

# Synopsis

Flavio Crispo, son of the Emperor Costantino, returns in triumph from the wars with the Eastern Franks. He is accompanied by Gilimero, his friend and a general in Costantino's army and as, a prisoner of war, Imilee, the daughter of Assarico, the king of Eastern France.

Fausta, the wife of the Emperor and Flavio's stepmother, has fallen in love with him. When she declares her love for him, he tells her that he is in love with Elena, an English princess living at the imperial court. Fausta tells him that Massenzio, her brother, is in love with Elena and intends to marry her.

Flavio declares his love to Elena, who accepts him. Gilimero declares his love for Imilee, but she rejects him, saying that she is in love with Flavio. Costantino tells Flavio that, in recognition of his victories, he will marry him to Imilee. Gilimero tells Flavio that he is love with Imilee. When the news of Flavio's impending marriage with Imilee becomes known to Fausta and Elena, they are stunned and dejected.

Fausta renews her pleas of love to Flavio, but he rejects her. Massenzio brings Fausta love letters Flavio wrote to Elena. Fausta tells Costantino that Flavio wrote these letters to her. Costantino orders Flavio to be put to death and that Gilimero be the executioner. Gilimero again declares his love for Imilee but she rejects him once more. Massenzio tells Elena that he is in love with her and wants to marry her, but she refuses.

Elena tries to persuade Flavio to declare his innocence, but he refuses. He decides to drink the poison offered to him by Gilimero.

Elena and Imilee lament the impending death of Crispo. Elena goes to Fausta for help, but she refuses. Fausta exults over Flavio's death. Massenzio tell her that, now that Flavio is dead, he can seize the throne. Fausta realizes the damage she has caused and confesses her crime to Costantino. She decides to commit suicide.

Massenzio assembles an army and is about to attack the city. Costantino retreats to the Roman baths and laments his fate and the loss of his son. Elena is prevented from jumping into the Tiber by Imilee. Imilee then threatens to kill Costantino in retribution for his killing Flavio; she is prevented from doing so by Elena. As the battle begins, Massenzio is seen on a bridge over the Tiber. Suddenly, he is confronted by Flavio. They fight and Flavio kills Massenzio.

Costantino is amazed to see his son. Flavio explains that Gilimero had given him a strong sleeping potion, hoping that the Emperor would relent. Costantino then consents to the marriage of Flavio and Elena.

## *Flavio Crispo*

### Personaggi [cast of characters]

Costantino, *Emperor of Rome*

**BASS**

Flavio Crispo, *son of Constantine from his first marriage*

**COUNTERTENOR**

Fausta, *daughter of the Emperor Massimiano and wife of Constantine*

**ALTO**

Massenzio, *brother of Fausta*

**TENOR**

Elena, *an English princess brought up in the Emperor's court*

**SOPRANO**

Imilce, *daughter of Assarico, King of Eastern France*

**ALTO**

Gilimero, *a barbarian prince in the army of Constantine*

**SOPRANO**

Johann David Heinichen: *Flavio Crispo*, HEI101

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# Foreword

## The unhappy fate of Heinichen's opera 'Flavio Crispo'

Johann David Heinichen was born on April 17, 1683, at Krössuln near Teuchern, a little village in the duchy of Saxony-Weissenfels. From 1696 to 1702 he attended the 'Thomasschule' at Leipzig, where the cantors and composers Johann Schelle (1648-1701) and Johann Kuhnau (1660-1722) were among his teachers. In 1702 Heinichen began to study law at the University of Leipzig. As a student he probably played harpsichord and organ with Georg Philipp Telemann's 'Collegium musicum', founded in 1701. After Telemann had left Leipzig at short notice in 1704, Heinichen seems to have taken over the direction of the 'Collegium musicum' for some time. Between 1705 and 1710 Heinichen composed several operas which were staged in Leipzig and Naumburg. The texts of these operas were written in German, but included many arias with Italian texts. During this period, Heinichen wrote the first version of his treatise on thorough-bass ('Neu erfundene und gründliche Anweisung ... zu vollkommener Erlernung des General-Basses', Hamburg 1711/Reprint Kassel etc. 2000; second edition, considerably enlarged, under the title 'Der General-Bass in der Composition', Dresden 1728/Reprint Hildesheim-New York 1969). But it would be a mistake to consider him primarily as a theorist; in fact he was a composer and practitioner who found theory without the closest connection to contemporary practice absolutely useless.

In 1710 Heinichen went to Italy. He settled in Venice, where at that time many famous composers like Antonio Lotti (1666-1740) and Antonio Vivaldi (1678-1741) were in the heyday of their creative powers. The carnival season in Venice was famous all over Europe, and many visitors came to the city to enjoy masquerades and opera performances. Among the admirers of Venice was the Prince of Saxony, Frederick Augustus (1696-1763), the only legitimate son of Augustus the Strong (1670-1733), Elector of Saxony (from 1694 to 1733) and King of Poland (from 1697 to 1733). In 1716 Heinichen met the twenty-year-old prince at the house of the rich Venetian merchant Bianchi, whose wife was a good singer. Her name was Angioletta, and she had been trained in one of the famous Venetian 'Ospedali'. Angioletta sang several Italian cantatas composed by Heinichen. The prince was so charmed by the concert that he decided to engage Heinichen as 'Kapellmeister'. He wrote to his father and received the answer that Heinichen could be employed as 'Kurfürstlich-sächsischer und königlich-polnischer Hofkapellmeister' from August 1, 1716, on. Early in 1717 Heinichen left Venice for Dresden, where he spent the rest of his life. He died at the age of 46 on July 16, 1729.

