

PROGRAM NOTES

George Frideric Handel (1685-1759): Trio Sonata in E minor, HWV 398 Op. 5 No. 3 (1739)

Trio sonatas belong to the core of instrumental music of the baroque period, with Arcangelo Corelli credited with laying the foundation for this genre. This favorite chamber music combination typically consists of three parts, most commonly for two violins and continuo. George Frideric Handel was also quite fond of the form, and explored it at different points of his life. There are two sets of Handel's trio sonatas: Opus 2 and Opus 5. Those in Opus 2 are mostly in four movements and are strongly influenced by Corelli. The sonatas of Opus 5, of which HWV 398 is the third, depart from that pattern and are a series of loosely assembled dance suites. These clearly have the mark of Handel's English tenure, where he took up residence in 1712.

HWV 398, as do all of the Opus 5 sonatas, includes considerable elements of drama. That's not surprising, since the set borrows considerably from many of Handel's operas, including "Arianna in Creta," "Ezio," and "Radamisto." In addition, many of the movements were adapted without substantial alteration from Handel's "Chandos Anthems," a collection of sacred choral compositions, as well as dance music which Handel composed for Marie Sallé in his Covent Garden operas.

The Opus 5 trio sonatas were printed in 1739 by the London music publisher John Walsh. It has been suggested that this was largely the work of Walsh who put together pieces from many different compositions by Handel. There just might be some truth in this - earlier publications of Handel's chamber music were cobbled together by Walsh's father without Handel's involvement.

Giovanni Gabrieli (1557-1612): Sonata XXI con Tre Violini (pub.1615)

In 17th century Venice, compositions with multiple voices, often involving an echo effect, were all the rage. Some places simply inspire echoes, and one of them was St. Mark's Basilica in Venice, where the sacred compositions of Giovanni Gabrieli bounced around in the later 16th and early 17th centuries. In addition to his well-known tenure as organist and composer for the cathedral, Gabrieli provided music for a number of feasts each year, not the least of which was St. Rocco's own feast day of August 16, for which it is believed he composed the Sonata XXI for three violins.

Published posthumously in 1615, Gabrieli's Sonata con tre violini may be the most stylistically advanced piece he wrote. It is his only instrumental work with a true basso continuo over which he places three violin parts that mimic each other. Instead of the alternating massed choirs found elsewhere in his instrumental music, Gabrieli chose a musical texture that may prefigure the trio sonata style that came to dominate instrumental music in the seventeenth century.

In this piece Gabrieli weaves an intricate and intimate musical web among the voices. The three upper voices tend to proceed either in imitation or in antiphonal sequences between a pair and a solo voice, often with virtuosic embellishment. The entire effect of the music is mesmerizing and must have sounded stunningly new to the audiences of the day.

George Philipp Telemann (1681-1767): Quartet in B-flat Major, TWV 43:B2 (c. 1730 – 1750)

George Philipp Telemann is said to be the most prolific composer of all time – yes, he even has Vivaldi beat – and was considerably more famous in the early 1700's than J.S. Bach himself. He also was more attuned to newer trends in music than Bach, and frequently employed the then exotic-sounding rhythms and melodic phrases derived from Polish and Moravian folk music.

Telemann's mellow and warm-hearted Quartet in B-flat Major, TWV 43:B2, is a three-movement piece scored for two violins, viola, and basso continuo. Telemann wrote quartets for a variety of instruments, many appearing as flute quartets, including a flute version of this one. He referred to works in this style as "quadros," indicating that they had four parts. The more sonata-like quadri treated the three upper voices fairly equally. Other quadros were more concerto-like, in that one or two of the voices – in this case, the violins – were more prominent. In both cases, the bottom voice plays a role analogous to that of the basso continuo.

Aside from composing literally thousands of works, Telemann was one of the first composers to concentrate on the business of publishing his own music. These published editions became extremely popular, and spread Telemann's fame throughout Europe.

Henry Purcell (1659-1695): Abdelazer, or The Moor's Revenge, Z 570 (incidental Music, 1695)

There are at least three tragedies associated with "Abdelazer, or The Moor's Revenge." The first is in the play itself, written by English dramatist Aphra Behn in 1676, where the captive Moor Abdelazer seeks revenge on the King of Spain for killing his father, with tragic results. The second is that the play, first performed in 1695, was a flop (a tragedy in itself, since Behn is believed to be the first known English woman to make a living as a playwright).

