

Carissimi, Progenitor Of The Oratorio

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Introduction

The oratorio was a sacred, but non-liturgical dramatic composition in which a biblical subject was presented in the form of recitative, arioso, aria, ensemble, and chorus, usually with the aid of a narrator or TESTO . . . In the presentation of the action and the general dramatic spirit akin to the opera, the oratorio appealed to the imagination of the audience and dispensed in principle, though not always in practice, with the stage.¹

Some historians suggest that in February, 1600, at the Oratorio della Vallicella in Rome, a significant new dramatic musical form was born—the oratorio. Although it would not be until the middle of the seventeenth century that this term actually would be applied to a musical form, the work that made its debut at that time, Emilio de' Cavalieri's *Rappresentazione di Anima et di Corpo*, fit perfectly the definition above.² While Cavalieri's work is often cited as the first oratorio, the title of "father of the oratorio is usually given to Giacomo Carissimi, who was not born until about 1605.

Carissimi's claim to the title, "father of the oratorio," does not stem from his having invented the form, but it is justified rather in that it was he who "established it artistically."³ It was Carissimi who elevated the chorus from the secondary role assigned it by other contemporary music drama writers to the more prominent forceful role we recognize today. It was Carissimi who gave it the character by which we now perceive the concept of oratorio—dramatic choral works. Carissimi's contemporaries generally utilized the chorus in the traditional Greek manner—that of moralizing and commenting upon the action of the soloists. Carissimi broke this tradition and promoted the chorus to a functional, dramatic component of the overall action.

Certainly, Carissimi's claim to the title, "father of the oratorio," could be supported, alone, by the sheer volume of his personal output. The fact that his pupils became some of the most important oratorio writers of his period and that their works both reflected his influence and influenced future generations justifies Carissimi as "progenitor of the oratorio."

This article will focus on Carissimi's contribution to the development of the oratorio, and will reference works and genres which paved the way for the establishment of the oratorio as we know it today.

Forerunners to the Oratorio

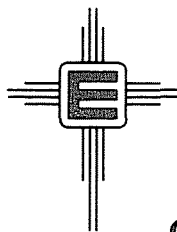
The term "oratorio" was recognized as a musical genre about the year 1660. The name oratorio was derived from the oratories, or prayer chapels, where narrative-dramatic works were performed. The earliest known documented evidence of the use of the term oratorio to designate a musical composition is found in a letter in 1640 by Pietro Della Valle (1586-1652) to a Florentine theorist Giovanni B. Doni.⁴

Before the oratorio became an established entity there were many attempts at dramatic music. The tendency to dramatize religious themes can be traced back to 13th and 14th century devotional songs called *laude*: religious songs often sung in dialogue form.⁵ Somewhat later in the 15th century, the Italian *intermezzi* and *intermedii* (musical interludes inserted between acts of a play or drama) stimulated thought to the dramatic possibilities. Additional interest followed in the late 1590's, after Orazio Vecchi composed *L'Amfiparnaso* (a setting of some fifteen related madrigals), and Peri and

Rinuccini wrote the first music drama, *Dafne*.

Through the efforts and activities of the members of the *Camerata*, there emerged a new concept of music drama. The most influential artists in the *Camerata* were Peri, Rinuccini, Galilei, Caccini, Cavalieri, and Bardi (the Count at whose home the group convened). Significant works by these musicians and poets were the already-mentioned *Dafne*, and the subsequent works *Euridice* by Peri and Rinuccini, and *Euridice* by Caccini. Even though these works were secular, they had a profound effect upon the evolution of sacred music drama. What composers learned from them was that elements of the music drama could be transplanted to sacred music and that the drama could readily relate to a sacred subject. Composers came to recognize that, though the nature of the text would be different, the same musical technique could be used in both opera and oratorio.

Some modern historians suggest that Cavalieri's *Rappresentazione di Anima et di Corpo* was indeed the first oratorio.⁶ However, since this composition was staged, complete with costumes and dancing, this author views that Cavalieri's work as more representative of what we now think of as stylized opera, not oratorio. That it stimulated thinking, even that of Carissimi, cannot be supported or



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refuted through research. Perhaps had the composer avoided the use of scenery and costumes and had he kept the dancers "in the wings," without argument, this work truly would have been the first sacred oratorio, as we think of the form today. However, it did have successors, such as Agostino Agazzari's *San Eumelio* (1606),⁷ and Stefano Landi's *I Sant' Alessio* (1632).⁸

