

PACIFIC BAROQUE ORCHESTRA 2008-2009 SEASON

Southern Italy: Murder, Mayhem, and Magnificence

There is much to be said about the fascinating musical scenes in Rome and Naples. The latter city was famous for its opera scene which rivaled that of Venice as well as conservatories where young castrati and other musicians were trained. In Rome, extremely conservative public institutions such as the Sistine chapel choir were at contrast with avant-garde music commissioned for private performances by extremely wealthy patrons such as Queen Christina of Sweden and Cardinal Ottoboni. String music during this time had a similar ambiguity: while it was ever more dramatic and virtuosic, it expressed itself always through contrapuntal precision and orchestral discipline.

A key development during this time was that of the *concerto grosso* style of scoring, which used a different procedure than the solo concerto style of Vivaldi and other Northern Italians. In a *concerto grosso*, the full ensemble (*ripieno* or *concerto grosso*) alternates with a core of soloists/section leaders (the *concertino*) to provide textural contrasts. The concertino group as it was standardized in Rome consists of two solo violins and a bass (played by a cello and/or a lute), which is basically a trio sonata ensemble. Corelli's *concerto grosso* publications go so far as to say that the concertos can be performed as trio sonatas by simply leaving out the *ripieno* parts.

Alessandro Scarlatti arrived in Rome as a twelve year-old boy in 1672, his family having fled a famine in his birth city of Palermo. His work took him throughout Italy, though much of his career was based in Rome and in Naples, where he helped establish the Neapolitan opera scene as a rival to the one in Venice. The oratorio *Cain, ovvero Il Primo Omicidio* ('Cain, or the First Murder,' written on the biblical story of Cain & Abel) was first performed during lent in 1707. The work's solemn introduction in three short movements is unusual in the way it features a virtuosic solo violin, at times completely unaccompanied (as in the very opening) and at other times accompanied by only a solo viola.

Arcangelo Corelli's also arrived in Rome in the 1670s, and his activities there as a teacher, director, and composer were enormously responsible for the spread of the violin throughout Europe (and with it the archlute, which Corelli specifies for the concertino bass part in some of his *concerti grossi*). Corelli's sonatas and concertos were studied, imitated, ornamented, and transcribed, as well as admired for their Apollonian perfection (his first name complemented the archangel-like serenity of his playing). Opus 6, #2 begins with a kind of trumpet fanfare imitation. The basic slow-fast-slow-fast church sonata procedure is more complex here, where the slow movements cycle through various mini-sections in various tempi.

Much ink has been spilled over the scandalous life of Alessandro Stradella, whose mysterious murder has inspired many legends, novels, and even operas. Before his brutal end, he was extremely important in developing the *concerto grosso*, sometimes specifying the lute alone to play the concertino bass. This scoring procedure was used in Roman vocal music in the 1660s and 70s, and is put to use in the Sinfonias which begin his Christmas cantata *Ah! troppo è ver*. Possibly Corelli played in some of Stradella's compositions of this type and was inspired to

develop the *concerto grosso* style further. Unusual here are the solo passages for the concertino violins, the lute, and even the harpsichord, which plays a kind of solo cadenza leading into the warm Christmas *pastorale*.

Francesco Durante studied and worked in Rome as a young man, though his career was mostly based in Naples where he was associated at different times with most of the major conservatories, including the *Conservatorio dei Poveri di Gesù Cristo* from 1728. The Concerto in A major 'La Pazzia' ('Madness') comes from a collection of nine unpublished works written in the late 1730s or early 1740s. The depiction of madness comes from the juxtaposition of absurd contrasts: an opening octave leap over a confident rhythmic accompaniment in the lower strings is suddenly brought to a stop with ominous recitative-like chromaticism. This material is interspersed with meandering, batty duets for two solo violas, a distortion of the *concerto grosso* principle for a superb comic effect. The second movement is a sort of slow dance of derangement while the final Allegro brings back the hilarious contrast between the orchestra's enthusiasm and violas' folly, the latter always lost in their own world (and tonality/affect). Possibly this concerto might be considered the first great viola joke!

Giuseppe Valentini settled in Rome around 1692, where he was called 'Straccioncino' ('Little Ragamuffin'). He wrote a sonnet and a sonata in Corelli's praise, though Valentini's success as a violinist and composer may have had a deteriorating effect on the aging Corelli's health. The twelve *concerti grossi* of Valentini's Opus 7 (Bologna, 1710) expand the Corellian concertino style: some movements call for no soloists at all, and the concertino is sometimes replaced with just a solo violin. In the eleventh concerto, we have a different structure altogether, with four solo violins of equal importance trading material along with a solo viola and 'cello. Possibly Vivaldi was influenced by this scoring as he used it famously in his collection *L'Estro armonico* (Amsterdam, 1711). Op. 7 #11 is a stunning work, full of drama and virtuosity as well as brilliant counterpoint (witness the six-voice fugue in the second movement).

Giovanni Zamboni Romano was described by a contemporary as an 'excellent contrapuntist and a virtuoso of the theorbo, lute, harpsichord, small guitar, mandola, and mandolin.' As his name suggests, he came from Rome, though later he worked in Pisa as a double bass player. His *Sonate d'Intavolatura di Leuto* (Lucca, 1718) is one of the last volumes of solo music for the Italian archlute. Possibly Zamboni was influenced by (and/or was an influence for) the great central European lutenist Silvis Weiss who worked in Rome from 1710-1714.

Georg Muffat was a German organist who obtained permission from an employer to study in Rome with Bernardo Pasquini in the early 1680s. There he composed works that were performed in Corelli's house and would be published in his *Armonico Tributo* (Salzburg, 1682). The extended *Passaglia* from Sonata #5 is perhaps the collection's most striking movement: the use of this dance itself, the rich five-part texture, and the *rondeau*-like repetitions of its refrain (with its magical, soaring triplet motive) are French, yet other elements remain firmly Italian: the concertino/ripieno alternation, the classic *ciaccona* bass in the middle section, the surprising chromatic variations. Muffat's particular genius here was to find a way to take elements of both national styles and stitch them together seamlessly into something entirely new.