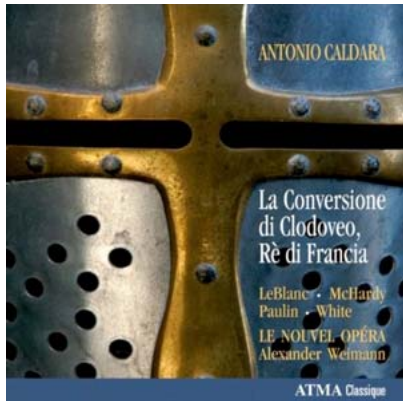


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CALDARA: *La Conversione di Clodoveo, Rè di Francia*

□ *LeBlanc, McHardy, Paulin; White; Le Nouvel Opéra, Weimann. Notes, Italian text, English and French translations. ATMA Classique ACD2 2505 (2)*



Antonio Caldara was born in 1670, and so belongs to the generation of Vivaldi and Alessandro Scarlatti. A published composer before he was twenty, he was employed by music-loving aristocrats for the rest of his long life. *La Conversione di Clodoveo*, an "oratorio volgare" – a sacred story to an Italian rather than a Latin text, suitable for performance during Lent when theaters were closed – was created in 1715, when Caldara was established in the Roman household of Prince Ruspoli. The following year, he won a post at the imperial court of Charles VI; he remained in Vienna until his death, in 1736.

Caldara's enormous body of work, mostly vocal (eighty operas; thirty-eight oratorios; twenty masses!), is little known today. This elegantly played, flawlessly cast recording should win him friends among those who love high baroque vocalism. Caldara is appealingly melodious in a Handelian style, diverse and charming in his orchestration despite very small forces. *La Conversione* is oratorio because of its sacred subject, but in no other way can the piece be distinguished from a brief opera – certainly not in the dramatic characterization or the intricacy of the vocal writing.

Clodoveo (Clovis) was the king of the Franks who converted to Christianity. His decision was ascribed in legend to his devout wife, Clotilde, and both of them became saints. So did Bishop Remigio (Rémy), who baptized them. The cast of characters is completed by a pagans' advocate – Uberto, the king's advisor. The plot is slight enough: Clovis goes to war, and rumor says he has lost the battle. All are terrified – but he returns, having changed gods in mid-fight and, therefore, won. Relief and baptisms all around. The texts, appropriately for Lenten performance, are often prayers of one sort or another, but the style of the prayer and the style of melody for it vary impressively – supplication of the fearful, certainty of God's righteousness in travail, rejoicing at having lived to convert. Melody, orchestration, ornament are all designed to suit; nothing is humdrum here.

This recording is a largely Canadian enterprise, which speaks highly of Baroque performance practice in that country. Allyson McHardy's Clodoveo smoothly relays clarion vigor and dignified repentance. Nathalie Paulin sings Clotilde in a voice that remains womanly and ravishing into its highest reaches, as when she rejoices, trumpet-like, at the news of Clovis's conversion. Suzie LeBlanc, bright star of Canadian early music, sings Remigio with well focused if slightly wiry tone and delicious trills and turns that make a point of this word or that without calling attention to the embellishment itself. Uberto is portrayed by the firmly masculine alto of Matthew White, whom New Yorkers will remember from City Opera's *Semele*. The forces of the small, sprightly Le Nouvel Opéra are led by Alexander Weimann (who also plays the harpsichord and organ continuos) with a graceful panache that almost demands the dancing Lent would have forbidden. □

JOHN YOHALEM