Apel asserted that some of "the earliest oratorios were usually performed with scenery and costumes, the chief distinguishing characteristic from opera being a more contemplative, less dramatic libretto."⁹ He further noted that another characteristic is the frequent use of a *testo*.¹⁰ Bukofzer observed: "According to Spagna, the outstanding oratorio poet of the period, the presence of the *testo* formed the distinguishing characteristic between opera and oratorio."¹¹ The terms *testo* and *historicus* are sometimes used interchangeably to indicate the narrator, who verbally relates the action and introduces characters in the oratorio. Curiously, Monteverdi in 1624 used the *testo* in his *Combattimento di Tancredi e Clorinda*, a dramatic work contained in his eighth book of madrigals. (Frederick Dorian called this work a ballet,¹² and Manfred Bukofzer asserted that with this work Monteverdi established the secular oratorio.¹³) Although it was included in a book of madrigals, this work has been staged and presented as a music drama.

There eventually evolved two types of oratorio: the Italian *oratorio volgare*, and the Latin oratorio. For the purpose of this article, and since Carissimi was

most famous as a composer of Latin oratorios, this discussion will focus on that genre. (For observations on poetic and stylistic characteristics of the oratorio in the vernacular, *oratorio volgare*, refer to Smither's *A History of the Oratorio*.)¹⁴

The center of the Latin oratorio was in Rome, at S. Marcello, where Carissimi was employed after the year 1649. Andre Maugars, a contemporary French violist of Carissimi's time, observed that Marco Marazzolo (c. 1602-1662) was a highly regarded composer of eleven extant oratorios of both the Latin and Italian genres.¹⁵ Marazzolo's employment at S. Marcello preceded Carissimi's. Claude Palisca surmised that when Marazzolo's music is better known he may well be recognized as the most important composer of oratorios before Carissimi.¹⁶ Other active oratorio composers of this time were Domenico Mazzocchi (1592-1665) and his brother Virgilio (1597-1646).

A secondary influence upon *Oratorio latino* development was the type of Italian dialogue performed in Rome at the Oratorio de S. Maris in Vallicella and Oratorio de San Girolamo dell' Carita, as illustrated by those in G. F. Anerio's *Teatro armonico spirituale* (Rome, 1619).¹⁷ Pasquetti and Alaleona both agree on this influence; their research was almost exclusively confined to Rome, specifically citing the principal activity at the Oratorio del Crocifisso, where Carissimi later became active.¹⁸

Carissimi certainly was affected by what was occurring during his youth. Research and experimentation was in fashion and was spawning new ways of

thinking in many areas. The time was right for Carissimi to be born to the world of music.

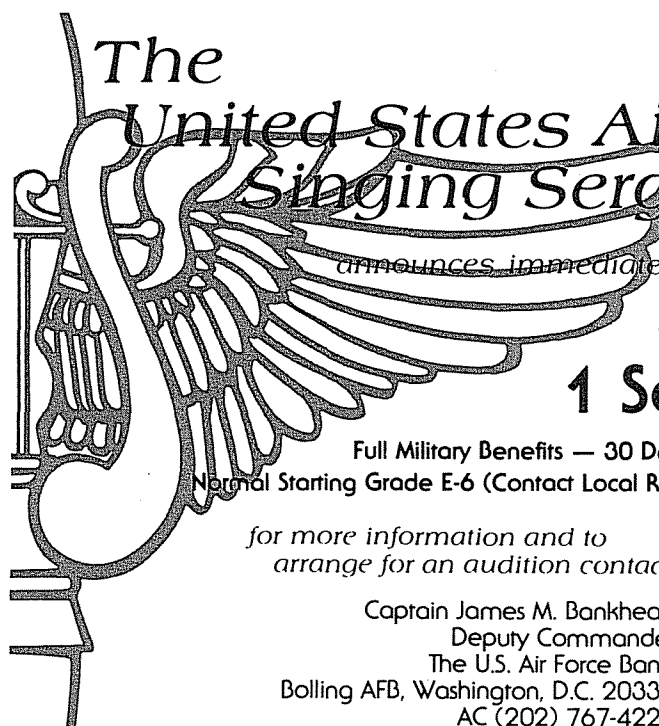
Carissimi and the Oratorio

Carissimi was born in the town of Marino, near Rome. He was baptized on April 18, 1605 (although Giuseppe Pitoni gave his birth-year as 1604.)¹⁹ Since it was most unusual in Roman Catholic families to postpone christening for so long and since the author of the *Grove's* article on Carissimi rules out Pitoni's date, there is no corroborative evidence to substantiate his claim.²⁰ Carissimi became a singer at the cathedral of Tivoli at the age of seventeen or eighteen, and became organist there from 1624-1627. From 1628 to 1629 he was maestro di cappella at the church of San Rufino at Assisi. By 1629 he began a long tenure at the German College in Rome and became maestro di cappella at Sant' Apollinare, a position he held until his death in 1674.²¹


