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Arts in Review:

Revivals of Cavalli and Soler in the Syracuse University School of Music

George Nugent



George Nugent's field of specialization is music of the Renaissance. He received his Ph.D. from Princeton and studied in Italy for two years under a Fulbright scholarship. Publications include a continuing series of Renaissance choral music for the American Institute of Musicology and articles for a forthcoming edition of *Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians*. Since 1973 Professor Nugent has been a member of the Syracuse University Fine Arts Department.

Antonio Soler: *Two concerts of vocal and instrumental music honoring the two-hundred-fiftieth anniversary of the composer's birth, performed in Crouse College Auditorium, Syracuse University, November 10-11, 1979. Produced and directed by Frederick Marvin.*

Francesco Cavalli: *Two performances of La Calisto, an opera by Cavalli and Giovanni Faustini, performed in Crouse College Auditorium, Syracuse University, February 8-9, 1980. Vocal and instrumental ensembles under the direction of David Ross.*

Don't blush at not recognizing the names: Cavalli and Soler get a brief mention in the standard history books, but they are still rarely encountered in today's opera houses and concert halls. Happily the revival of both composers by the Syracuse University School of Music turned out to be outstanding events in the 1979-80 season and gave local listeners occasion to ponder anew the mysterious laws governing survival or oblivion in the world of music. Is genius enough, or does it take a throw of good luck too? Don't ideals and tastes alter sharply from one generation to the next, sweeping away the old for the new; or can something subtle and intangible counter that process? These are hard questions to cope with, unable as we are to summon fate to the witness stand. But for a start we can check into the historical record and then let the music speak for itself, hoping in the end to form at least a better perception of what Cavalli and Soler offered to their own times and to the enduring currents of music.

Cavalli was born Pier Francesco Caletti Bruni in Crema, northern Italy, in 1602, son of the music director at the local cathedral. On showing precocious musical talent, the lad won the patronage of a discerning Venetian noble named Federigo

Cavalli, who took him off to Venice in 1616 and helped to launch his career. (In gratitude, the composer later adopted his benefactor's name.) Venice was then the music capital of Europe, proving grounds for the most exciting experiments with the interaction of voices and instruments and destined soon to take the lead in the newly discovered medium of musical theater—an enterprise decisive both for Cavalli and the history of music. Aspiring musicians flocking to Venice from all over Europe found a worthy model in the great Claudio Monteverdi (1567-1643), music director of St. Mark's Cathedral and the first outstanding master in the history of dramatic music. Young Cavalli gained a foothold in the St. Mark's establishment within a year from arrival and gradually rose through the ranks to the post of director in 1668.

Although Cavalli had to be in close contact with Monteverdi for a quarter of a century, surprisingly few details of their relationship survive. That the younger man learned much from the older can safely be assumed; but what their music also suggests is that Monteverdi eventually borrowed some of Cavalli's ideas, a case of mutually profitable exchange that calls to mind the later parallel of Haydn and Mozart.

Providing music for worship at St. Mark's was a continuing obligation for Monteverdi and Cavalli, but both men possessed an extraordinary affinity for the revolutionary new theatrical style *dramma per musica* (as the first practitioners called it), or opera, as it came to be known—and both left their strongest marks in contributions to the theater. Monteverdi, for his part, brought fledgling opera along from a curious agglomeration of old and new styles in *Orfeo*, his first effort of 1607, to the musically unified and dramatically compelling mode of expression in his last stage work, *L'incoronazione di Poppea* of 1642. Several lost works intervened between these early and late pieces, and what they might tell us about the stages of Monteverdi's growth disappeared with them. Very probably, however, the composer lent careful ear to the first stage successes of Cavalli prior to producing his two final operas and proceeded to make some of their attractive techniques his own.

Two years after Venice opened the first public opera house, Cavalli introduced his first opera, *Le nozze di Teti e di Peleo* of 1639. Over the next thirty years he produced forty more operas, chiefly in Venice, the best known perhaps being *Giasone* of 1649. So great was Cavalli's success that he was soon recognized as the foremost dramatic composer in Europe. Thus, in the clamor for the fresh and the new, only a few years after Monteverdi's passing, Cavalli's fame totally eclipsed the memory of his master. Wealthy and honored, he remained the pride of Venice until his death in 1676.

