

BALDASSARE GALUPPI (1706–1785)

Thousands of English-speaking students are only familiar with this composer through a poem by Robert Browning entitled “A Toccata of Galuppi’s.” Few of these students had an inkling of who he was or had ever heard a note of his music. This is in keeping with the poem in which the toccata stands as a symbol of a vanished world. Although he was famous throughout his life and died a very rich man, soon after his death he was almost entirely forgotten until Browning resurrected his name (and memory) in his 1855 poem. He belonged to a generation of composers that included Christoph Willibald Gluck, Domenico Scarlatti, and CPE Bach, whose works were emblematic of the prevailing galant style that developed in Europe throughout the 18th century. In his early career he made a modest success in opera seria (serious opera), but from the 1740s, together with the playwright and librettist Carlo Goldoni, he became famous throughout Europe for his opera buffa (comic opera) in the new dramma giocoso (playful drama) style. To the succeeding generation of composers he became known as “the father of comic opera,” although some of his mature opera seria were also widely popular.



BALDASSARE GALUPPI was born on the island of Burano in the Venetian Lagoon on October 18, 1706, and from as early as age 22 was known as “Il Buranello,” a nickname which even appears in the signature on his music manuscripts, “*Baldassare Galuppi, detto ‘Buranello’* (Baldassare Galuppi, called ‘Buranello’).” His father was a barber, who also played the violin in theater orchestras, and is believed to have been his son’s first music teacher. He entered the world of professional music at age 16, when his *La Fede nell’Incostanza, Ossia gli Amici Rivali* (*Faith in Fickleness, or the Rival Friends*) was staged in 1722 at opera houses in Chioggia and Vicenza. It was certainly a brave move by a precocious young musician, the type of story that might inspire other composers and artists. Unfortunately, it wasn’t very inspiring for teenager Galuppi. The audience booted everything except the early curtain that was lowered before the audience started a riot! Galuppi sought advice and comfort

from a fellow Venetian composer, Benedetto Marcello, who scolded him for daring to mount an opera at such a young age. This probably would have been enough to make anyone quit right away, but Marcello also offered to pay for a composition teacher. The only thing he

required was a vow of creative silence. So, Galuppi didn't write anything else until his studies were complete. His teacher was Antonio Lotti, the chief organist at San Marco Basilica in Venice, who trained Galuppi in composition and harpsichord.

From 1726 to 1728, Galuppi was harpsichordist at the Teatro della Pergola in Florence. On his return to Venice in 1728, he produced a second *opera seria*, *Gl'odi Delusi dal Sangue* (*The Ways I am Disappointed by Blood*), written in collaboration with a writer friend of his and also a Lotti pupil, Giovanni Battista Pescetti. It was well received at its first performance at the Teatro San Angelo. The collaborators followed it with another opera, a *favola pastorale* (pastoral fable), *Dorinda*, in 1729. This, too, was modestly successful, and Galuppi began to receive commissions for operas and oratorios. (For the rest of his life, he averaged about two operas per year, and they were played in some of Italy's major theaters).

Not much is known of Galuppi's life during the years from 1729 until 1740, except that he continued to compose and present operas and other musical pieces. In 1740, he was appointed *direttore della musica* (director of music) at the *Ospedale dei Mendicanti* (Mendicant Hospital) in Venice, which had a conservatory associated with it. Here his duties ranged from teaching and conducting to composing liturgical music and oratorios. In his first year of service at the Mendicanti, he composed 31 works: 16 motets, 13 settings of the *Salve Regina*, and two Psalm settings. During the 11 years he was at the conservatory, he brought the quality of the school up to par with other such schools in Venice. (Prior to his tenure there, the conservatory had not been taken very seriously). Although he became internationally known as an operatic composer, he also maintained a steady output of sacred music throughout his career.