Scholars agree that Carissimi's works are the first extant oratorios proper and, though he himself did not invent the form, he was primarily responsible for establishing it artistically. Palisca mentioned that Carissimi's extant oratorios number sixteen,—fifteen Latin and one Italian.²² Bukofzer stated: "The sixteen extant oratorios of Carissimi all belong to the Latin type, except *Daniele*, thus far unpublished, and not identical with the *oratorio volgare* of the same title that is sometimes hypothetically ascribed to him."²³ Crocker asserted that Carissimi wrote more than fifteen large works of a dramatic nature that some called *historia*.²⁴ All of these are now called oratorios.

In all of his oratorios, Carissimi used the *historicus* or *testo* to narrate the action. This is an important point. With a narrator to verbalize the action, there was no need for scenery or costumes as with opera. Thus, his use of the narrator in his oratorios is a significant concept. While some works which were not oratorios occasionally used a narrator, the use of the narrator became the prescribed ingredient in oratorio development. Carissimi is credited with first using the *historicus* in oratorio, and establishing it as the norm for later composers.²⁵

In his oratorios, Carissimi was indeed an extremely effective choral composer,



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using the chorus for great dramatic impact. Since he was a typical *bel canto* composer, he was very conscious of melodic line; he used all the devices at his command, including *concertato* effects. In *Miserunt ergo sortem*, a recitative and chorus from *Jonas*, for example, he used the *testo* in alternation with vigorous syllabic declamation in the choir to accomplish the desired dramatic impact. It is important to recognize that the use of repeated notes in the chorus was used by both Peri and Caccini in Euridices, and that this technique "generally suggests a concentration on the import of the text."²⁶

Through the efforts of Carissimi, the chorus assumed a more prominent role in the oratorio. In addition to functioning similarly to the chorus in Greek tragedy—by reflecting on the action and often clarifying the meaning of the drama, sometimes by moralizing—Carissimi enlarged its scope so that "the choral portions are very large, sometimes the bulk of the work."²⁷ The chorus sometimes functions as a narrator (as in *Transivit ergo Jephthe*, telling of the battle in *Jephthe*; and *Et Proeliabantur venti*, describing the violent sea storm in *Jonas*). Most reflecting and moralizing choruses are found at the end of a work, and all the oratorios except *Job* close with a chorus.²⁸ Crocker sug-

gested that Carissimi's larger oratorios might be thought of as "sacred concertos (for chorus and instruments) which have been given a new intensity by providing them with short recitatives to prepare, or set the stage, for the chorus to follow."²⁹

Bukofzer further commented on the importance of the chorus in the overall structure:

The main pillars of the oratorio structure are the choral sections which call sometimes for large combinations such as double chorus with soloists, as in the *Diluvium*; or even a triple chorus with orchestra, as in the *Judicium Extremum*. The chorus which sometimes serves as a moralizing spectator, but more often takes part in the action, is written in a strictly chordal and extremely rhythmic style, inspired by the fiery anapaests and the relentlessly hammering dactyls of the Latin language. The sea storm in *Jonas* and the tumultuous gathering of the elements during the Deluge in the *Diluvium* are depicted in superb rhythmic stylization. Other memorable scenes are the sudden calm of the sea after Jonah has been sacrificed to the waves, where the chorus comes in after an uncannily eloquent rest on a single sustained chord; or the battle

chorus in *Jephthe* in which alternating choral and soloistic snatches conjure up a sharply profiled picture of strife.³⁰

The harmonic style of the choruses, indeed of the oratorios in general, tends to be diatonic, with an economical use of chromaticism. Chordal style is prevalent in the choral writing of his oratorios, with imitative texture employed only incidentally. In the double and triple choruses, overlapping antiphonal style is frequently used, as in *Et proeliabantur venti* in *Jonas*. Some counterpoint is employed in final duets and choruses, "but even here the consideration of a lucid speech rhythm restrains Carissimi from showing the contrapuntal skill which he did not hesitate to apply in his church music and cantatas."³¹

The epitome of his beautiful choral writing can be exemplified in the subtle imitative style employed in the famous chorus, *Plorate filii Israel* from *Jephthe*.

