# MAYR'S CANTATAS



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The cantatas make up a significant section in Mayr's catalogue of works and should not be overlooked as the little work done on them so far has proved to be most rewarding. Furthermore, they take us into a social and political panorama of early Italian nineteenth century music which has been too easily put aside; they also reveal the extent to which Mayr was involved with local music making, that is to say, his preferred world to that of the cabals of the operatic stage. Indeed, we find works in which he relaxed and shared his more intimate realms of composition.

Cantatas played an important part in Italian musical life from the seventeenth century (for example, those of Stradella and Alessandro Scarlatti) onwards until Mayr's own times. He may be said to be one of the last great exponents of its art. In the true cantata tradition he composed works celebrating love and marriage, war and peace, birth and death, using religious,historical and mythological themes. Most were for gatherings of professionals and *dilettanti* (here the word is used in the original and not in the modern perjorative sense), commonly called "academies" to which the public was usually invited. The rich or the charitable (for example, in the latter case Mayr himself), or academies such as the Seminary or the Ateneo of Bergamo to which Mayr belonged (being for a time its president), could convene such gatherings, large enough to fill the rebuilt San Carlo or small enough for a private music room. On a more humble scale the cantata was the "stuff" of true music making: that is, people gathering to share the sheer joy of music on an intimate scale. The verses set were considered to be as important as the music and gave the intellectual tone of the evening, be it religious, historical or whatever. For example, it is easy after studying the texts of the three Carthaginian cantatas [A161, A176, A154] (all three edited and published by Ian Caddy) to understand how they might well have stimulated conversation afterwards on the theme of Hannibal - the recent defeat of the century's own 'Hannibal' on the fields of Waterloo and its implications for the future were not far from the minds of the audience. It is interesting to note that it was the Seminary which convened the meeting. Academies were essential gatherings for the Intelligensia who had in those days a far better preparation in the traditions of the West than the equivalent of today, they knew their classical sources and could converse in Latin; a few like Mayr also knew Greek. They loved their literary inheritance and appreciated the works of allegory and symbol as well as the various levels of moral and anagogical interpretation.

Mayr's cantatas may be subdivided under three headings:

a) STAGED CANTATAS These are 'operas', for argument's sake divided into parts or acts. Some were lavishly staged at theatres of importance such as La Fenice, La Scala and the San Carlo. Under this heading are also those cantatas staged by Mayr in order to raise m oney for his charitable organisations, his school and home for musicians. These might well have been staged at the Teatro della Società, near the Piazza Vecchia in the old city of Bergamo, or in the Teatro Riccardi in the new, lower town.

b) CANTATAS FOR SOCIAL AND POLITICAL COMMEMORATIONS These range from commemorations for the Napoleonic or Austrian régimes. These too on special occasions were lavishly staged, or presented on more humble occasions such as gatherings for the unveiling of a portrait [see A148]
c) CANTATAS COMPOSED FOR SOLO VOICES These were for particular singers who, on Mayr's own testimony, commissioned the works which would have been for social occasions, academies, marriages etc., as for the three Carthaginian Cantatas mentioned above and composed in 1816.