In 1741 the Earl of Middlesex (*left*) invited Galuppi to work in London for two years as operatic director of his theater, the King's Theater in the Haymarket. He was to replace his friend, Pescetti. He petitioned the Mendicanti authorities for a leave of absence, to which they agreed. Of the 11 operas under his direction in London, at least four are known to have been his own compositions: *Penelope*, *Scipione a Cartagine* (*Scipio in Carthage*), *Sirbace*, and *Enrico*. (Even rival composer Handel attended several of these productions). Galuppi also attracted attention as a keyboard virtuoso and composer of other works while in London. His contemporary, the English musicologist Charles Burney, wrote that "Galuppi had had more influence on English music than any other Italian composer." However, in Burney's view Galuppi's skills were still immature during this period in London: "He now copied the hasty, light and flimsy style which reigned in Italy at this time, and which Handel's solidity and science had taught the English to despise."

Upon his return to Venice in May 1743, Galuppi resumed his employment with the Mendicanti, and continued to compose *opera seria* for the opera houses, sometimes in partnership with the librettist Pietro Metastasio. But he also took note of the cutting-edge operatic innovation (*opera buffa*) that was becoming fashionable in Naples and Rome and was beginning to become popular in Venice. Galuppi adapted three full-length comic operas for Venetian audiences in 1744, and the following year composed one of his own, *La Forza d'Amore (The Force of Love)*, which was only a mild success.

In 1748, in addition to the Mendicanti position, he was appointed *maestro della cappella ducale* (master of the Doge's chapel), basically the vice-maestro position, at San Marco Basilica. At both the Mendicanti and San Marco, Galuppi was able to draw upon his operatic experience to communicate an optimistic and lively spiritualism in his sacred compositions. Sacred music also allowed him to write for choruses and larger orchestras than was typically found in the theater.



Galuppi returned once again to *opera buffa* in 1749 and was fortunate to begin collaborating with Carlo Goldoni (*left*) as his librettist. Although Goldoni was an established and eminent playwright by the time he began working with Galuppi, he was happy for his libretti to be subservient to the music, something which Metastasio had fought. Goldoni was as warm in his regard for Galuppi as Metastasio had been cold. Their first collaboration was *L'Arcadia in Brenta*, followed by four more collaborative works within a year. These were enormously popular at home and abroad. However, under the pressure of holding both the *cappella ducale* and the Mendicanti positions, in addition to the demand for new *opera buffa* and *opera seria*, Galuppi had to resign his post at the Mendicanti in 1751. By the middle of the 1750s he was, in the words of musicologist Dale Monson, “the most popular opera composer anywhere.”

For the next ten years, Galuppi remained in Venice, with occasional short trips elsewhere for commissions and premieres, producing a series of secular and religious works. His operas, serious or comic, were in demand across Europe. Of the British premiere of [*Il Filosofo di Campagna \(The Country Philosopher\)*](#) in 1761 a critic wrote, “This burletta surpassed in musical merit all the comic operas that were performed in England [prior to it].” (This opera became one of his most popular *opera buffa*.)

In April 1762 Galuppi was promoted to the head music position, *maestro di cappella* (master of the chapel) of San Marco, considered the top musical job in Venice; in July he was also appointed *maestro di coro* (choir master) at the *Ospedale degli Incurabili* (Hospital of the Incurables). At San Marco, he set about reforming the choir; he persuaded the Basilica authorities,

the *Procuratori* (Procurators), to be more flexible in payments to singers, allowing him to attract more performers with first-rate voices.

Early in 1764 Catherine the Great of Russia (*right*) made it known through diplomatic channels that she wanted Galuppi to come to Saint Petersburg as her court composer and conductor. There were prolonged negotiations between Russia and the Venetian authorities before the Senate of Venice agreed to release Galuppi for a three-year engagement at the Russian court. The contract required him to “compose and produce operas, ballets and cantatas for ceremonial banquets,” at a salary of 4,000 rubles; it also included accommodations and a carriage for his use. Galuppi was reluctant, but Venetian officials assured him that his post and salary as *maestro di cappella* at San Marco were secure until 1768 as long as he supplied a *Gloria* and a *Credo* for San Marco’s Christmas Mass each year.



