

BACH AT SEVEN SERIES 2018-2019

Narratives in Music

Program 1 - October 10, 2018 at 7 PM

S. Clement's Church, 2013 Appletree Street, Philadelphia, PA 19103

Giacomo Carissimi

JONAS

During the second half of the 17th century, there were trends toward the secularization of the religious oratorio. Evidence of this lies in its regular performance outside church halls in courts and public theaters. Whether religious or secular, the theme of an oratorio is meant to be weighty. It could include such topics as Creation, the life of Jesus, or the career of a classical hero or biblical prophet.

Other changes eventually took place as well, possibly because most composers of oratorios were also popular composers of operas. They began to publish the librettos of their oratorios as they did for their operas. Strong emphasis was soon placed on arias while the use of the choir diminished. Female singers became regularly employed, and replaced the male narrator with the use of recitatives. By the mid-17th century, two types had developed: the *Oratorio Volgare* in Italian and the *Oratorio Latino* which was performed in two sections, separated by a sermon. The music of both resembles that of contemporary operas and chamber cantatas. *Oratorio Latino* first developed at the Oratorio del Santissimo Crocifisso, related to the church of San Marcello al Corso in Rome. The most significant composer of this form was Giacomo Carissimi, whose *Jephte* is regarded as the first masterpiece of the genre.

Giacomo Carissimi (baptized April 18, 1605, died January 12, 1674) was an Italian composer, one of the most celebrated masters of the early Baroque, or, more accurately, the Roman school of music. He was born in Marini, near Rome. His exact birthdate is not known, but it probably was in 1604 or 1605. Of his early life almost nothing is known, and there are no actual pictures of him. Son of a barrel maker, Giacomo became chapel-master at Assisi at the age of 20. In 1628, he obtained the same position at the church of St. Apollinaris belonging to the Collegium Germanicum in Rome, which he held till his death. In 1637 he was ordained a priest.

Carissimi is also noted as one of the first composers of oratorios. He sought to create an alternative "spiritual entertainment" to the theater and thus invented the Oratorio, which was viewed with a great suspicion. *Jonas* is one of his most dramatic and riveting works, based on the story of Jonah and the Whale and the conversion of the Ninevites.

Jephte and *Jonas* are important as definitely establishing the form of oratorio unaccompanied by dramatic action, which maintained its hold for two hundred years. Carissimi was active at the time when secular music was about to usurp the dominance of sacred music in Italy; the change was decisive, and permanent. When he began composing, the influence of the previous generations of Roman composers was still heavy (for instance, the style of Palestrina); and when his career came to a close, the operatic forms, as well as the instrumental secular forms, were predominant.

The Oratorio genre has survived through the Baroque into Victorian England to the present day. The Oratorio has the power to vividly represent stories in our mind's eye in which scenery, props and acting would only hinder.

Most recently, Choral Arts Philadelphia performed Carissimi's *Jephte* and *Jonas* on April 28, 2012 at St. Marks' Episcopal Church in Philadelphia.