

# Itamar

REVISTA DE INVESTIGACIÓN MUSICAL: TERRITORIOS PARA EL ARTE



AÑO 2020

6

 Facultat de Filosofia i Ciències de l'Educació



VNIVERSITAT  
DE VALÈNCIA

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# **Territorios para la Educación**

## Anna Bon di Venezia–Bologna and her music

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**Resumen.** La biografía de Anna Bon no había sido corroborada. Su fecha y lugar de nacimiento han sido disputados, pero esta investigación encontró su registro bautismal en Bolonia en 1738. Su madre Rosa Ruvineti Bon era una excelente cantante cómica, y su padre Girolamo, famoso pintor y escenógrafo. Un documento de 1743 establece que Anna estudió en el famoso Ospedale della Pietà en Venecia, pagando la tarifa requerida a los no huérfanos. Para 1756, ella estaba trabajando para Margravine de Bayreuth, pero con la muerte de ésta, dos años después, la familia trabajó de forma independiente hasta que fueron contratados para la ópera de la corte del conde Nicolas Esterházy, en 1762. Los informes de E. L. Gerber (1790–92 y 1812) de la vida posterior de Anna no pueden confirmarse. Sus composiciones para flauta, clavecín y dos flautas del período de Bayreuth muestran elementos de *Empfindsamkeit*; la música vocal atribuida a ella, la influencia de principios de Haydn.

**Palabras clave.** Anna Bon, La Donna Musicale, Venecia, Compositora, Siglo XVIII, *Empfindsamkeit*, Galante, Viola da gamba.

**Abstract.** The biography of Anna Bon has been uncorroborated. Her date and place of birth have been disputed, but this present research found a baptismal record for her in Bologna in 1738. Her mother, Rosa Ruvineti Bon, was a fine comic singer, and her father, Girolamo, an internationally famous stage designer and painter. A document of 1743 establishes that Anna studied at the celebrated Ospedale della Pietà in Venice as a fee paying non-orphan. By 1756, she was working for the Margravine of Bayreuth; but on their patron's death only two years later all three Bons freelanced until they were hired by Count Nicolas Esterházy for his court opera in 1762. E. L. Gerber's reports (1790–92 and 1812) of Anna's later life cannot be substantiated. Her compositions for flute, harpsichord, and two flutes from the Bayreuth period display elements of *Empfindsamkeit*; the vocal music attributed to her, the influence of early Haydn.

**Keywords.** Anna Bon, La Donna Musicale, Venice, Women composers, 18<sup>th</sup> century, *Empfindsamkeit*, Galant, Viola da gamba.

### 1. Birth and early life

Anna Bon was the daughter of Rosa and Girolamo Bon, both famous Italian opera personalities. During Rosa's thirty-two-year career as a singer, she received numerous stellar reviews and frequent engagements. According to E. L. Gerber's *Historisch-Biographisches Lexicon der Tonkünstler* (Leipzig, 1790–92), Rosa Ruvinetti Bon “was an exceptionally skilled comic singer, born in Bologna; came as such to St. Petersburg in 1735. When the King of Prussia [Frederick the Great] founded an Intermezzo Theater in Potsdam in 1748, she appeared there as the first singer, to uncommon applause. In 1750 she was still singing there....” Of Anna's father, the *Lexicon* states: “born in Venice; in 1735 went with several of his fellow countrymen to St. Petersburg for the founding of an Italian Opera. After this, he presumably followed his wife to Germany....” Girolamo enjoyed international renown as a stage designer and painter. Regarding Anna herself, the *Lexicon* states: “Chamber-virtuosa of the Margrave of Brandenburg-Culmbach, born in Venice; around 1760 she had three works printed in Nuremberg....”

Previous biographies of Anna Bon have differed regarding both her place and date of birth—Venice or St. Petersburg, 1738 or 1740. Even though Anna's parents spent some time in St. Petersburg, it is unlikely that she was born in Russia. Beginning in 1735, Anna Ivanovna (Empress of Russia, 1730–40) contracted with a company of musicians, actors, dancers, and theater technicians from Bologna and Venice to create the first performances of Italian operas in her country. Anna Bon's parents, as well as the actress Zanetti Casanova (mother of the notorious Giacomo Casanova), were part of this company. However, members of the company were allowed to take a leave of absence in February 1738, which would have given the Bons time to travel back to Italy for Anna's birth.

