* shares the characteristics of an *azione teatrale* (see below) in that it was performed by amateurs (in this case four archduchesses) on a specially erected stage in a room of the *Hofburg* with scenery borrowed from the storerooms of the court theatres. It's twin piece, *La corona*, of similar length and written for the same performers in the same location seems correctly identified as an *azione teatrale*. It is as though a different scale of reference is being used not just for amateur rather than professional performances, but for certain amateur performances given predominantly by members of the royal household, an inclination further evidenced by the poet's application of the term *azione teatrale* to works that might otherwise be recognized as *componimenti*

drammatici (see below). Since *Il Parnaso* was immediately followed at its first performance by the ballet *Le triomphe de l'Amour*, danced by the three younger siblings of the *Parnaso* cast, it is possible that Metastasio viewed the whole as a *festa teatrale*. *Il Parnaso*, however, in comparison with its fellows, is an *azione teatrale*.

Two final observations:

(1) When, in a letter to Tommaso Filipponi (10:10:1765), Metastasio refers to his *festa teatrale*, *La pace fra le tre dee* as a “non breve serenata” (a by no means short serenata), this is a clear response to the use of the term “*serenata*” in common parlance as a catchall designation for works of lesser grandeur than those described above. Surely, it is in this sense that he refers to his *Il Parnasso accusato e difeso* and *Il pace fra la Virtù e la Bellezza* as *serenate* in letters to Stelio Mastraca (29:11:1738 and 17:01:1739) and Giuseppe Bettinelli, (28:03:1739). Likewise, in reference to the Pasquini/Porsile *Fama accresciuta dalla Virtù*, in a letter to his brother, Leopold (15:10:1735). Interestingly, this work is identified elsewhere as a *festa di camera a due voci* (celebratory chamber piece for two voices).

(2) Within the Metastasio correspondence, the term “*festa*” may simply indicate a festive occasion or a festive piece written for such an occasion. Although the particular features of the original 1735 version of *Le cinesi*, for example, place it squarely with other *componimenti drammatici*, it is referred to in three letters written on 26 February of that year as a “*festa*.” An important distinction, therefore, exists between a *festa* (i.e. a celebratory occasion or party piece) and a *festa teatrale* (i.e. a theatrical genre).