The third is the tragic death of English composer Henry Purcell at the age of 36 in 1695, the year he wrote his incidental music to Abdelazer. In addition to his semi-operas, Purcell composed incidental music for ten plays, Abdelazer being among the last. Music played an important part in 17th century English theater. Plays invariably included not only songs, but also short orchestral pieces to signal the start of the entertainment, provide fill-in between acts, and mark scene changes.

Purcell's music for Abdalazar consists of nine pieces scored for strings and harpsichord. Of these the Minuet is a particularly elegant piece, while the Air that succeeds it is typical of the lively, tuneful pieces with which Purcell adorned the theater of the day. But it is the Rondeau that has ensured enduring fame for an otherwise forgotten play and its largely neglected music, for this is the movement taken by Benjamin Britten as the theme on which he based his famous "Variations and Fugue on a Theme of Purcell," more popularly known as "The Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra."

Arcangelo Corelli (1653-1713): Trio Sonata in C Major, Op. 1 No. 7 for Two Violins and Continuo (1681)

1681 was a largely uneventful year in the history of Western music, with possibly two exceptions. That year saw the birth of Georg Philipp Telemann and the publication of a set of twelve trio sonatas by the Italian violinist and composer Arcangelo Corelli. What placed this set, published as Opus 1, above all others was that it became an important landmark in the development of Western classical music, and established Corelli as one of the most celebrated and influential composers in Europe.

Corelli's Op. 1 Sonatas have been described as "sonata da Chiesa" (church sonatas), despite the fact that Corelli did not use this term himself. A Baroque instrumental work often in four movements, the church sonata was thus named to distinguish itself from a "chamber" sonata, which tended to include dance movements. The church sonata emphasized counterpoint, and could be used to accompany worship.

Most of Corelli's da chiesa sonatas use a four-movement slow-fast-slow-fast plan, a layout most musicologists believe Corelli originated. The Opus 1, No. 7 sonata deviates slightly from this plan by lacking an opening slow movement. Corelli scored the Opus 1 sonatas for three

melodic stringed instruments and continuo, a favored Roman arrangement. The two upper parts were intended for violins, and the bass part was originally written for violone or archlute. Exactly what Corelli meant by “violone” is unclear, since there were at least three different sizes of bass violin in use at the time. The term did not refer to the violoncello, which was a distinctly different instrument.

Corelli dedicated his Opus 1 set, his first published work, to Christina, the former Queen of Sweden, a wealthy patron of the arts who was then in the last of her four sojourns in Rome.

Notes by Steve Siegel

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750): Violin Concerto in E Major (BWV 1042) (1717-23)

According to Schweitzer, Bach “learned from Vivaldi the perfect violin technique, the art of writing singably.” He viewed the E major concerto as being, “full of an unconquerable joy of life that sings its song of triumph in the first and last movements.”

In contrast to the sonatas, Bach is a modernist in the concertos. He developed the Vivaldian model into more tightly and logically written patterns. This is manifest in the free alternation and interplay of orchestral tutti and solo episodes that result in a genuine give and take between the partners. A comparison of Bach’s transcriptions with Vivaldi originals is, in this respect, revealing.

The opening allegro is in ABA form with a middle section in the related c-sharp minor and an adagio cadenza for the soloist just before the return of A. This innovation later became a standard feature of the Classic period concerti. The movement starts with the so-called three “hammer strokes”—a much-used Baroque device. (This feature is echoed in Beethoven’s Eroica Symphony). The slow middle movement is a hauntingly beautiful meditation. Debussy, who did not care for most of Bach, makes an exception of this movement. “Frankly, such music puts one out of countenance and one wonders how to behave for fear of being unworthy to listen to it.” The finale is a joyous rondo. The refrain appears five times with four interludes featuring the soloist. The mood of this movement is well expressed by the critic Marc Pincherle, “Bach’s contemporaries expected concerti finales to be lighter than the first sections, more concise, less portentous so as to take a good-humored leave of the listeners. This rondo of Bach’s, no doubt, was up to their expectations.

Notes by Hoyle Carpenter