The identification of Venice as Anna's birthplace may have been prompted by the dedication pages of all three of Bon's published works, which read: “Composte da Anna Bon di Venezia.” However, this could have been a marketing strategy designed to link the composer with the cultural center, or it may just have indicated that she was raised in Venice, not that she was necessarily born there.

While looking through Anna's documents in the Archivio di Stato in Venice, I found a copy of her baptismal record, indicating that she was born in Bologna in 1738, daughter of Hyeronymi (Latin for Girolamo) Boni and Rosa Ruvinetti. Bologna is a plausible birthplace for Anna, since her mother had been born there.

The story of Anna Bon the musician begins with her education at the famous Ospedale della Pietà in Venice. This institution had been part of Venice's social welfare system since 1346. Founded as an orphanage and music school for girls, it gradually achieved an international reputation as a first-class conservatory with intensive musical training. No less a figure than Antonio Vivaldi taught and composed at the Ospedale from 1703 to 1740. The school was also noted for the high level of its orchestral and choral performances.

When Anna Bon entered the Ospedale as a student, it still enjoyed a magnificent reputation for music education and performance. She enrolled under a special status called *figlia in educazione*, which applied to fee-paying, non-orphan residents. An Ospedale document of 1743 states that maestra Candida dalla viola “has the privilege of giving lessons to Anna Giovanna Lucia Bon in this pious place”. It certainly was a place of extensive musical opportunities, as some of the best composers of the period taught there, and some of the best compositions in Europe were performed there with high-quality ensembles made up of the girls from the Ospedale.



Anna Bon

## 2. Bayreuth

The next place we can reliably locate Anna Bon is Bayreuth in 1756, at the court of Frederick, Margrave of Brandenburg-Bayreuth (1711–1763) and his wife, Friederike Sophie Wilhelmine, Margravine of Bayreuth (1709–1758), born a Princess of Prussia and sister of Frederick the Great. Brandenburg-Bayreuth was a tiny German state that, under Wilhelmine’s watch, became one of Europe’s great cultural centers.

Anna Bon’s compositions from the Bayreuth period employ elements of *Empfindsamkeit*, or “ultrasensitive music,” a more expressive variant of the *Galant* style, which portrays subjective feelings, especially melancholy, along with simple and playful melodies. The second movements of Bon’s Flute Sonata IV, Harpsichord Sonata VI, and Divertimento IV exemplify this melancholic expression. Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach (1714–1788), who served at the court of Frederick the Great, is usually credited with creating this “avant-garde” style. In

La Donna Musicale’s Anna Bon recording, we generally chose to interpret the music from Anna’s first period in an *Empfindsam* style, using C.P.E. Bach’s performance aesthetic as model. Part of the reasoning behind this choice is that it is highly likely Anna knew the works of Bach. Wilhelmine and her younger brother, Frederick the Great, often performed together in Frederick’s various palaces, so Anna would have been aware of Frederick’s musical taste and Bach’s music. In addition, both Anna and Bach used the same music printer for their published works. But above all, the music responds perfectly to being interpreted in the *Empfindsam* style.

### 3. Instrumentation

Johann Joachim Quantz (1697–1773) was teacher and musical advisor to Frederick the Great. Although he was not an advocate of the *Empfindsam* style, Quantz does provide useful performance practice information for Bon’s instrumental works in his treatise on eighteenth-century performance practice, *Versuch einer Anweisung die Flöte traversiere zu spielen* (1752). In the section of the treatise on the “duties of those who accompany,” we can discover support for the use of the fortepiano to accompany these pieces.

According to Quantz, the fortepiano has everything required that is necessary for good accompaniment, particularly dynamics. The fact that Frederick the Great owned many fortepianos reinforces Quantz’s strong endorsement of the instrument.

Although Bon indicated the recommended instrumentation in the titles of her three printed compositions—*Sei Sonate da Camera per il Flauto Traversiere e Violoncello o Cembalo*, 1757; *Sei Sonate per il Cembalo*, 1758; and *Sei Divertimenti a Due Flauti e Basso*, ca. 1759—we experimented with other solo instruments and found that the pieces are easily playable on the violin and, except for a few challenging passages, on the *pardessus de viole*. This alternative instrumentation provides an opportunity to hear other period instruments performing Bon’s music.

