

PROGRAM NOTES & SYNOPSIS

For many years the lurid end to Alessandro Stradella's brief life was all the world knew about this talented composer. Assassinated at forty-two for reasons that remain murky, Stradella quickly became one of music history's most sensational figures: he was said to have survived an earlier attempt at murder because his music charmed the goons sent to kill him. Though picaresque fantasy, this legend has proved persistent and was only disproved recently. In the end, Stradella's lack of judgment was his undoing. In the seventeenth century musicians could get away with embezzling money from the church, but they were not supposed to have affairs with the mistresses of powerful men.

Born in 1639 into a family of minor aristocrats south of Rome, Stradella took up residence in the Eternal City by the mid 1650s, where he gained entrée into various noble households. A gifted composer and fluent courtier, he nevertheless avoided permanent service with any of Rome's illustrious families, preferring to collect independent commissions for works in all the major genres of his day, from sonatas to operas. His striking and original compositional voice found many admirers, including the Colonna and Chigi families plus Queen Christina of Sweden, whose sumptuous Roman exile fostered many musical careers.

Stradella's musical achievements are many and varied. He pioneered the *concerto grosso* texture, in which a "concertino" group of soloists (typically two violins plus cello) are set against the "ripieno," a larger ensemble of strings. His similarly inventive vocal textures include highly virtuosic stretches of recitative and arias with concerto grosso-style scoring. With over three hundred works to his credit, including six operas and six oratorios, Stradella was among the most productive composers of his generation.

In 1675 his good connections brought a highly desirable commission from the Confraternity of the Florentines in Rome, for an oratorio about St John the Baptist, patron saint of Florence and thus a crucial figure for this organization. Set to a libretto by one of the confraternity's favorites, poet and canon Ansaldo Ansaldo, *San Giovanni Battista* treats the Biblical story of John the Baptist, Herod, and Herod's daughter Salome. As told in the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, John the Baptist comes to Herod to demand that this Roman King of Judea renounce the wife he took from his own brother, since that marriage violated Jewish law. Herodias and her daughter Salome have other ideas, however; they convince Herod to imprison John the Baptist and then to kill him.

Salome proves the decisive character in both Ansaldi's libretto and Oscar Wilde's play (the basis for Richard Strauss's opera). Seeking to ingratiate herself at Herod's court, Salome dances lasciviously before him on his birthday. Half-mad with desire for his step-daughter, Herod rashly promises whatever she wants as payment. At her mother's urging, Salome asks for the Baptist's head on a platter.

The Biblical accounts both end here, with no further word about Herod or Salome. In Strauss's *Salome*, by contrast, the title character herself is the next victim; she dies on Herod's orders. Stradella's oratorio concludes enigmatically, with a delighted Salome and an anguished Herod questioning their respective motivations on an unresolved dominant chord.

San Giovanni Battista reflects its time and place in its scoring for five principal singers, who probably also functioned as the "chorus of disciples," plus a string orchestra divided into a small concertino group of two violins and continuo against the larger ensemble. The work found admirers far and wide during the eighteenth century especially, from the Italian theorist Padre Martini to George Frideric Handel, who owned a copy. This performance is the oratorio's Texas premiere.

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