

ORATORIO

RTHK Radio 4
10:00 – 11:00

Programme 3
Sunday 20 May 2007

MUSIC: De Almeida --- La Giuditta : Introduction CD 18780 – 01 # 1

KANE: v.o. at 0:20 (> c. 1:02)

Hello, and welcome to 'Oratorio'. You're listening to the orchestral introduction to an early 18th century oratorio, by a largely unknown Portuguese composer, on a subject that's been a favourite one for oratorio (and operas, too) since before Vivaldi's time..... and he too wrote one. The subject? the biblical story of Judith, the heroine who saved Israel from the besieging Assyrian army by murdering its general, Holofernes. Our oratorio this week is 'La Giuditta' by Francisco Antonio de Almeida. It was written and first performed in Rome, in 1726, in the oratory of the Fathers of the Chiesa Nuova, and is sung in Italian.

[105]

v.o. at 2:33

Not much is known about the *composer* of this music, Francisco Antonio de Almeida. Only a handful of his works have survived, mostly religious: some motets and music for Christmas pageants. Besides *this* oratorio, he's known to've written *another* one too. As a promising young musician, he was one of a group sent to study in Rome by Portugal's King John 5th, who was keen to encourage an artistic and cultural revival in the country. Rome at that time, around the 1720s, was still a lively, vibrant cosmopolitan centre of music, attracting musicians from all over Europe. Handel had been there some 14 years before. The same year he wrote "Giuditta", De Almeida returned to Portugal and there put on the first Italian opera to be sung in the country, his *own* first opera. There had already been numerous oratorios on the Judith story in the previous 100 years, and a libretto by famous poet and playwright Metastasio was used by many. De Almeida used a *different*, anonymous libretto, but otherwise followed all the then 'traditional' conventions in his version. Thus, there are just 4 characters, the main protagonists of the story:

Judith herself who's a beautiful widow, Holofernes the Assyrian general, Achior commander of the Ammonites, allies of Holofernes, and Uzziah ruler of Betulia a stronghold barring the way into Judea. Also, the work is in two parts, about an hour each, thus allowing for a customary *sermon* in between. In each part there are ten arias, following dialogue recitatives; and a concluding duet each time. For this programme today, however, we've had to 'lose' rather more of the music than you'll actually hear [275]

MUSIC: De Almeida -- La Giuditta disc 1 # 1 continue to end 5:48

KANE: The story of Judith and Holofernes comes from the second half of the biblical book called "Judith". It's curious how a story with such a violent and melodramatic climax inspired so many oratorios over a number of centuries right up to the 20th (and the elder Scarlatti wrote *two* of them). Not only composers, but painters also took to the theme; there must be dozens and dozens of 'Judiths with the head of Holofernes' in galleries and collections around the world. The first few numbers in De Almeida's "La Giuditta" (Judith, which means the Jewish woman) have the four main characters setting the scene: first, we hear Judith herself speaking of her painful widowhood, and the aggravated pain of seeing her fatherland oppressed and besieged: but then she recalls her hope and trust in God. Next, Holofernes is quizzing Achior about the proud stubborn people who're standing in his way, resisting his siege: and Achior tells him about Israel's God. Then there's Uzziah, lamenting the suffering and cries of his people.

171

**MUSIC: De Almeida – La Giuditta disc 1 ## 2 – 6 stop at 0:35
Continue at 4:10**

14:42

KANE: Judith now challenges Uzziah for his fearfulness about defending Betulia, and *he* asks her what makes her heart so joyful. Holofernes meanwhile steps up pressure on the besieged town: there's no more water and the people suffer greatly. At length, Uzziah decides that if within five days the Lord does not answer their prayers, he will surrender the town. 'Restrain your rash words', Judith says to him::

'You are not begging God for mercy but tempting Him. You may not impose a law upon almighty God.' And then she announces *her* plan to go at dawn to the enemy's camp, claiming the Lord inspired her to this deed. Uzziah thinks it a senseless decision, but eventually gives his blessing. 119

MUSIC: De Almeida -- La Giuditta disc 1 ## 12, 14 8:38

KANE: Part two of *La Giuditta* by Francisco Antonio de Almeida begins with Judith's prayer to God to avenge the suffering of His people: how *can* He endure the threats and mockery of their enemy? In one of the oratorio's most dramatic arias, she sings of heaven arming itself against the heathen, "a quivering lightning flash descending to avenge so many insults". 62

MUSIC: De Almeida -- La Giuditta disc 2 # 1 4:59

KANE: Judith walks towards the enemy camp, while Holofernes gloats over the coming destruction of Betulia and rouses his men to battle. Then he sees the beautiful Judith approaching, she introduces herself, he is smitten by her beauty, and she begins to entice his interest in her. He offers her whatever she may want, invites her to his table, and she asks to be allowed stay in his camp. 68

**MUSIC: De Almeida --- La Giuditta disc 2 # 4 stop at 0:48
>> # 5 3:27**

KANE: "There lies, overcome by sleep, drunk and deprived of his senses, the evil and lascivious monster". So sings Judith at the climax of the drama. She asks God's strength, seizes a sword, and "Lo, he is dead, the foe has fallen... behold his head severed from the loathsome trunk". She gives Holofernes' head to her maid to bring back to the beseiged city; and its ruler Uzziah rejoices that the torment is over. 73

MUSIC: De Almeida -- La Giuditta disc 2 ## 7 - 8 6:39

KANE: Judith returns joyfully to the city, shows the head of Holofernes, tells

Uzziah and Achior it was God who strengthened her hand to the deed.
The oratorio ends with Judith and Uzziah proclaiming in a second duet
that the joy their hearts feel comes from heaven. In the recording
we've been listening to, Judith is sung by soprano Lena Lootens,
Holofernes by tenor Martyn Hill, Uzziah by counter-tenor Axel Köhler,
and Achior by soprano Francesca Congiu, accompanied by Concerto
Köln directed by Rene Jacobs 84

MUSIC: De Almeida -- La Giuditta disc 2 # 11 to 0:49

>> continue at 4:01 3:18

Music: 47:31

Words 577 (exclud. V.o.)