

# A Letter by Pietro Metastasio

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During Pietro Metastasio's years as court poet for the Habsburgs in Vienna, people of talent--real or perceived--solicited him for opinions of their work. Women as well as men wrote to him, requesting his endorsement or, more directly, his aid in ameliorating their artistic situations. As Charles Burney noted in his memoirs of Metastasio, the poet did not appear to seek the post of judge for writers and musicians of his day, yet he always answered their inquiries, and particularly those from women "with due politeness and gallantry."<sup>1</sup> In one such case, Metastasio not only responded but willingly interceded in defense of a young Roman composer, Maria Rosa Coccia, whose artistic reputation had come under attack. His correspondence reveals the amicable respect in which they held one another, even though they were never to meet.

Early editions of biographical dictionaries and encyclopedias contained entries on Coccia; she was eliminated from the revised editions of some of these reference works, however, most likely to make space for more contemporary or more prolific composers. Thanks to the recent surge of research on women composers and musicians, Coccia's life has been documented again.<sup>2</sup> Many current sources record her birth date in Rome as January 4, 1759; however, in the Latin inscription beneath her portrait in the *Elogio storico della signora Maria Rosa Coccia Romana* (Rome, 1780) written in her defense, the date appears as June 4.<sup>3</sup> The latter date is substantiated by Alberto Cametti's article on Coccia which cites records from the Church of San Lorenzo in Damaso.<sup>4</sup>

Coccia exhibited precocious musical talent and, at 13, she composed not only an oratorio, *Daniello nel lago dei leoni*, but also a setting of Metastasio's *L'isola disabitata*. Her parents placed her under the tutelage of Sante Pesci, maestro of the Basilica Liberiana, with whom she studied counterpoint. On November 28, 1774, she was tested by members of the *Congregazione dei signori musici di S. Cecilia* (later the Accademia di Santa Cecilia), and based on the results of this examination--a fugue on a cantus firmus, the antiphon "Hic vir despiciens mundum"--she was granted the title of Maestra di Cappella. Subsequently, the examination piece was presented to the members of the Accademia Filarmonica in Bologna, who named her Maestra pubblica di Cappella on October 13, 1779. Her examination is preserved in the Biblioteca of the Accademia in Bologna, as is that of Mozart who had earned the title of Maestro di Cappella nine years earlier.

Embellished with poetic comment, an edition of Coccia's fugue was published in 1775. Her work, however, came under the attack of Francesco Capalti, Maestro di Cappella of the Cathedral of Narni, who claimed that the fugal answer did not conform to the rules of counterpoint. His criticism clearly called into question her examination process; Coccia should never have been appointed Maestra, he maintained, assigning the blame to Pesci. To make matters worse, two of the original examiners, buckling under the pressure of having their judgment questioned, moved into Capalti's camp, stating that Coccia had been passed not on her talent but out of respect for her gender. Indeed, they had never imagined that her examination would be made public.<sup>5</sup> Scathing attacks flew between the two sides: Capalti and his followers versus those who defended Coccia's name and that of their maligned colleague Pesci. In order to silence the charges, her allies set about gathering letters of support from knowledgeable and respected persons. Copies of her music were sent to Giovanni Battista Martini, Carlo Broschi (the castrato Farinelli) and Metastasio. Comments were also elicited from those who knew the young composer's work firsthand, such as representatives from the courts of Naples and Portugal, and Angela Benucci, abbess of the monastery of Montealboddo, for whom Coccia had composed music to the text "Veni Creator Spiritus" in the convent's Pentecost service. The responses were compiled by Abbot Michele Mallio and published in the aforementioned *Elogio*.

Metastasio's first act in Coccia's campaign was to respond to Andrea Ratti, Archbishop of Adrianopoli, who had sent the poet a letter of recommendation on the composer's behalf. About a week later, on December 29, 1777, Metastasio wrote directly to Coccia, acknowledging receipt of a packet containing samples of her work; therein, he admitted that he himself had not felt competent to judge her music, so he had sought the aid of someone qualified, who, in his presence, examined the material and assured him that the pieces "were not only correctly but masterfully written."<sup>6</sup> With this testimony in hand, Coccia might well have ended the correspondence, yet Metastasio had left the issue open, stating that he would await word as to what he was to do with her music. His next letter to her (February 12, 1778) suggests that she had responded by making it a present to him:

The generous gift which you would make to me of your skillfully done manuscript (for which I am most grateful) will be transformed by me into a sacred deposit...and meanwhile will be guarded over jealously so as to be returned again to you when you need to put it to better use.

His third letter, dated January 15, 1779, refers again to this "sacred deposit" which had fulfilled its commission of demonstrating her talents to him.<sup>7</sup> Urging her to compose more such works, he expressed to Coccia, "the brave Trevia shepherdess," his wish that in some way he might be the "instrument to correct the injustice which you have until now suffered from Fate." He assured her that, if occasion should arise, he would do whatever he could to help her: "believe me truthfully," he concluded.

Vicenza 15. del 1777.

