

03. Alma Redemptoris Mater

Op. 10, No. 9 (1684)

Isabella Leonarda
(1620-1704)
arr. William Melton

Leonarda, Isabella

(born Novara, September 6, 1620; died Novara, February 25, 1704)

She was born Anna Isabella Leonardi to a leading Novarese family (her father was Count Gianantonio Leonardi, Doctor of Law). At the age of sixteen she entered the Collegio di Santa Orsola, an Ursuline convent where she would remain the rest of her life. There she may have found a mentor in the composer Gasparo Casati, master of the Novara cappella. She subsequently taught music to others, became Mother Superior in 1686, was made *madre vicaria* a decade later, and ultimately became *consigliera* for the entire region. Casati included Leonarda's pieces in a published collection, and she would go on to write more than two hundred works, roughly half of which were solo motets. Dubbed "la Musa novarese" by a later generation, Leonarda may also have authored many of her own texts. Her *Sonatas da chiesa*, Op. 16 of 1693 are possibly the first instrumental sonatas ever published by a woman.

The *Alma Redemptoris Mater* (Loving Mother of the Redeemer) is a Marian antiphon sung during the Advent season at the end of day office of Compline. It was already well known at Chaucer's time, as the Prioress' Tale from his late 14th century *Canterbury Tales* shows.

As he sat in the scole at his prymer,
He Alma redemptoris herde singe,
As children lerned hir antiphoner;

The hymn text, which praises different aspects of the Virgin Mary and asks humbly for her intercession, has since been set to music by many gifted composers including Dufay, Josquin, Lassus, Victoria, Palestrina, and Byrd.

Alma Redemptoris Mater, quae pervia caeli porta manes,
et stella maris, succurre cadenti surgere qui curat populo:
Tu quae genuisti, natura mirante, tuum sanctum Genitorem:
Virgo prius ac posterius, Gabrielis ab ore sumens illud Ave, peccatorum miserere.

*Loving mother of the Redeemer, gate of heaven
and star of the sea, help your fallen people who strive to rise again:
In a wondrous manner you bore your Creator:
Remaining a virgin before and after, you who received Gabriel's greeting, have mercy on our sins.*

Isabella Leonarda's stately, conservative setting of *Alma Redemptoris Mater* offers imaginative touches: after the slow triple meter (itself a reflection of the Trinity) of *tuum sanctum Genitorem*, duple meter takes over with *Gabrielis ab ore sumens illud Ave*. Here the greeting of the Archangel is portrayed in quicker note values and dotted rhythms which continue to the end of the motet. Leonarda's *Alma Redemptoris Mater*, Op. 10, No. 9 was published by Camagni of Milan in 1684 in the collection *Motetti a quattro voci*.

Text by William Melton