Our best approach to early opera is logically enough the study of Monteverdi and Cavalli. On leafing through their output, one first notices the limited gamut of dramatic themes: Orpheus, Jason, Ulysses, Romulus and Remus, Apollo and Daphne, Dido, Xerxes, Julius Caesar, Nero, and so on—not a single contemporary story but instead subjects drawn exclusively from

mythology or ancient history. The repertory still strongly reflects the original aims of opera's creators in Florence at the close of the sixteenth century: to recreate Greek drama as they imagined it had been performed by the ancients; and evidently audiences found new luster in the familiar old tales as transformed by the powers of music. On the musical end of things, the solo voice dominates proceedings with minimal intervention by the chorus. Instrumental participation (typically a small string orchestra) keeps normally to a supportive role. Monteverdi declared that the music must play servant to the words, and that creed lies at the heart of his and Cavalli's masterly use of the new declamatory style called recitative: actors intone the text in an impassioned way, suggesting the freedom and spontaneity of speech. No one since their time ever captured that art so well. Reflective, lyrical moments, on the other hand, called for appealing melody cast in structurally controlled arias and ensemble pieces. To underscore emotions of the text, singers introduced effective embellishments, some of them (like the repeated-note trillo) uncomfortable for their counterparts today. In Monteverdi and Cavalli, the two styles of recitative and aria intermingle naturally and flexibly, achieving a balance between word and music that the next generation overturned in favor of greater musical autonomy and virtuoso display.

The premiere of Cavalli's tragicomedy *La Calisto* took place in the Sant' Appollinare Theater of Venice in the autumn of 1651. As expected, the plot recycles classical mythology, but shrewd comic touches induce an earthy, irreverent treatment. The conflict basically turns on two love interests pairing gods with mortals, familiar risky business taken here none too seriously. Jove deserts Olympus in chase of Calisto, lovely young votary of Diana, goddess of the hunt. Diana, eternally sworn to chastity, nonetheless reciprocates the young shepherd Endymion's love, scorning the ardent attentions of Pan, god of the shepherds. In order to seduce Calisto, Jove temporarily assumes the guise of Diana (one singer enacts both the real and the counterfeit Diana), thus creating vexing mixups for all concerned. Eventually Juno, Jove's outraged wife, descends to settle the score. By curtain fall Calisto is first turned into a bear cub by Juno's spite, then transformed into the Ursa Minor constellation by a still-admiring Jove. Diana and Endymion exit dreamily pledging eternal but chaste love. Against those main themes, librettist Giovanni Faustini weaves a boisterous counterpoint of low-comedy intrigue involving nymphs and satyrs, shepherds and Furies.

Seventeenth-century opera poses stiff challenges to the modern performer. The early manner of presentation cannot be duplicated with any certainty today; and even if it could, it might well put off a modern audience. The surviving musical scores amount to little more than shorthand reductions of the composer's ideas, usually only slender skeletons of melody and bass needing much fleshing out by knowledgeable, sympathetic

performers. Such scores require not only the improvised embellishments expected of singers but even, in many cases, the choice of instruments and the scoring of their parts.

Crouse College's *Calisto* was organized and conducted by David Ross, a young instructor with a zeal for early music. He chose the realization that British conductor Raymond Leppard prepared for the 1970 Glyndebourne Festival production (subsequently recorded by Argo). In the interests of ensuring maximum dramatic effectiveness and aural allure, Leppard resorted to substantial alteration and elaboration of the original score, taking the bold approach now thought necessary to "sell" early opera to the modern audience. Scholars cavil at Leppard's rearrangement of arias into duets, addition of melodic lines here and there, restructuring of scenes, insertion of music from other Cavalli operas, and the like; and, in truth, his 1970 *Calisto* offers a far richer, more sensuous musical experience than Cavalli's could have in 1651. On the other hand, Leppard's realization escapes the garish coarseness of, say, the late Leopold Stokowski's popularizations of Bach; and I strongly suspect that Cavalli himself, sensitive as he was to the public pulse, would find more to please than to dismay in Leppard's transformation of his score.

David Ross assembled a young, spirited troupe from both within and without university ranks, and his sure leadership belied the fact that *Calisto* marked his debut as an operatic conductor. His small orchestra of strings, harp, lutes, guitar, chamber organ, and harpsichords afforded surprising richness and color, and all his singers displayed captivating freshness and verve—even in some cases noteworthy dramatic skill. Given the general excellence of the singing, it will suffice here to mention only the principals. Among the women, Melanie Brunet made a sweet-voiced Calisto, Gayle Ross a regal Juno, and Kristin Bregenzer a splendidly satisfying Diana, ably distinguishing her dual persona by gesture and tone. As often happens in youthful productions, the men were a trifle outmatched by the women. Baritone Eero Eskelinen approached Jove with rich voice but stiff demeanor. In the transvestite part of the aging nymph Linfea (the transvestite interpretation was not specified by Cavalli but was sanctioned by the liberties of the time), Trent Zorn scored all the right comic punches without stooping to fraternity-house chorus-line routines. As Endymion, Jay Hersher may have overplayed the posture of anguish, but his clear countertenor and strong musicality proved great assets. Happy to say, he mercifully avoided the coos and clucks that make so many countertenors sound like laureates of an Anna Russell master class. For the rest, Dennis Pucci was a crafty Mercury and Jerry Thomas a sonorous Pan; the chorus accomplished its modest tasks with energy and discipline.