In order to better evoke the suavity and emotional intensity typical of the *Empfindsam style*, a Stainer viola da gamba was used on the above-mentioned CD, bowed and plucked, in place of the violoncello, as a means of complementing the sound of the fortepiano. This decision is supported by information in Michael O’Loughlin’s *Frederick the Great and His Musicians: The Viola da Gamba Music of the Berlin School* (2008). This study discusses a number of eighteenth-century German composers, including C.P.E. Bach, who wrote for the viola da gamba, encouraged by the presence of Ludwig Christian Hesse, one of the last gamba virtuosi, at the court of Frederick the Great.

### 4. Esterházy

In 1758, Wilhelmine died, leading to the dispersal of the group of musicians working for her in Brandenburg-Bayreuth. After her death, the Bons freelanced until 1762, when all three were hired by Count Nicolas Esterházy after performing at his invitation. They were contracted to work at the court opera,

Girolamo as stage designer and the women as singers. Haydn had just arrived at Esterházy the previous year and soon afterwards was made *Kapellmeister*. There appears to have been much interaction among the Bons and Haydn: Girolamo apparently wrote the texts for some of Haydn's early cantatas, and Haydn composed arias specifically for Rosa. The vocal music attributed to Anna Bon that was included on our recording shows the influence of Haydn's early period (for example, his Cantata "Destatevi o miei fidi," Hob. XXIVa: 2, 1763).

Ondřej Horník (1864–1917), a Czech collector of musical relics, archivist, and composer, gathered and preserved eighteenth-century musical scores from churches throughout Europe. His archive was eventually bequeathed to the Národní Museum in Prague, which is where the vocal scores included on this recording are preserved.

All three vocal pieces survive in manuscript as parts only, not full scores, an indication that they were indeed performed. It is possible that they were all part of a single larger work, probably *Ardete amore* or *Astra coeli*, because of their close harmonic relations. In the manuscript, there are many fermatas that could be interpreted as places for the singers, and in one case the violin, to improvise cadenzas. Incidentally, Bon's contemporary, Giovanni Paisiello (1740–1816), also wrote a piece titled *Astra coeli*, but neither the text nor the music bears any resemblance to Anna Bon's composition.

## 5. The End?

The next known reference to Anna Bon appears in E. L. Gerber's *Neues historisch-biographisches Lexikon der Tonkünstler* (1812): "living in 1767 at Hildburghausen as wife of the chamber and opera singer there, the very fine tenor Mongeri." Claudio Sartori's index of singers in his catalogue of libretti yields three entries for a Francesco Mongeri performing in Turin in 1770. In addition, I found another source in which Francesco Mongeri is mentioned as part of traveling company of virtuoso singers that performed in Rovereto (Italy) in 1761. However, perhaps we cannot trust the *Lexikon* on this either, since it was incorrect about Anna Bon's birthplace.

The Hildburghausen newspaper *Hildburghäusische wöchentliche Anzeige*, which began publication in April 1766, mentions a Franciskus Mongeri, court musician, and the births and deaths of his children, but does not mention their mother. Documents from the same year, found in the *Kirchenarchiv Hildburghausen*, also mention the court musician Franciskus Mongeri and name the court singer Maria Germackin as the mother of his children.

So far I have not found any other references to Anna Bon being in Hildburghausen or married to Franciskus Mongeri. However, I did find a reference to an Anna Bon seeking a divorce in Venice in 1772 from a Brescian man, one Marc Antonio Averoldi. Clearly, more research will be required in order to determine what happened to Anna Bon after her Esterházy period and identify the time and place of her death.

Finally, Gerber's Lexicon of 1790–92 mentions that “in Nuremberg in 1764 Girolamo Bon published *6 facile Sonate di Violin. col. Bass*” (6 easy sonatas for violin with basso). I tracked down these sonatas. No publication date appears on the title page. Although Girolamo was known as a remarkably gifted and versatile scenic artist, and he may have written some cantata texts for Haydn as noted above, his musical talents are unknown. Could these compositions have actually been written by Anna? And could there be more music by her that remains undiscovered?



Laury C. Gutierrez Mayorga