

Te Deum

Marc-Antoine Charpentier (1643 - 1704)

Marc-Antoine Charpentier was one of the most outstanding musicians in late seventeenth-century France. As a young man he had spent three years in Rome studying with one of the leading Italian composers of the day, Giacomo Carissimi, with whom he acquired valuable first-hand experience of opera and oratorio - both relatively new forms at that time. On returning to his native Paris he put these skills to effective use, composing a number of operas and bringing the dramatic oratorio to France for the first time.

Charpentier's output of sacred music was prodigious, comprising some thirty-five oratorios, eleven settings of the Mass, over two hundred motets and the well-known *Te Deum*, the overture of which is used as the signature tune for the Eurovision Song Contest. (It is rather ironic that the music of a composer who faced a continual struggle to achieve recognition during his lifetime should now be familiar to millions of people right across Europe!)

The *Te Deum*, which dates from about 1692, was probably written for the great Jesuit church of St. Paul in Rue St. Antoine, when he was *Maitre de Musique* there. Its brilliance and powerful dramatic impact suggest that it must have been written in celebration of some special occasion, such as the recent French victory at Steinkerque on August 3rd, 1692.

The powerful effect of the *Te Deum* is achieved by a variety of means. Firstly, Charpentier uses a much larger instrumental band than any previous French composer of church music. Secondly, he exploits to its fullest advantage the customary Baroque technique of contrasting full orchestral and choral forces with solo voices accompanied by just a few instruments. Thirdly, and perhaps most significantly, Charpentier has a remarkable ability to fuse the conflicting elements of drama and devotion into a unified whole, coupled with an instinctive feel for ceremonial brilliance. These are the qualities that strike one most in this wonderful work, and it seems extraordinary that it is not more widely performed.

programme notes by John Bawden

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