In June 1764 the Senate granted Galuppi formal leave to go. He resigned his post at the *Incurabili*, made provision for his wife and daughters (who were to remain in Venice, while his son travelled with him), and set off for Russia.

He made detours along the way, visiting CPE Bach in Berlin and encountering Giacomo Casanova by chance outside Riga, before arriving in Saint Petersburg just over a year later (on September 22, 1765).

For Catherine’s court, Galuppi composed new works, both operatic and liturgical, and revived and revised many others. He wrote two operas there, *Il Re Pastore* (*The Shepherd King*, 1766) and *Ifigenia in Tauride* (*Iphigenia in Tauride*, 1768), and two cantatas, *La Virtù Liberata* (*Virtue Released*, 1765) and *La Pace tra la Virtù e la Bellezza* (*Peace between Virtue and Beauty*, 1766), the latter to words by Metastasio. In addition to the work for which he had been contracted, Galuppi gave weekly harpsichord recitals and sometimes conducted orchestral concerts.

He was a hard taskmaster to the Russian court orchestra in order to improve standards, but he was from the beginning enormously impressed by the court choir. He is reported to have exclaimed: “I’d never heard such a magnificent choir in Italy.” Galuppi took pride in his prestigious appointments; the title page of his 1766 Christmas Mass for San Marco describes him as the “First Master and Director of all the Music for Her Imperial Majesty the Empress of all

the Russias, etc. etc. and First Master of the Chapel of San Marco in Venice.” In 1768, as had been agreed with the Venetian Senate, he returned to Venice, detouring again on his homeward journey, this time to visit Johann Adolph Hasse in Vienna.

When he returned to Venice, Galuppi resumed his duties at San Marco and successfully applied for reappointment at the *Incurabili*, holding this position until 1776, when financial constraints obliged all the hospitals to cut back their musical activities. In his later years he wrote more sacred than secular music. His output continued to be considerable in both quantity and quality. The contemporary musicologist, Burney, wrote in 1771: “It seems as if the genius of Signor Galuppi, like that of Titian, became more animated by age. He cannot now be less than seventy years old, and yet it is generally allowed here that his last operas and his last compositions for the Church abound with more spirit, taste, and fancy, than those of any other period of his life.”

Galuppi told Burney that his definition of good music was: “*vaghezza**, *chiarezza*, *e buona modulazione* (grace or charm*, clearness, and good modulation).” (**Archaic usage*.) Burney also commented on Galuppi’s prodigious workload that in addition to his duties at San Marco and the *Incurabili*, “he has a hundred sequins a year as domestic organist to the family of Gritti, and is organist of another church, of which I have forgotten the name.”

The last opera by Galuppi was *La Serva per Amore* (*The Servant for Love*) that premiered in October 1773. In May 1782 he conducted concerts to mark a papal visit to Venice by Pope Pius VI. Thereafter, he continued to compose, despite declining health. His last known completed work is the 1784 Christmas Mass for San Marco.

Baldassare Galuppi died on January 3, 1785 after a two-month illness. He was buried from the church of San Vitale. He was commemorated by a requiem Mass that was celebrated in the church of Santo Stefano at which the actors of the Teatro San Benedetto sang. The sacred event was paid for by professional musicians who had worked with Galuppi over the years. He was extremely popular and very wealthy at the time of his death.

CONCLUSION

Galuppi’s musical output was both varied and prodigious. He composed 109 operas, both *opera seria* and *opera buffa*, making him the sixth most prolific opera composer in history. Galuppi’s sacred music oeuvre comprises at least 284 works, including 52 Masses and movements pertaining to the Mass, 73 settings of Psalms and music for the divine office, eight motets, and 26 uncategorized works, including hymns, versetti, a setting of *St. John’s*

Passion for women's voices, and a *Baccanale* for the Church of San Rocco. In addition, Galuppi was much admired for his compositions for keyboard; he had well over 110 sonatas, toccatas, divertimenti and etudes.

