

## Boston Early Music Festival Chamber Ensemble play Agostino Steffani (2017)

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-Agostino Steffani : *Tengo per infallibile (duo pour soprano et basse)* -Francesco Corbetta : *Sinfonia à due pour guitare et basse continue* -Agostino Steffani : *Quanto care al cor (duo pour deux sopranos)* -Girolamo Frescobaldi : *Chaconne pour harpe et basse continue* -Agostino Steffani : *E perchè non m'uccidete (duo pour soprano et ténor)* -Georg Friedrich Haendel : *Trois leçons en sol mineur - Sonate Larghetto HWV 580 / Capriccio HWV 483 / Menuet HWV 434/4* -Agostino Steffani : *Su, ferisci, alato arciero (duo pour deux sopranos)* -Agostino Steffani : *Occhi belli (duo pour soprano et ténor)* -Giovanni Girolamo Kapsberger : *Toccata pour théorbe* -Agostino Steffani : *Gelosia (duo pour soprano et ténor)* -Georg Friedrich Haendel : *Col partir la bella clori pour viole de gambe* -Agostino Steffani : *Fulminate (duo pour soprano et basse)* / Boston Early Music Festival Instrumental Ensemble: Paul O'Dette - archlute & Baroque guitar Stephen Stubbs - theorbo & Baroque guitar Maxine Eilander - Baroque harp Michael Sponseller - harpsichord Erin Headley - viola da gamba Boston Early Music Festival Vocal Ensemble: Amanda Forsythe - soprano Emöke Barath - soprano Colin Balzer - tenor Christian Immler - bass-baritone 5. February 2017, Sendesaal Bremen

Co-artistic directors Stephen Stubbs and Paul O'dette unite an all-star roster of musicians from the Boston Early Music Festival—the largest and among the most important festivals of its kind. An ensemble of six instrumentalists and four singers performs an enchanting selection from the chamber duets of Agostino Steffani punctuated with instrumental interludes. Considered his crowning achievements by his contemporaries—as well as the composer himself—Steffani's duets became a model of contrapuntal writing for later composers, including George Frideric Handel and Johann Sebastian Bach. --- follytheater.org

The chamber duets of Agostino Steffani (1653-1728) represent music well worthy of being

exhumed not only for study and historical evaluation, but for the more practical and pleasant purposes of performance. These compositions for two voices and basso continuo, of which there are approximately one hundred complete duets extant, were written probably between the years 1689 and 1716, although it is impossible to affix any certain dates to them. They were generally written for persons attached to the court at Hanover to be used for personal performance, or commissioned as gifts for the courtier or lady in favour at the moment. Thus some of the duets are prefixed with initials, but the identity of the recipients of these charming gifts is unfortunately not ascertainable.

The duets, some of them in autograph, some in the handwriting of Steffani's secretary and copyist, Gregorio Piva, others in unidentifiable handwriting, are preserved in libraries and museums in England and on the continent. The Electoral court at Hanover, which was the scene of Steffani's greatest achievements both politically and musically, at this time was far from being a small provincial center. It was known throughout Europe for its brilliance and gaiety stimulated and encouraged by the wit and taste of the Electress Sophie (whose paternal grandfather was James 1) and her children, and the Elector, Ernst August, whose love of music and the theater accounted for the cosmopolitan aspect of this small German court. Italian musicians, led by the famous violinist Farinelli together with French musicians comprised the major part of the court orchestra, and the very few German players attached to it received far less in salary than did these imported performers.

French comedies were presented by companies of French actors, and during the carnival season, a month of masques, entertainments, comedies, operas, balls, and all manner of frivolity after the Italian manner, Hanover was thronged with visitors not only from other German principalities but from neighboring countries as well. Steffani, arriving here around 1688, soon distinguished himself with his operas written expressly for Ernst August and performed in the beautiful new theater which the latter's councillors had built for him in order to discourage his protracted sojourns in Italy. But greater than the acclaim won for Steffani by his operas was the reputation and recognition gained through his chamber duets. Handel openly admitted his indebtedness to Steffani for providing him with such inimitable models whose beauty he could match but not surpass. Reinhard Keiser, a rival opera composer based in Hamburg, was said to have "lain in wait" for each new Steffani duet in order to study its effects. Such present historians as Paul H. Lang assert that Bach himself took the Steffani compositions as patterns for his cantata duets, as well as for the duets in the B minor mass.

Johann Mattheson, a contemporary musician, critic, and commentator from whose writings we learn a great deal about the then current scene, considered Steffani unsurpassed in this field of composition. Charles Burney, born two years before Steffani died and therefore close enough to him to report first-hand the continuing influence and popularity of the duets, recorded that they were dispersed and sung throughout all of Europe.

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Sir John Hawkins in his General History of the Science and Practice of Music published in 1776, included one of the duets and giving in the biographical notes on Steffani an expression of the esteem with which the latter was regarded in his time. Hawkins also gives what he records as a verbatim account of Steffani's first meeting with Handel, as reported by Handel, in what are presumably the latter's own words. ---Thesis (M.A.), Boston University

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