Ross scrapped the original text in favor of a decent English translation by Geoffrey Dunn that was, however, only intermittently understood in the recesses of the hall; but when words were lost, music and action came handily to the rescue. Constrained to a shoestring budget, Jay Hersher, who also

functioned as stage director, resourcefully conjured up much out of little: simple costumes provided by the singers (a few of the let's-raid-the-attic variety), no scenery at all, a reduced vocabulary of stylized gestures, and clever utilization of stage, balcony, and linking staircases. Economy with taste governed every aspect of the performance, and the outcome was a genuine triumph of manner over means.

After passing some three hours in Cavalli's company, one easily perceives the special qualities that kept him at the top in seventeenth-century Europe and are now bringing him renewed acclaim. Musicians can only admire the convincing, well-paced harmonies and skillful manipulation of rhythms. Dancelike patterns abound, alternating with rhapsodic recitative, the fierce tremolo of Monteverdian *stile concitato*, and the stately tread of transitional passages. Overall vitality and directness characterize Cavalli's approach, rather than subtlety or refinement. His sense of drama is acute, his musical craft solid and assured. The music is indeed a marvel as it responds flexibly to every shift in the drama, always with a simplest of means—such as the tense repetition of a single, striking figure to portray continuing torment. In the passionate outpouring of recitative, Cavalli closely rivals Monteverdi, if not quite extracting the final measure of poignancy that the older man can achieve. Extended lyrical moments, on the other hand, come oftener than in Monteverdi, and in the numerous short arias, Cavalli really shines: usually set in lilting triple meter, the melody of the arias unfolds with irresistible ease and naturalness.

To sample the range of Cavalli's expression, the newcomer should experience the coloratura rage of Juno's first encounter with Calisto; the soothing refrain with which the satyrs calm frustrated Pan; the blunt banter between pert Satirino and reluctant old maid Linfea; Endymion's haunting *Cor mio, che vuoi tu* (*My heart, what do you long for?*); the haggish snap of the Furies as they set upon Calisto towards the close; and the sensuous languor of Jove and Calisto's parting phrases. A musical and dramatic gift of this order comes along but rarely, and February's *Calisto* certainly supports the judgment of the history books in proclaiming Cavalli the true heir to Monteverdi in the realm of opera.

Was *Calisto* worth the trouble? Well, the Syracuse audience showed up with polite curiosity that soon gave over to obvious enjoyment. The basic dramatic issues, shorn of mythological trappings, reflect constant elements of the human condition that, assisted by comic touches in the plot, make *Calisto* as accessible as *Oklahoma*. Perhaps, too, the modern viewer, like the seventeenth-century audience, gets a boost from catching the gods with their pants down.

In any case, the resounding success of February's production should stand as encouragement to all concerned. The School of Music is relatively small and must operate on a comparatively modest budget. On both accounts it cannot sustain a full-fledged opera division. Yet small-scaled works such as *Calisto* offer the ideal starting point for viable college opera theater. This

abundant repertory, at once unhackneyed, worthy and suitable for young singers, can supply the basic training and experience sorely needed by students who aspire to the fullest potential of a singing career. May *Calisto's* star lead the way!

To reach our second neglected figure, we shift in time, place, and mood from the worldly sophistication of seventeenth-century Venice to the tight insular decorum of eighteenth-century Spain under the rule of the French house of Bourbon. Antonio Soler was born in a Catalonian hill town in 1729 and took his first musical training at the prestigious monastery school of Montserrat. By the age of fifteen, he was appointed choirmaster at the cathedral of Lerida. On taking vows as a monk in the Order of Saint Jerome in 1752, he took up permanent residence in El Escorial monastery near Madrid, serving there as organist, choirmaster, and music teacher to members of the royal family. Soler was a prolific composer of instrumental and vocal works, but none of his music was published in his lifetime, and it fell into oblivion soon after his death in 1783. Fortunately, the long neglect was finally broken in our century, and Spain in particular now shows great interest in reclaiming her most noteworthy native musician of the eighteenth century. Modern editions of the keyboard works and some of the concerted vocal pieces are being issued, and organists, harpsichordists, and pianists pay increasing attention to his sonatas in concerts and recordings.