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a) I have been unable to consult the scores of Mayr's two San Carlo cantatas *Arianna a Nasso* [A130] of 1815 composed for Colbran and Nozzari amongst others, and *Il sogno di Partenope* [A128] composed for the opening of the newly rebuilt San Carlo in 1817. The libretto of the last mentioned with its profusion of elemental beings denotes a freedom for Mayr's imaginative forces. They are energies more easily related to our understanding of German romanticism, and Weber in particular, rather than the staunch world of Italian classicism. These elemental energies are again to be found in *Arianna e Bacco* [A129] also of 1817 composed 'per l'Accademia de' professori, nel tempo della Petecchiale' and included Mayr's boys appearing as *amorini,* fauns, satyrs, good and bad genii. The libretto is by Merelli on a plan drawn-up by Mayr. The Fondo Mayr manuscript is complete except for a section missing from Act 2 Scene 3. This is from 'Perchè fuggi da me?' to the second line in Scene 4 'Assai di meno'. It includes the chorus sung by the baccanti which too was for Mayr's students. This is a great pity, but hopefully the section lost through negligence may turn up amongst all the miscellaneous papers in the last *faldoni* of the Fondo Mayr. The cantata is a splendid example of Mayr working with his colleagues in order to lift the spirits of his friends and the general public. The orchestral Introductions admirably set the scenes. The cantata begins with Teseo and his companions setting sail before dawn, leaving the Island of Naxos; it is a fine atmospheric scene with trumpets sounding across the sea (as also is the case on a much larger scale in Act 1 Scene 8 of his opera *Fedra).* There is no recitativo secco and the first scene rapidly changes to reveal Arianna asleep surrounded by good and malevolent genii. Abandoned, she is tormented by despair and hope. A storm develops, this Arianna sees as divine judgement on her betrayer in love ...'May he sink to the bottom of the sea!'. The second act (Mayr terms it 'Part two') indicates Mayr's optimistic philosophy in the time of trouble, Bacchus does not present himself as a drunkard but as a friend, gladdening the heart. His joviality and amiability persuades Arianna that despair and the thought of ending her life is a deceit. Love and wine, food and friendship bring happiness.
Such solar energy is reflected in Mayr's preference for the major keys; he is not one to take his listener to the lunar world of the minor, except for good dramatic effect. Mayr's love of good wine is also mirrored in the solo bass-baritone cantata *Il bagno di vino* [A179] composed for the Unione Filarmonica, Bergamo.

b) Falling under this heading are staged and unstaged cantatas, for example *l'Armonia* [A139] of 1825, libretto by Baizini and based on a draft by Mayr to be sung

on the departure of Francis I of Austria from Bergamo, a work conceived on proportions more easily associated with Berlioz than with Mayr, and *La cantata per la morte di Beethoven* [A145] of 1827, with verses by Mayr.

*L'Armonia* is in a class of its own, calling for large orchestral and vocal forces, it is discussed fully in my book on Mayr (translated ed. of 1995). The Beethoven cantata has been performed twice, first at Munich on 18 February 1982 in an edition by Heinrich Bauer (Peters), then at Lewis University, Illinois on 2 May 1990, newly edited and conducted by Lawrence Sisk. Knowing this work reasonably well, I fail to understand why it is not often included in concerts as an aperitif to Beethoven's Ninth, for all the vocal and orchestral forces are already present and the music and words are a fine piece commemorating Beethoven's genius. I refer my reader to Sisk's *Giovanni Simone Mayr's Cantata for the Death of Beethoven* in The Beethoven Newsletter, Vol 2 No2, San José University, USA.
It is sad to write that a curious mishmash of a concert was given in the Teatro Donizetti at Bergamo on 17 September 1992, when, what I can only describe as a "cavalier" performance took place of an extract from Mayr's substantial cantata commemorating the marriage of Napoleon and Maria Luisa of Austria, a work I have subtitled "War and Peace" in my catalogue [A135]. The occasion amply illustrated how not to revive Mayr. Why play but an extract from an interesting work? Why perform this *soupçon* without satisfactory understanding, preparation, or insight? Like many others present I could not understand why the whole canata was not sung intelligently and well for such a revival would have been more than justified and may well have found its way on to a disc. Both text and music reveal Mayr working within accepted conventions of the time but with mercurial freedom of expression, happily at odds with the prevailing fashion for Rossinian rhythms and glad to be among his own. Here Mayr was not composing for far afield but for those he loved and for whom he gave his true creative life. The cantata illustrates the well-crafted and pure music he shared with his friends.
I have since learned that Gianluigi Cerea's important edition of the cantata, performed recently (Teatro Donizetti 31 October 1995) was still not fated to be complete. May the work soon be integrally and professionally recorded.

