

## Program notes

*La Resurrezione* HWV47 is a sacred oratorio by George Frideric Handel, set to a libretto by Carlo Sigismondo Capece (1652–1728). It was first performed on Easter Sunday of 1708 in Rome, under the patronage of the Marchese Francesco Maria Ruspoli (1672–1731), the most important of Handel's Italian patrons. Ruspoli was one of the leading lights of the Arcadia, the literary society founded in 1690.

The work details the events between – and during – Good Friday and Easter Sunday, with the action carried forward in recitative, and the exploration of character and delineation of mood taking place in the arias. The characters of the liturgical drama that appear in the oratorio are Lucifer, an Angel, Mary Magdalene, St John the Evangelist and St Mary Cleophas.

A large orchestra was employed for the occasion, consisting of a string orchestra plus one viola da gamba, two trumpets, one trombone, four oboes, a theorbo/archlute as well as recorders and transverse flutes. The role of Mary Magdalene was sung at the first performance by the female soprano Margherita Durastanti. However, the participation of female singers was prohibited by Papal edict, and the Pope went to the length of admonishing Ruspoli for permitting Durastanti to take part. In the second performance her role was sung by a castrato. The only details given concerning this individual are that he was called 'Pippo', and was in the service to the former Queen Casimira of Poland. Durastanti later sang in Handel's *Agrippina* (Venice) and spent almost all of her career in singing Handel's music. The violins at the first performance of *La Resurrezione* were led by the composer and violinist Arcangelo Corelli.

Tonight's concert presents the first performance in modern times of *La Resurrezione* in the low Roman pitch with transposing winds; *Contrasto Armonico* is, indeed, the first orchestra which nowadays explores this field and applies it to a well-known work by Handel. In the early 18th century, the pitch commonly used in Rome was very low compared to other European cities. The high number of castrati that were singing there may be one reason, but so too may be the appreciation of the city's cognoscenti for the low pitch. Michael Praetorius reported in 1618 that: 'The lower pitch of which we have spoken (a minor third down) is used a great deal in different Catholic chapels in Germany, and in Italy. Some Italians quite rightly take no pleasure in high-pitched singing: they maintain that it is devoid of any beauty, that the text cannot be clearly understood, and that the singers have to chirp, squawk and warble at the tops of their voices, for all the world like hedge-sparrows.'

Since Praetorius's reference was at A+1 (about A = 465 Hz), the low level would have been A-2 (about A=392Hz). He was thus referring to the Roman pitch. *La Resurrezione* was composed almost a century later, but Praetorius's report shows that the Roman taste for low pitch remained unchanged over time.

Due to a Papal ban, the performance of double reed instruments in church was forbidden. The nobility, however, found a way around this lack of 'native' oboists by inviting virtuosi from Venice and Milan. One of the most prestigious oboists was Ignazio Rion, who possibly took part in *La Resurrezione* in 1708 (the *Sig. Ignazio* stated in the payment list of the 1708 performance could also be Ignazio Sieber, another Venetian virtuoso who was in Rome at that time).

The pitch difference between Rome (A = c.385Hz) and Venice (A = c.430Hz) was considerable, amounting to a whole tone. In a 1752 essay Quantz states: 'In Rome at one time wind instruments were banned from the church. Whether the unpleasant high pitch or the manner of playing the instruments was the reason for this, I must leave undecided. For although the Roman pitch was low, and advantageous for the oboe, the oboists then played on instruments that were a whole tone higher, so that they were obliged to transpose. And these high instruments produced an effect like that of German shawms against the others that were tuned low.'

Thus, almost all music composed around this time in Rome was performed with oboes playing a whole tone higher (in the Venetian pitch) than the violins. For example, if a piece was written in D major for the strings, the oboes were playing it in C major. This is also confirmed by the orchestral material of *Carmelite Vespers* by Handel (1707) and other music by Caldara and Alessandro Scarlatti (the oratorio *Il Giardino di Rose*,

performed at Ruspoli palace in 1707) where the oboes were notated a whole tone lower ('un ton più basso'). Although the original parts of *La Resurrezione* are lost, its exceptionally high range and implausible keys for the oboe suggest that their parts were notated a tone lower.

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## CONTRASTO ARMONICO

**Contrasto Armonico** is an early music orchestra which specialises in music composed in the Italian style. It was founded in 2004 by Marta Semkiw and Marco Vitale, and established with the support of De Brauw Blackstone Westbroek. The founding of the orchestra was celebrated in Delft with two productions of operas by Handel: *Siroe, Re di Persia* and *Lotario*.

Contrasto Armonico aims to push back the boundaries of early music performance practice, taking the ideas of historically informed performance as work in progress: a philosophy rather than a consolidated tradition. It is formed of professional musicians from all over the world who share the same ideals and feelings regarding performance practice, using copies of original instruments, historical pitches and transpositions, aiming to present the original style and aesthetic of the work under consideration as closely as possible.

In 2007 Contrasto Armonico has started recording project of Handel vocal works in Italian language for the Dutch label Brilliant Classics: the first recording of the serenata *Aci, Galatea e Polifemo* was released last year to critical acclaim. The second CD of the orchestra is the oratorio *La Resurrezione*, which has been recently released, performed with early Roman pitch and wind transposition.

Contrasto Armonico opened a new era for the performance of Italian music by Handel played in Roman pitch. In Handel's year 2009 Contrasto Armonico and Brilliant Classics will release the first volume of the Complete Cantatas by Handel: the first phase of this project will include Roman cantatas, both for instrumental accompaniment as well as basso continuo, therefore recorded in a=392 Hz.

[www.contrastoarmonico.eu](http://www.contrastoarmonico.eu)

## MARCO VITALE

Marco Vitale was born in Palermo (Italy) in 1980.

He studied piano, organ, harpsichord and composition at Palermo's "V. Bellini" Conservatory, where he took the piano diploma in 2001 and the organ diploma in 2002 with full marks and "Cum Laude". He took part in many international master-classes where he developed his skills and taste for baroque music.

His concert life began at age of 15, with performances as a soloist and chamber musician. Since then his musical activity brought him to play, as a soloist and continuo player around Europe and Middle East.

In 2002 he moved to The Netherlands where he studied at the Royal Conservatoire in The Hague. He took a Bachelor's degree in organ with Jos van der Kooy and a Master in Early Music (harpsichord) with Ton Koopman and Tini Mathot.

Marco Vitale is the co-founder and musical director of "Contrasto Armonico", baroque orchestra specialized in the performance of music in Italian style and baroque operas, using original instruments, historical pitches and performance practices.

In addition to performing he also gives master-classes throughout Europe and teaches at the Royal Conservatory in The Hague.