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VALENTINA ANZANI, *Antonio Bernacchi (1685-1756), virtuoso e maestro di canto bolognese*, Ph.D. diss., Università di Bologna, 2018.

Abstract

The historical and artistic importance of Antonio Bernacchi (Bologna, 21 June 1685 - Bologna, 16 March 1756) has so far escaped thorough investigation, unlike colleagues such as Melani, Senesino, Farinelli, Carestini, Pacchierotti, Velluti and others. Bernacchi was a leading figure in the musical world of the early eighteenth century, but even though he achieved international fame, he was nevertheless deeply rooted in Bolognese cultural life. A pupil of Francesco Antonio Pistocchi, he became a successful virtuoso on the stages of Italy, Germany and England. Later in his career he gathered around him a large group of pupils – many of whom became famous in the following generation – and was *princeps* of the renowned and influent Accademia Filarmonica of Bologna for two consecutive terms.

Compared to what musicological or local history studies have to date highlighted about Bernacchi, this dissertation sheds new light in particular on surviving archival documents (Italian, German, English and French), most of which are reproduced in complete form for the first time. Thanks to this new documentation numerous errors have been corrected and new biographical aspects – human, psychological, social, artistic – have been revealed. Unpublished contemporary sources such as legal acts, financial documents, wills and parish registers – besides tracing in detail Bernacchi's biography and his vocal, artistic and professional profile – outline with some precision the most intimate aspects of the everyday life of a man who of necessity had to negotiate his delicate physical condition in order to adapt successfully to his social context. Also new is a perspective in which a performing artist quite unexpectedly emerges as a “pater familias”, with a group of devotees who in some sense compensated for the fact that he could not marry or have children. A final important aspect of the thesis is a new definition of “Bolognese singing school”, here emerging as a phenomenon that is too often mythologized and misrepresented.

Rather than being limited to mere biographical narrative, this study collects archival and other material in an attempt to reconstruct the social environment in which Bernacchi lived and worked: the humble origins; the dynamic Italian theatres of the early eighteenth century in which the greatest musicians of the time paraded every evening; the Bavarian court whose ceremonial practice was studded with musical events; a capital city (London) that was mad for Italian opera, and that found in the castrati idols to be worshipped; the Accademia Filarmonica di Bologna with its internal intrigues; the profoundly Catholic public morality that nevertheless accepted different human realities, “extended” family ideas (cohabitation between the teacher and his pupils), forms of private education not necessarily managed and controlled by ecclesiastical rules.

Particularly relevant is the reconstruction and the analysis of the relationship that Bernacchi developed with his most intimate pupils, his dear friend and colleague Antonia Merighi and their respective families. With them he created mutual bonds of affective and economic support that could be compared to those of a real family. By these means, Bernacchi managed to implement practices otherwise impossible for him, such as *ante litteram* civil union, adoption and the transfer of assets, giving him a sort of family genealogy that supplied an artistic, human and patrimonial lineage. His case thus offers an

example of how, despite the compromises that castrati had to make within society, they were nevertheless able to find their own identity and self-determination.

A close study of the career of Bernacchi also offers valuable new perspectives on the so-called “Bolognese singing school”, described in literature as a tradition with peculiar stylistic traits that are routinely opposed to the Neapolitan one. A comparison between first-hand accounts of Bernacchi’s vocal qualities and those of later biographers (unusually numerous and voluble in his case) clearly shows how the latter tended to construct a mythical profile of the singer. Polemicists such as Stefano Arteaga and Vincenzo Martinelli, dedicated critics of the castrati as a professional group, harshly criticised his manner of singing, suggesting that his elaborate style brought ruin to the art; but writers such as Giambattista Mancini, Giovenale Sacchi, Charles Burney and Enrico Panzacchi fashioned Bernacchi as the last exponent of an “ancient style” of singing praised by Pierfrancesco Tosi in his famous singing treatise. The final section of the dissertation enquires into why Bernacchi stimulated such a large body of inaccurate or incorrect information. One important reason lay in the fact that, as well as being a professional singer, he was one of the most famous singing teachers of his generation. His teaching made him seem responsible for generating others of his kind, thus amplifying any criticism or praise directed towards him. The fact that he occupied prestigious positions in his home town of Bologna, and that he had personal and epistolary connections with illustrious contemporaries, only increased his authority. A person of his qualities was, in other words, particularly well-suited to becoming an “exemplar”, and the main reason for the manipulation of his figure was to feed the fame of the “Bolognese singing school”, which can now be demonstrated as nothing more than a controversial rhetorical concept used to give credit to the teaching tradition in Bologna.