In all of his music Carissimi had an affinity for triple rhythms. This is evident in his more-familiar arias from cantatas, such as *Vittoria, mio core, Nò, nò mio core*, and *Nò, nò, non si sperì*. This rhythmic preference can be found in numerous examples of his music, and Crocker observed that the excited triple-time sections are "given effective meaning by being placed at a moment of

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response to a dramatic situation."³²

It should be noted also that Carissimi was a prolific and fine composer of cantatas. He is reported to be the inventory of that form, but John Hawkins refutes that claim, stating that it was first invented by Barbara Strozzi (c. 1619-?), one of Carissimi's female contemporaries; however, Carissimi first applied the cantata to religious subjects and introduced it into the church.³³ After Luigi Rossi (c. 1598-1653), who wrote the majority of his cantatas before 1650, Carissimi was the leading vocal chamber music composer in Rome with 145 extant cantatas.³⁴

Although there are excellent vocal numbers in his cantatas, Carissimi's ultimate importance as a composer rests with the oratorio and his application of cohesive principles in its design. His native musical ability, coupled with a rare sense of what techniques best fit a dramatic given situation, established the popularity of the oratorio during his time. Unfortunately, as earlier mentioned, there are only sixteen extant examples of these. There is no way of knowing how many more oratorios Carissimi may have composed.

The dates of composition of his oratorios are unknown also, with the exception of *Jephte*, his best known work, which was composed around 1649.³⁵

Lewis asserted that *Jephtah* (English spelling) is "one of the most coherently satisfactory works of its type in the seventeenth century."³⁶ He further stated:

Notwithstanding Carissimi's fine vocal technique, the music of this epoch had more urgent need of its structural gifts, through which he exerted the most important and lasting influence on his contemporaries, and, on which, in the final analysis, the fullest achievement of his art depends.³⁷

Other impressive oratorios are: *Jonas*, the *Judicium extremum*, the *Diluvium universale*, *Judicium Salomonis*, *Historia divitis*, *Bathazar*, *Felicitas beatorum*, *Lamentatio damnatorum*, and *Historia di Abraham et Isaac*.

It should be added that Carissimi's student, Marc-Antoine Charpentier, imported the oratorio to France, and used his teacher's model for many works of his own; he used several of the same subjects in composing *Extremum Dei Jidicium*, *Sacrificium Abrahae*, and *Judicium Salomonis*. Charpentier's oratorios were all settings of Latin texts and clearly show the direct influence of Carissimi.³⁸ (Charpentier is considered an important oratorio composer, since he is the earliest-known French com-

poser of a large number of them.) Burkofzer commented: "Likewise the significant dramatic function of the chorus and the concise and lucidly profound coloraturas of the soloists were borrowed from Carissimi."³⁹ Furthermore, Carissimi is reported to have taught Alessandro Scarlatti while in Rome.⁴⁰ This pupil composed one-hundred-fifty oratorios and around six-hundred cantatas and became a leading exponent of the 18th-century Neapolitan School. Other outstanding pupils include Giovanni Paolo Colonna, Kaspar Forster, Jr.,⁴¹ Pietro Antonio (Marcantonio) Cesti, and Giovanni Maria Bononcini.⁴²

Although after his time the Latin oratorio with choruses was largely abandoned in favor of the *oratorio volgare* (i.e., oratorio with Italian words), through Carissimi's innovative, dramatic choral writing, the Baroque oratorio, which later reached its zenith through the endeavors of Handel, was firmly established. (Bukofzer strongly stated that what Handel admired in Carissimi's choral oratorio was "primarily the structural dramatic function of the chorus."⁴³ Indeed, the important role which Carissimi assigned to the chorus further differentiated the early Baroque oratorio from opera development, and served as a model for contemporary and succeeding generations of musicians to emulate.

Musicians are urged to examine the oratorios of Carissimi, a composer who excelled in this medium of expression. Without argument, he was one of the most significant figures in the history of oratorio development. Choral musicians who become familiar with the oratorio repertoire of Carissimi will discover many gems, worthy of present day performance. Reciprocally, such familiarity should instill the significance of Carissimi's contribution to oratorio.

SOURCES FOR CARISSIMI'S ORATORIO REPERTOIRE

For Urtext edition, please consult *Historie et oratori* of Carissimi, (3 volumes), Rome: Instituto Italiano Per La Storia Della Musica.