*L'innalzamento al trono del giovane Re Gioas* [A143] may well be an extract from the azione sacra *Atalia* and is a scene of genuine dramatic proportions. The piece was sung, as parts show, in Bergamo and possibly also in Bologna. We know that the "Athaliah' theme had been with Mayr long before the performance in Naples in 1822 [see Zavadini 11]. An aria for Goiarda, the High Priest, after a brief recitative section, evolves into a terzetto and a majestic finale in which the chorus plays a full part. This cantata was clearly prepared for a local academia for the story is one of the Bible's favorite tales (set to music, among others, by Handel) and raises one of Mayr's prime themes for discussion - the destructive energies of the fallen, and negative feminity, the role of Lilith, the counterpart of Eve.

c) I suggest that the cantatas for solo voice, expressly commissioned, could well be represented by the following five (for which modern editions exist):

- *Il Poltrone* [A181] cantata buffa for bass (2cl. 2cr, str)

- *La solitudine* [A170] cantata for tenor with violin obbligato (fl, ob, 2cl, 2cr, trbne, str)

- *Annibale* [A161] cantata n.1 'pel Seminario' for tenor (cl obbl, fl, ob, cl, 2cr, tr,str)

- *Annibale a Cartago* [A175] cantata n.2 'pel Seminario' for bass (cr obbl, fl, ob, cl, 2cr, str. [2fg, tr optional])

- *La moglie di Asdrubale* [A154] cantata n.3 'pel Seminario' for soprano with violin obbligato (fl, ob, cl, 2cr, str)

The first and third of these consist of instrumentally accompanied recitative and an aria, the others of instrumentally accompanied recitatives and two arias. *Il Poltrone* may have been composed for a singer who commissioned others in a buffo mould. For example *Il bagno di vino* [A179], *Il poeta immaginario* [A180], *Il secolo d'oro* [A182] and *Rodomonte* [A183] and performed quite likely at a gathering of Mayr's Unione Filarmonica. Could this have been Mayr's friend William Balfe who sung at such gatherings and was known at the time as a fine interpreter of buffo roles rather than as a distinguished composer? *Il Poltrone*, it will be noted, calls for small instrumental forces. Basing one's search on an orchestra consisting of 2cl (or 2ob), 2cr and strings, it may be possible to build up a whole collection of cantatas, perhaps originally destined for a particular ensemble of friends. *La solitudine* is for a slightly bigger orchestra and is an especially attractive piece. This violin obbligato line, as with *La moglie di Asdrubale* suggests that Capuzzi may have originally led the orchestra. It is comparable to *Alla tomba dell'amico* [A164] which is another cantata worthy of revival and may have been composed for the same singer and ensemble of players. In the cantata *La moglie di Asdrubale* the violin takes a major role. The influence of Mayr is rewardingly illustrated in the soprano plus obbligato violin *Qui sedes* of Donizetti's *Messa di Gloria e Credo* of 1837. It is quite extraordinary that such profound lyrical expression stems from Tartini, though Capuzzi, to Mayr, and then on to Donizetti.

The three cantatas of 1816 on Carthaginian themes 'pel Seminario' should be considered as a group even if the first for tenor is the weakest of the three, clearly composed for a tenor of limited resources. As ever with Mayr, the pieces are fascinating for their instrumentation, the scores are full of details which only become apparent on frequent rehearing and are remote from the extrovert, immediately accessible sound of Rossini. Mayr's world is hidden and has to be studied for its treasures to be released
Note the dramatic details of the two recitatives in *Annibale a Cartago*, how each phrase is 'painted' by the accompaniments, for example 'E non ti basta un mar di sangue ostile...?' and 'Ma tu mi scacci' etc. Note also how the last of the two bass arias ['Sono un'esule infelice...'] does not have a conventional operatic ending but explores the madness of exile with the repetition of the words 'Godrò sempre il bel diletto/Di vederti a palpitar'. Surely Napoleon's removal to the Isle of St Helena cannot have been far from Mayr's thoughts?