

JOHANN JOSEPH FUX

(ca. 1660–1741)

Ave Regina

K 208

Notes on the work

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 CONCERTATO

NOTES ON THE WORK

Johann Joseph Fux, “Ave Regina” (K 208 / FuxWV IV.12.33)

Fux’ *Ave Regina caelorum* in F major for soprano solo, K 208, is his setting of one of the four Marian antiphons (the others are *Alma redemptoris mater*, *Regina coeli* and *Salve Regina*). In the liturgy, *Ave Regina caelorum* is sung during Lent from Candlemas (the Feast of the Purification or the Presentation of Jesus Christ, with blessing of the candles, on 2 February) until Maundy Thursday, normally at the end of the second Vesper or Compline.¹ At the Vienna court, polyphonic performances of the most important antiphons and hymns, as well as of the proper (especially the gradual and offertory), were customary. For that reason, Fux, as court composer from 1698 and later chapel master (*Kapellmeister*), created a number of works in various scorings and dispositions for these smaller categories.² This is why we have (at least) 23 settings of the *Ave Regina* by Fux (K 205–226; L 38).

The hymn text consists of eight verses rhymed in pairs (aa bb cc dd), which can be divided into two strophes or four sections,³ but the content suggests a three-part form: in K 208, the middle section “Gaude Virgo gloriosa” stands in contrasting time signature and expression to the beginning (“Ave Regina”) and the closing sections (“Vale, o valde decora”). The structure in three sections is not always as clear as in K 208; thus, Fux avoids a change of time signature at “Vale” in the three-part *Ave Regina* K 214, creating rather an impression of two sections. Fux used the same structural scheme as in K 208 for the three-part *Ave Regina* K 215: The outer movements are in common time, the middle section in 6/8. Both pieces employ the same key of F major as well.

After an instrumental introduction (bars 1–12), the soprano intones the invocation of the Virgin Mary (“Ave”) with a downward leap of a fifth. The motif is then sequenced and continued, and the melodic variant derived from it at “ave Domina Angelorum” is repeated (in thirds) in a violin interlude. Such dialogues between voice and violins are very popular in baroque music, and are found especially often in this work. In the next pair of verses (“Salve radix”), the harmony changes from F major to the parallel D minor (bars 30/31). The violins softly accompany the stepwise falling motif (with first-inversion seventh chords on the accented beats) before rising scales in the voice symbolize the “birth of the light” (“lux est orta”). A sequence in descending fifths closes this first section.

There is a fundamental difference between settings of the *Ave Regina* or similar categories of sacred music for trio or quartet on one hand, and for a single soloist or a duet on the other, in that the latter offers the composer more leeway for displays of vocal virtuosity (although not as excessively as in an opera aria).⁴ Fux exploits this opportunity, as he does in other settings of the *Ave Regina*, with more or less extended melismas on the words “orta”, “speciosa” / “gloriosa” and “decora” / “exora”. The melismas thus mark the ends of the verses, and with them the rhymes, all emphasizing the vowel “o”. The vocal runs in sixteenth notes on the word “speciosa” are especially sweeping; stretching out over seven bars, they first reach the fifth step of B-flat major (bar 66) and then that of G minor (bar 78), with a long hold on the final notes and violin figurations underneath. The latter in their turn are a variant of the dance-like, joyful motif (“Gaude Virgo”) that opened this middle part in 6/8 time (bars 39 ff.).

Because of the coloraturas, the central section is the longest (49 bars), whereas the last part, “Vale, o valde decora” is the shortest with its 28 measures (the first contains 38 bars, although it includes four verses).⁵ Both closing verses are accompanied throughout by the strings and continuo, but – with the ex-

1 See the data given by Kilian Reinhart, *Rubriche generali*, Vienna 1727 (Vienna, ÖNB, Mus.Hs. 2503, fol. 11v and 14r).

2 Friedrich W. Riedel, *Kirchenmusik am Hofe Karls VI. (1711–1740). Untersuchungen zum Verhältnis von Zeremoniell und musikalischem Stil im Barockzeitalter* (Studien zur Landes- und Sozialgeschichte der Musik 1), München/Salzburg: Emil Katzschichler, 1977, pp. 168–170.

3 The four-part form is most clearly audible in K 207 (also in F major), a piece which is preceded by a sonatina (Fux-GA III/1, pp. 142–161).

4 Ludwig Ritter von Köchel, *Johann Josef Fux*, Wien 1872, Beilage X, p. 88 [work catalogue K 208] notes: “Dem Sopran ist zwar keine ungewöhnliche Höhe, aber eine bedeutende Geläufigkeit zugemuthet.”

5 However, the proportions are brought back into line in allowing the middle section to be played somewhat faster and the last section slower than the basic tempo “Andante”.

ception of a short interlude – *pianissimo*. This farewell greeting, “Vale”, clearly recalls the opening “Ave”; the quote is especially recognizable at the repeat (bars 97/98). In this way Fux spans a motivic arch that clarifies the text in terms both of structure and expressivity. The plea for intercession offers the soprano one more opportunity to display his ability in soaring melodic lines and rhetorically intense cadences on “exora”. Virtuoso vocal artistry and festively varied orchestral writing – here even with the viola added to the violins – were not seen as being incongruent with ceremonial worship in divine service by the Habsburgs’ *pietas Austriaca*. Precisely with his settings of the *Ave Regina* – of which, to name one example, those of his important predecessor Marc’Antonio Ziani (ca. 1653–1715) are lacking⁶ – Fux enriched the repertoire of sacred music in his own age, as in ours.

Alexander Rausch, 2019
Translation: Glen Wilson, 2020

⁶ Johannes Prominczel, *Die Kirchenmusik von Marc’Antonio Ziani. Quellen – Analyse – Werkverzeichnis*, PhD thesis University of Vienna 2012, pp. 372–384.