Like Cavalli, Soler owed much to an outstanding teacher. The brilliant Neapolitan harpsichordist Domenico Scarlatti (1685-1757), himself the son of an important operatic composer, spent the most productive years of his life in Portugal and Spain, where he found a devoted pupil in Maria Barbara, the music-loving Portuguese princess who became queen of Spain. Scarlatti expressed his unique genius for the keyboard in a series of over five hundred short sonatas in which scholars see the foundations of modern keyboard technique. Equally impressive as his technical inventiveness is his astonishing assimilation of elements from Spanish popular tradition—sounds from the streets of Madrid, cries of muleteers, the strut of gypsy dancers, and the strumming of folk guitarists. Some writers credit him with introducing nationalistic materials into art music, by example encouraging Spanish musicians to exploit folk idiom. (In similar fashion, another Italian, Lully, earlier helped to shape a distinctively French national style.)

Between 1752 and 1757 Scarlatti passed a part of each year with the royal household at the Escorial, and the strong impression the visiting Italian made on the resident Spaniard is clearly registered in the keyboard sonatas Soler began to turn out in such abundance (around two hundred, by a recent estimate). Enough of the sonatas have been recovered to permit identification of their characteristic features. Like Scarlatti's, most are in single-movement form in two well-defined sections, with strongly directed tonal organization in a manner foretelling the great sonata-allegro forms of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven.

Texture can be austere, spare, confined sometimes to single notes in each hand, or exhaustingly virtuosic, with cascading scales in both hands, tricky repeated tones, or perilous leaps and hand crossings. Soler's sonatas, like Scarlatti's, also project bold, attention-getting harmonic relationships, an innovation Soler defended at some length in his treatise *Llave de la modulaci3n*, published in 1762.

Frederick Marvin, professor of piano in the School of Music, has been an enthusiastic partisan of Soler's music for over three decades now, both in numerous performances and recordings since the late 1940s and more recently as continuing editor for a published series of works newly rescued from dusty archives. His celebration of Soler last November was on a grander scale and considerably more comprehensive than a similar program given here in April 1970, and the two evenings provided a broad sampling of Soler's output, from keyboard sonatas and chamber music to villancicos and religious works. Complementing Soler's music was a special symposium of scholarly papers on the culture of eighteenth-century Spain enterprisingly arranged by Professor Peter Goldman of Foreign Languages and Literature. Distinguished visitors Paul Ilie (Michigan), Javier Herrero (Virginia), and John Dowling (Georgia) treated the themes of foreign influence, repressive religious and social attitudes, the place of music in the Spanish theater, and the emerging recognition of national elements in the Spanish arts. Their thoughts and interactions gave listeners a valuable vantage point for the proper reception of Soler's music.

The first concert was entirely instrumental music, including nine solo sonatas and fandango for keyboard and the third of a series of keyboard quintets published by Robert Gerhard in 1933. All amply displayed range and diversity of expression. Soler the adventurous virtuoso came to the fore in several sonatas (nos. 16 and 18 in Marvin's listing); strong echoes of Scarlatti's grandest manner in no. 37; guitar and folkish elements in nos. 3 and 38; spare, lean writing in nos. 4 and 12. Quirkiest of all is the fandango, pitting a stubbornly repeated left-hand broken-chord figure against endless romps in the right hand until an abrupt, inconclusive chord, like a brusque pluck of guitar strings, cuts the dizzying dance short. The most ambitious offering of the evening was the G major quintet for strings and keyboard in five movements, alternating fast tempi with slow. This and the others in the series elude easy categorization, but they probably help to place Soler in historical perspective better than the sonatas can, for all their charm and vivacity.

Soler lived during a transitional period between the extravagant high baroque of Bach and Handel and the oncoming classicism of Haydn and Mozart. (A close contemporary, Haydn outlived Soler but seems to have escaped his notice.) The transitional phase saw new movements arise, variously identified as rococo, *style galant*, and *empfindsamer Stil*: all embody a reaction against the complexities of the preceding period, offering in their place a combination of grace, charm, and simplicity. The immediate appeal of such music is at the

same time its own peril: laying most of its charms on the surface, it leaves little beneath to plumb on repeated hearings. But in meeting the new taste for pretty frills and easy diversion, eighteenth-century composers were also, perhaps unconsciously, working out new conceptions of structure based on primary tonal relationships manipulated over long time spans, and new ways of dramatizing those relationships with contrasting materials. Soler, especially in this quintet, is very much a spokesman of the *style galant*. Not a thick sound or a rough gesture enters the score; the keyboard is an active partner without lording it over the ensemble; textures are transparently light, rhythms buoyant, tunes and harmonies simple but pleasantly fussed up with trills. Steering safe of the deeper waters, this is clearly music to assist an aristocratic way of life, a genre that finds a more sophisticated cousin in Haydn's divertimenti. The deft, sympathetic performance by Professor Marvin and the Chester Quartet captured all the elegance in the score.