Some time after Heinichen's engagement the prince made a contract with another musician. The famous Antonio Lotti was a well-known opera composer, and the Saxon court expected from him the establishment of an opera on the highest level. Lotti brought with him a librettist, a copyist, some instrumentalists, a band of very fine singers including his wife, Santa Stella Lotti, and some painters, engineers and artisans. In 1717 Lotti wrote a 'Melodramma pastorale' with the title 'Giove in Argo' ('Jupiter in Argos'). In 1718 followed an opera seria, 'Gli odi delusi dal sangue' ('Hatred assuaged by consanguinity'), also called 'Ascanio', and in 1719 Lotti completed the opera seria 'Teofane'.

On August 20, 1719, Prince Frederick Augustus married the Austrian princess Maria Josepha of Hapsburg in Vienna. Soon after the wedding the couple left Vienna for Dresden, where they arrived on September 2. This marked the beginning of splendid festivities which were to last four weeks. The three operas which Lotti had composed in Dresden played an important role within the representative framework of these magnificent days. But late in 1719 Lotti left Dresden to return to Venice, his task and contract were accomplished. He resumed his post as first organist at St. Mark's, gave music lessons at the 'Ospedale degli Incurabili' and eventually was

rewarded with the post of ‘maestro di cappella’ at St. Mark’s in 1736. Lotti died in 1740. The last two decades of his life were dedicated mostly to church music.

After Lotti’s retreat it was Heinichen’s turn to compose an opera for Dresden. During the time of Lotti’s stay he was never asked to do so, although he had accumulated a good deal of experience in the composition of operas. Besides the German operas mentioned above he had written two Italian operas and succeeded in staging them at Venice during the carnival season of 1713: ‘California’ (libretto: Grazio Braccioli) and ‘Le passioni per troppo amore’ (‘Passions caused by all too great a love’; libretto: Matteo Noris. Noris’s drama does not belong to the ‘historical’ type described below). The libretto Heinichen chose (or was forced to choose) for his only Dresden opera was entitled ‘Flavio Crispo’. Besides the two surviving copies of the score the text alone survives in a hand-written copy without naming the author. But it was presumably written by the then court poet Stefano Bernardo Pallavicini who had also written the libretto for Lotti’s last Dresden opera, ‘Teofane’.

As to the construction of the drama, ‘Flavio Crispo’ strongly resembles the texts of Lotti’s operas ‘Ascanio’ and ‘Teofane’. The main characteristics of this type of ‘historical’ drama are: three acts of about fifteen scenes each; arias restricted to the end of scenes which always begin with (and sometimes merely consist of) recitatives; strict observation of the three Aristotelian unities of place, time and action; mingling of ‘historical facts’ and invented fiction (especially intrigues concerned with love); and finally strict renunciation of comical persons (e. g. comic servants) who are banished into ‘intermezzi’ between the acts. On the whole these are the roots of ‘opera seria’ which culminated later in the works of Pietro Metastasio, the great Italian poet in the service of the Hapsburg emperors.

The first performance of ‘Flavio Crispo’ was planned for the autumn of 1719 or for the carnival season of 1720, but things went wrong, so the work was never performed. And never again would Heinichen get the opportunity to write an opera (of course he did not know that in 1719). The bulk of his musical output in the 1720’s consisted of music for the Catholic church services of the Dresden court; it obviously didn’t matter that Heinichen himself was Lutheran.

The most detailed account of the misfortunes surrounding ‘Flavio Crispo’ can be found in the autobiography of the well-known flautist and composer Johann Joachim Quantz (1697-1773) who was at that time a musician in the service of the Dresden court (to be precise a member of the so-called ‘Polnische Kapelle’). Quantz’s autobiography was published in 1754 and composed not much earlier, but there is no reason to doubt his report. Maybe he was an eye-witness of the incident; in any case he had access to reliable sources. Quantz writes (author’s translation of the text originally written in German): ‘After the nuptial festivities Heinichen composed an opera which was to be performed after the King’s return from Poland. But during a rehearsal, held in the palace in the presence of the director of music, Baron von Mortax, the two singers Senesino and Berselli behaved like very impudent virtuosi. They quarrelled with the Capellmeister Heinichen about an aria and blamed him - a man of erudition who had dwelled for seven years in Italy - for mistakes in the application of the words to the music. Senesino, who might already have been thinking of his future engagement in England, tore Berselli’s part to pieces and threw it before the Capellmeister’s feet. This was reported to the King in Poland. [...] The King gave the order to dismiss all the Italian singers. And thus opera at Dresden was brought to an end for the time being.’

If we believe Quantz we could ask the question: which piece was impugned by Senesino and Berselli? This writer thinks that there are good arguments for pointing at Gilimero’s aria ‘Sdegno tu cerca ov’io’ (act ii, sc. 8), which is part of the role originally to be sung by Matteo Berselli (cf. the arguments in the article cited below).

To be sure, Senesino had good reason to provoke a scandal which would eventually oblige him to leave Dresden, since he and some of the other Italian artists had talked to George Frideric Handel who had visited Dresden shortly before in the search of singers for London. Soon after the scandal the singers went to London where they were warmly received by the Royal Academy of Music. The Elector and King too had an interest in dismissing the singers, since they were no longer really needed but nevertheless had to be paid their high salaries.

It was only in 1731 that a new period of opera at Dresden would begin, now under the brilliant direction of Johann Adolf Hasse (1699-1783). Heinichen did not live to see this new dawn, and his greatest opera, 'Flavio Crispo', had become an innocent victim of circumstance.

June 2005, Wolfgang Horn

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