Galuppi was one of the best-known and most respected figures in the Venetian musical establishment. Of course yesterday's star is often today's footnote. With the exception of a few operas (and Robert Browning's 1855 poem "A Toccata of Galuppi's"), Galuppi's music was mostly forgotten after his death. Contributing to this neglect problem was Napoleon's invasion of Venice in 1797, which resulted in his manuscripts being scattered around Western Europe, and in many cases, destroyed or lost. However, since the late 20th century, his works are encountering a minor renaissance, thanks to period instrument ensembles and European festivals, including a yearly festival in Venice. Also, many of his works have been recorded, thus bringing them to a new generation of aficionados.

In a sign of trust and gratitude to its great ancestor, the Island of Burano dedicated the main square to Baldassare Galuppi, called the Piazza Baldassare Galuppi, erecting a monument in his honor, made by another Buranello, the sculptor Remigio Barbaro.



Adapted by James J. Boitano, PhD from:

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A TOCCATA OF GALUPPI'S
by Robert Browning

I

Oh Galuppi, Baldassaro, this is very sad to find!
I can hardly misconceive you; it would prove me deaf and blind;
But although I take your meaning, 'tis with such a heavy mind!

II

Here you come with your old music, and here's all the good it brings.
What, they lived once thus at Venice where the merchants were the kings,
Where Saint Mark's is, where the Doges used to wed the sea with rings?

III

Ay, because the sea's the street there; and 'tis arched by . . . what you call
. . . Shylock's bridge with houses on it, where they kept the carnival:
I was never out of England—it's as if I saw it all.

IV

Did young people take their pleasure when the sea was warm in May?
Balls and masks begun at midnight, burning ever to mid-day,
When they made up fresh adventures for the morrow, do you say?

V

Was a lady such a lady, cheeks so round and lips so red,—
On her neck the small face buoyant, like a bell-flower on its bed,
O'er the breast's superb abundance where a man might base his head?

VI

Well, and it was graceful of them—they'd break talk off and afford
—She, to bite her mask's black velvet—he, to finger on his sword,
While you sat and played Toccatas, stately at the clavichord?

VII

What? Those lesser thirds so plaintive, sixths diminished, sigh on sigh,
Told them something? Those suspensions, those solutions—"Must we die?"
Those commiserating sevenths—"Life might last! we can but try!"

VIII

“Were you happy?” —“Yes.”—“And are you still as happy?”—“Yes. And you?”
—“Then, more kisses!”—“Did I stop them, when a million seemed so few?”
Hark, the dominant’s persistence till it must be answered to!

IX

So, an octave struck the answer. Oh, they praised you, I dare say!
“Brave Galuppi! that was music! good alike at grave and gay!
“I can always leave off talking when I hear a master play!”

X

Then they left you for their pleasure: till in due time, one by one,
Some with lives that came to nothing, some with deeds as well undone,
Death stepped tacitly and took them where they never see the sun.

XI

But when I sit down to reason, think to take my stand nor swerve,
While I triumph o’er a secret wrung from nature’s close reserve,
In you come with your cold music till I creep thro’ every nerve.

XII

Yes, you, like a ghostly cricket, creaking where a house was burned:
“Dust and ashes, dead and done with, Venice spent what Venice earned.
“The soul, doubtless, is immortal—where a soul can be discerned.

XIII

“Yours for instance: you know physics, something of geology,
“Mathematics are your pastime; souls shall rise in their degree;
“Butterflies may dread extinction,—you’ll not die, it cannot be!

XIV

“As for Venice and her people, merely born to bloom and drop,
“Here on earth they bore their fruitage, mirth and folly were the crop:
“What of soul was left, I wonder, when the kissing had to stop?

XV

“Dust and ashes!” So you creak it, and I want the heart to scold.
Dear dead women, with such hair, too—what’s become of all the gold
Used to hang and brush their bosoms? I feel chilly and grown old.