A different profile of Soler came into view with the second evening's concert for voices with instruments, several works heard for the first time since the eighteenth century. Choral parts were ably taken by the University Chorale directed by Burton Harbison and St. Paul's Cathedral Choir of Buffalo under Anthony Furnivall. Only one liturgical text figured in the program—the Marian antiphon *Salve regina* so often set by masters of the Renaissance. Soler divides the text into five short sections scored for solo soprano, strings, continuo, and chorus. Like most eighteenth-century religious music, the *Salve* engages a style closer to theater than to church, with angular, exploratory lines for the soprano (artfully negotiated by the experienced Jean Hakes), considerable expressive power in melody and harmony, and a firm bias to somber minor tonality. A tendency to easy repetition, predictability of phrase, and foreshortened endings might be associated with a hasty commission or may simply betray the composer's youth: he was only twenty-four when he wrote it.

All the other pieces belong to the uniquely Spanish genre of villancico, a species akin to the dramatic type of baroque cantata. To me, these pieces find Soler in his most congenial medium—free, spontaneous, and unpretentious, lending responsive ear to local popular taste rather than aristocratic convention. Probably created for monastic diversions, most of Soler's villancicos have religious associations, many relating to the festive celebration of Christmas. *Congregante y festeró*, for example, sketches the haggling between parishioner and choirmaster over the stipend for Christmas masses; and in *De un maestro di capilla* a director bullies his wayward choristers to learn their music in time for Christmas (zestfully enacted by tenor Brian McGovern). Among the better than one hundred other villancicos by Soler are such titles as *The Prussian*, *The Henhouse*, *The Doctor*, and *Two Student Beggars*. Here Soler works the native soil with most gratifying results, often naively

amusing, always captivating. In a given villancico, the chorus may serve as direct participant or commentator or both. Often the chorus belts out refrains in unison, underscoring ties to folk style, while more demanding parts go to soloists. The mix of elements is fascinating, here recalling a country dance, there a folk hymn; the village band may come charging through, only to be elbowed out by a pedantic fugue lesson; and, of course, aria and recitative are always on ready call from the opera house.

The evening's final villancico was also the most ambitious, scored for two choruses and instrumental ensemble, two solo sopranos, and flute. *En piélagos inmensos (In Fathomless Depths)* reports, with homespun phrases of popular piety, the fearful confusion of fallen man prior to his redemption; it goes on to salute the birth of Jesus and ends with a militant call to defend the faith. Given the rambling text, Soler understandably produces uneven music. In any case, the performing units seem layered according to function without the rich interplay among parts one finds, for example, earlier in Bach or Handel, or later in Mozart. The recitative too lacks the compelling quality of those masters' examples. As in the *Salve*, sections often seem to end shortbreathed. On the credit side, however, are vigorous rhythm, colorful touches of scoring, and pungent popular elements of language and melody. The massed forces dealt splendidly with the piece's requirements, and flautist John Oberbrunner was an equal partner to sopranos Hakes and Margaret Chalker in graceful phrasing and sweetness of tone.

It is still far too soon to attempt an overview of Soler with only a modest part of his total output currently available for study, but already we can be sure that he is much more than merely an adept disciple of Scarlatti. His music speaks in clear, forthright tones of the *style galant*, and his exploitation of popular Spanish elements reveals an especially attractive dimension of his talent, perhaps hitherto underplayed in present-day efforts to cast him as a universal figure. In any case, the villancicos suggest that the true measure of his lasting importance to Spanish music has yet to be taken.

Syracuse's champions of Cavalli and Soler unquestionably reflect great credit on themselves and on the School of Music which supported their efforts. How fitting that such events should be fostered in an academic environment where learning values traditionally outweigh crass commercial interests! Of course, quality musical education has always gone beyond mere teaching how to read and play the notes. It also explains convincingly the tricky questions of form and style embracing an increasingly wide stretch of accessible repertory. Naturally, the greater a student's exposure to all stages of our complex musical evolution, the deeper his or her understanding and interpretive skills will be. Even the ultraconservative faction on campus, fleeing the roar of marching bands and the hustle of teacher-training and music-industry programs, must raise its sights. On the strong witness of the Cavalli and Soler revivals, one can cheerfully reaffirm that music is indeed alive and well at Syracuse.