Jephte—(SSSATB choir, SATB soli, continuo)

Complete oratorio (Edited by Wolters), Mösel.

Complete oratorio (Edited by Gui), [Latin] vocal score, Universal.

Excerpts from *Jephte*

"O Weep, Ye Daughters of Israel," (*Plorate filii Israel*), (Edited by Vlasto), SSATBB, a cappella, Oxford #43.328.

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"Lament, Ye Children of Israel," (*Plorate filii Israel*), (Edited by Greyson), SSATBB, Bourne #ES34.

*Jeptha**—(SSATTB, SATB soli, continuo)

Complete oratorio, choral vocal score, Kalmus.

Complete oratorio (Edited by Wöldike, Mogens), Wilhelm Hansen Edition (with strings and piano).

Choral-Orchestral score, Kalmus.

*Jephtah**—(SSSATB choir, SATB soli, continuo)

Complete oratorio (Edited by J. Beat), [English/Latin], organ/piano, vocal score, Novello. String parts (instrumental for rental).

Complete oratorio (Edited by Pauer), [English/Latin], organ/piano, vocal choral score, H. W. Gray.

Complete oratorio (Edited by F. Continio), [English/Latin], vocal choral score, Dean.

Excerpts from *Jephtah**

Plorate filii Israel, mixed chorus, Southern.

Plorate filii Israel, SATB, Kjos #29.

Plorate filii Israel, 6-part mixed

chorus, Möselers, LB-730.

Hymnus cantemos Domino (Edited by Beveridge)—"Sing Hymns of Praise to the Host," SS, E. C. Schirmer #1968. Also contains *Cantata mecum Domino*, "Praise Ye, with me, the Lord Our God," SSA, S. solo; and *Cantemus omnes Domino*, "Let Us Praise the Lord Our God," SSSAAA.

Historia Jonae, complete oratorio (Edited by Rudelle), Möselers.

Jonah (Jonas), complete oratorio (Edited by Pilgrim), SSAATTBB, SATB soli, instruments. Oxford #46.177.

Judicium Salomonis, complete oratorio (Edited by A. Egidi). "König Salomons Urteil" [German/Latin], mixed choir (SSTB), soli, strings, organ/piano, cembalo. Vieweg. String parts, chorus parts, strings, piano. Instrumental parts available.

*Note the various spellings for *Jephte*.

FOOTNOTES

¹ Manfred F. Bukofzer, *Music in the Baroque Era* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1947), p. 123.

² There is some question whether Cavalieri's *Rappresentazione di Anima et di Corpo* should or should not be called an oratorio. Bukofzer, p. 124, suggests that it is a cross between oratorio and sacred opera, but recognizes that it has been generally recognized as an oratorio since the time of Charles Burney (d. 1814), the British music historian. Howard Smither,

however, declines to call *Rappresentazione* an oratorio because it was staged. See Howard E. Smither, *A History of the Oratorio*, Vol. 1 (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1980), pp 6-7.

³ Bukofzer, p. 125.

⁴ See Smither, pp. 174-178.

⁵ Claude V. Palisca, *Baroque Music*, edited by H. Wiley Hitchcock (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: 1968), p. 114.

⁶ Smither, p. 6. See also footnote #2.

⁷ Palisca, p. 114.

⁸ Willi Apel, ed., *Harvard Dictionary of Music*, Revised ed., (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press, 1970), p. 603.

⁹ Apel, p. 602.

¹⁰ Apel, p. 602.

¹¹ Bukofzer, p. 123.

¹² Frederick Dorian, *The History of Music in Performance* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1942), p. 66.

¹³ Bukofzer, p. 38.

¹⁴ Smither, pp. 145-206.

¹⁵ Palisca, pp. 114-115.

¹⁶ Palisca, p. 115.

¹⁷ Howard E. Smither, "The Latin Dramatic Dialogue and the Nascent Oratorio," *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, XX, No. 1 (Spring, 1967), pp. 403-404, referring to Guido Pasquetti's *L'oratorio musicale in Italia: storia critico-letteraria* (Florence, 1906) and Domenico Alaleona's *Studi su la storia dell' oratorio musicale in Italia* (Turin, 1908, later reprinted in 1945).

¹⁸ Smither, "The Latin Dramatic Dialogue and the Nascent Oratorio," pp. 404-405.

¹⁹ A. C. Lewis, "Giacomo Carissimi," *Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 5th ed., ed. by Eric Blom, Vol. 11, New York, S. Martin's Press, 1954, p. 70.