La gentile attenzione della valorosa Pastorella Trivia  
negli augurj che mi porge, e seconda del' universale  
uffizioso costume, mi ricambia con questa incomoda  
e per lo più vana cerimonia, assicurandomi dell'  
onorato loco, di cui tuttavia conservo nella memo-  
ria di persona così distinto e meritovola. Io gliene  
rendo il dovuto contraccambio, ed mi glorioso  
se potessi in qualche modo servir d'istrumento  
per correggere l'ingiustizie di Ella fin ora soffre  
dalla Fortuna. Il sacro deposito che si trova tutta-  
via appresso di me, è perfettam. eseguita la commis-  
sione d'informarmi della meravigliosa abilità  
dell'ingegno che l'ha prodotto: Vorrei che le produ-  
cesse altri più sensibili frutti: et io sarei pronto  
ad impiegarlo a tale oggetto, se mi si scoprisse occa-  
sione di farlo utilm.; o di farlo ritornare intatto alla  
sua sorgente, se mai potesse costì esser meno infruttua-  
lo alla illustre sua Produttrice. Mi conservi intanto  
l'irriducibile sua piagiolità; e mi creda veracem.

Di Vo. V. Serv.  
Pietro Metastasio.

Ca.  
S. Maria Rosa Cecilia Roma

This third letter is now part of the Moldenhauer Archives at the Library of Congress. The stationery, without envelope, had been merely folded over and addressed on the back to "Mademoiselle Marie Rose Coccia--Rome." The letter is well-preserved, its red wax seal still intact. Together with another two of Metastasio's letters (to other recipients), also in the Moldenhauer Archives, it serves to demonstrate the court poet's fine, careful penmanship, while its text is an expression of his gentle, benevolent nature. In a fourth letter, dated February 14, 1780, Metastasio wrote to thank Coccia for sending him her portrait which, he told her, helped him to form an idea not only of her talent but also of her person. It appeared, like the previous three, in Mallio's *Elogio* as witness to Coccia's musical ability and to her character.

Coccia sought Metastasio's assistance even after the publication of the *Elogio*. In the last of the five extant letters, dated September 6, 1781, Metastasio gently corrected Coccia's opinion that he frequented Court and therefore would be present there to recommend her work to the Grand Duke and Duchess of Russia who were to visit Vienna at the end of that year.<sup>8</sup> Metastasio patiently explained that, because of his advanced age (eighty-three), he left home only "to satisfy the duties of religion, and then not always." Since the nobles were on the way to Italy, he suggested, would it not be better to seek them in person when they arrived in Rome? He concluded by expressing his regrets that he could do no more than confirm once again his good and true wishes in her regard.

Metastasio died some seven months after this last letter. Yet the attacks on Coccia's work continued, even as long as four years after the publication of the *Elogio*.<sup>9</sup> It seems likely that she was merely a pawn in a larger, more personal struggle between Capalti and the opposition, and she seems to have been all but forgotten by her protectors. She did practice her art, however. In the archives of the Accademia di Santa Cecilia, Cametti discovered a petition, dated December 18, 1832, for financial assistance which Coccia, then seventy-three, had submitted. In it, she stated that she had spent her life "composing and teaching," but because she was alone, advanced in age and ill, she needed a subsidy to help provide for her necessities. She had never been able to save even "a small fund" for her old age as she had been the sole support of her elderly parents and sister before they had died. In reply, she was granted a meager pension.<sup>10</sup> She died some days before November 21, 1833, the date on a receipt for four Masses said for her soul at the parish of San Carlo a Catinari, headquarters of the Congregazione di Santa Cecilia. No special services marked her passing; in fact, the Masses were not even said for her alone but included the name of another deceased parishioner.<sup>11</sup>

If Coccia indeed spent her life composing, much of her music must have been destroyed or lost.<sup>12</sup> While most of her biographical data comes directly from Mallio's *Elogio*, much about her character and personality can be deduced from Metastasio's correspondence. Coccia could count on little more

than the use of his name during what amounted to a public trial of her artistry, but when others later deserted her cause the memory of his friendship must have provided her some small comfort.

<sup>1</sup> Charles Burney, *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of the Abate Metastasio*, vol. 3 (London: G.C. and J. Robinson, 1796; reprint, New York: Da Capo Press, 1971), p. 52.

<sup>2</sup> For a bibliography of sources on Maria Rosa Coccia, see Aaron Cohen, *International Encyclopedia of Women Composers*, 2nd ed. (New York: R.R. Bowker and Co., 1987), p. 157.

<sup>3</sup> The pertinent portion of the inscription reads: "Maria Rosa Coccia, Rom. nat. 4 Iun.an.1759" or "Maria Rosa Coccia Romana, nata 4 Iunius, annus 1759."

<sup>4</sup> Alberto Cametti, "Altre notizie su Maria Rosa Coccia," *Gazzetta musicale di Milano* 55 (June 21, 1900): 343.

<sup>5</sup> C. Lozzi, "Una govinetta romana maestra di musica ammirata dal Martini e dal Metastasio," *Gazzetta musicale di Milano* 55 (May 31, 1900): 297-98.

<sup>6</sup> All of Metastasio's letters cited herein can be found in volume 5 of Bruno Brunelli's edition of the poet's oeuvre, *Tutte le opere di Pietro Metastasio* (Verona, Italy: Arnoldo Mondadori, 1954).

<sup>7</sup> While the month is missing from the original letter, one may assume, as does Brunelli in his edition of Metastasio's letters, that the poet was writing on the fifteenth day of the year 1779.

<sup>8</sup> Brunelli's note to this letter in *Tutte le opere*, vol. 5, *Lettere*, p. 817.

<sup>9</sup> Lozzi, op. cit., p. 298.

<sup>10</sup> Cametti, op. cit., pp. 343-44.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 344.

<sup>12</sup> For a list of Coccia's known compositions, see Barbara Garvey Jackson, *"Say Can You Deny Me": A Guide to Surviving Music by Women from the 16th Through the 18th Centuries* (Fayetteville, Arkansas, 1994).