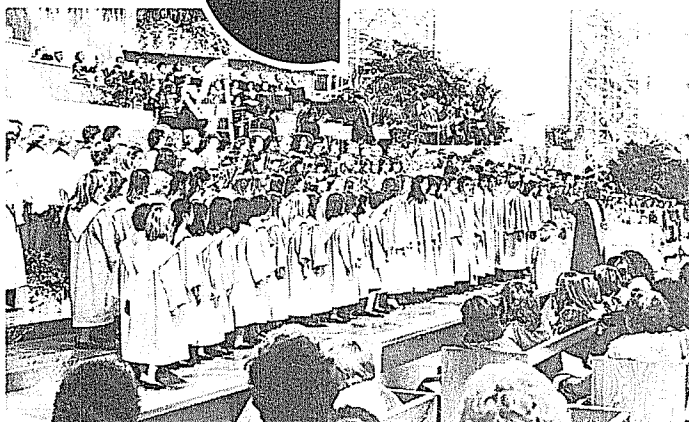
²⁰ Lewis, p. 70.

²¹ Smither, *A History of the Oratorio*, p. 216.

²² Palisca, p. 115.

²³ Bukofzer, p. 125.

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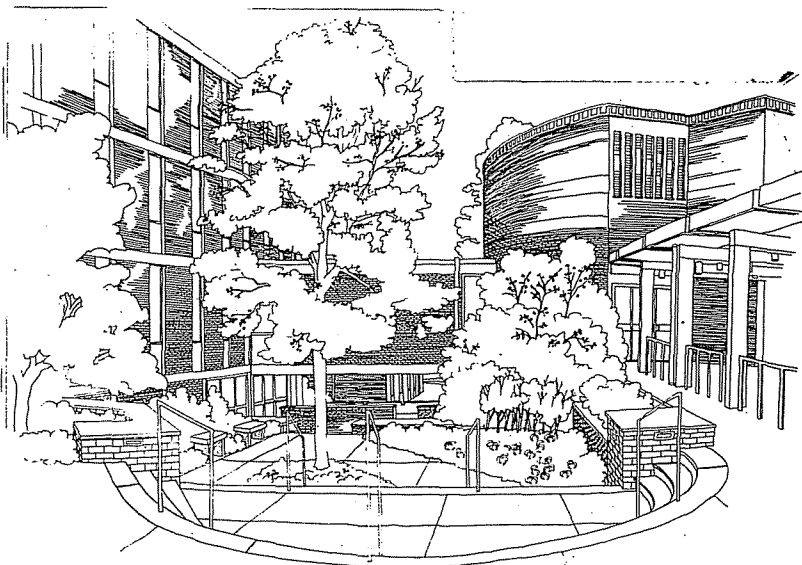
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²⁴ Richard L. Crocker, *A History of Musical Style* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966), p. 270.

²⁵ Oscar Thompson, ed., *The International Cyclopedia of Music and Musicians*, 9th ed., (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1944), pp. 1518-1519.

²⁶ Archibald T. Davison and Willi Apel, eds., *Historical Anthology of Music*, Vol II, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1968), p. 282.

²⁷ Crocker, pp. 270-271.

²⁸ Smither, *A History of the Oratorio*, p. 239.

²⁹ Crocker, p. 271.

³⁰ Bukofzer, p. 125.

³¹ Bukofzer, p. 126.

³² Crocker, p. 271.

³³ John Hawkins, *A General History of the Science and Practice of Music* (New York: Dover Publications, 1963), pp. 594-595.

³⁴ Palisca, p. 109.

³⁵ Smither, *A History of the Oratorio*, cites this date, because one of its French sources bears the date 1649, and because Kircher describes part of *Jephte* in his treatise of 1650, *Mesurgia universalis*. See Smither, p. 241. Ray Robinson, ed., *Choral Music: A Norton Historical Anthology* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978), p. 307 lists the date of *Jephte* as 1669.

³⁶ Lewis, p. 73.

³⁷ Lewis, p. 73.

³⁸ Smither, *A History of the Oratorio*, p. 420.

³⁹ Bukofzer, p. 163.

⁴⁰ Paul Henry Lang, *Music in Western Civilization* (New York: W. W. Norton, n.d.), p. 453.

⁴¹ Smither, *A History of the Oratorio*, p. 220.

⁴² According to Carol MacClintock, ed., *The Solo Song 1580-1730* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1973), p. 328.

⁴³ Bukofzer, pp. 125-126.

⁴⁴ Palisca, p. 117.

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