

PROGRAM NOTES

One of the most exciting musical inventions of the Baroque was the concerto. This idea of setting one or more solo instrumental voices against the full orchestra was something that appealed to the eighteenth-century's love of maximum aesthetic contrast. One contemporary musical visitor to Italy remarked on how "the ear is astonished by the contrasts of solo and tutti, forte and piano, of the full orchestra and the small group of soloists, as the eye is by the contrasts of light and shade." A vivid image; those who have been to Italy will know well the striking difference between blazing sun and soft, cool shade.

The concerto was also formally useful for Baroque composers since it provided a way to create a large musical structure with minimal means. Its basic unit, the orchestral ritornello, is essentially a three-part paragraph: a striking opening gesture, the continuation in a sequence, and then the final exit strategy. The solo instruments could reflect this material, or they could explore their own varieties of virtuosity. The orchestra itself provides musical punctuation by reiterating parts of the ritornello in an ongoing conversation, which could be a contest, a dialogue, an argument, or a monologue with commentary.

This formal structure could then be transposed into other musical genres, for example, the overture, which often incorporated concerto elements into an orchestral sinfonia. One master of this form was the composer and violin virtuoso Francesco Veracini. Our program opens with his dramatic multi-movement *Overture in G Minor*, featuring oboes and a bassoon as soloists.

Charles Burney remarked that "by traveling all over Europe, Veracini had formed a style of playing peculiar to himself." A Florentine by birth, Veracini came to Venice when he was twenty-one and began a career there as a soloist and oratorio composer. By 1714 Veracini had made his way first to London, and then to Dresden, where he became a well-paid court soloist for a few years. This interlude ended badly when he leapt from a window in a fit of madness and professional jealousy; apparently his intense study of alchemy had produced some severe psychological side-effects. Tonight's overture probably comes from his Dresden period. It is filled with brilliant touches for both orchestra and soloists, and ends with an especially quirky minuet.

The name most associated with the Italian concerto is, of course, Antonio Vivaldi, although he would have preferred that we think of him more as an opera composer. The vividly kinetic quality of Vivaldi's style for both instruments and voices was frequently remarked on by contemporaries. (Perhaps the headlong pace of so much Italian music at this time could be attributed to the high-octane Turkish coffee that had just then become the fashionable beverage of choice.)

Vivaldi was associated for many years with one of the city's most celebrated attractions, the Ospedale della Pietà. This was one of several institutions the Venetian state had founded to deal with the problem of unwanted pregnancies. Here newborn children could be left anonymously in a special niche near the front door with the assurance that they would be brought up well. The boys were apprenticed to learn a trade, and the girls, if they showed talent, were trained as singers and instrumentalists.

This musical education came at a price: these women were expected not to perform in public once they left the Ospedale to be married. Not surprisingly, many of them decided to stay on at the school to teach and play. The performances of this brilliant chorus and orchestra provided a steady income for the Pietà, a novel system of the arts paying for social services.

The all-female orchestra of the Pietà fascinated foreign visitors. One standard eighteenth-century guidebook remarked that "not a single important person visiting Venice left before honoring them with their presence." The women played a concert nearly every Saturday and Sunday and on most feast days, beginning at four in the afternoon and lasting until just after six. Since the performers played behind a screen, the audience could not actually watch these astonishing acts of musical pyrotechnics, but only hear them.

Many of Vivaldi's manuscripts for these concerts were eventually gathered in the great library collection at Turin. Among them are the sources for the concerti that we hear tonight. These manuscripts, with their hastily-scrawled indications of phrases, bear witness to Vivaldi's compositional energy. Vivaldi was a master at creating intensely vivid and theatrical effects with minimal means, much as his contemporary, the artist Canaletto, was doing on canvas with his cityscapes.

The restlessness of Vivaldi's *Concerto in D Major*, "L'Inquietudine," is clear from the opening with a tremendously agitated tarantella-like ritornello that is abruptly interrupted by the soloist in a flight of virtuosity shooting up to a high A (the top note on the baroque fingerboard, according to Geminiani). In the slow movement, a sharply dotted figure with a series of rushing scales is traded back and forth between the voices. In the last Allegro, these dotted figures are transformed into a brisk triple time as the violin soloist takes on some extremely wide-ranging and ferocious string crossings.

One lesser known figure of the Italian Baroque is the violinist Giuseppe Valentini, who began working in Rome at the age of eleven. He appears in employment records as *Straccioncino*, or "little ragamuffin," well into his twenties. Valentini published most of his collections in the first decade of the eighteenth century when he was becoming established as a performer in Rome. In his Op. 7 set of concerti grossi, he shows his musical indebtedness to his mentor Arcangelo Corelli—even as he strikes out in interesting new directions of his own.

His *Concerto in A Minor for Four Violins*, for example, starts with a typical Corellian walking bass—but here it is traded between the violins, rather than given to the bass line. The Fuga that follows offers a chance for all six voices to introduce the vigorous subject before moving on to more brilliant passagework. A very brief five-bar Grave serves as an introduction and conclusion to an Allegro, which gives each violin in turn an extended solo. After a sturdy cut-time Presto and an Adagio full of gorgeous sonorities, the concerto closes with another breakneck Allegro.

The manuscript for Vivaldi's *Concerto for Two Violins and Two Cellos*, RV 564a, shows just how fast he composed. The score is nearly in shorthand with brief scrawls to indicate unison passages, and repeat signs used whenever possible. But like the work of his contemporary, the artist Canaletto, these effects that seem up close to be only the barest sketches, turn out to be tremendously effective in a larger perspective.

The opening movement of this concerto provides a particularly good example of Vivaldi's ritornello construction: a striking unison beginning, some sixteenth-note action that is repeated in echo, and a brilliant syncopated conclusion. (He liked this ending so much he reused it in one of his chamber concertos, RV 84.) The slow movement is given over to a conversation among the soloists, with a few comments from the orchestra. The concerto closes with another irresistibly kinetic Allegro, this one propelled by an endless chain of syncopations.

Vivaldi's *Concerto for Two Flutes*, RV 533, is a gentler affair. This was an instrument that Vivaldi only began to write for relatively late in his career. He first published a set of concerti for "flauto traverso" in 1728, perhaps inspired by Quantz's visit to Venice two years before. In the same year, the German Ignazio Siber seems to have begun teaching flute at the Pietà. Vivaldi soon learned the particular virtues of this instrument. His C Major concerto creates its own intimate, galant sound-world, closer to the watercolors of Tiepolo than the large cityscapes of Canaletto.

Our last concerto by Vivaldi is another of his multiple-instrument works, this one for oboe and bassoon. The Pietà had several oboe teachers over the years, among them Siber as well as Ignazio Rion and Ludwig Erdmann. And the women of the Pietà were well known for their wind playing. One of them, "the oboist Susanna," inspired particular praise from foreign visitors.

Visitors also remarked that the Pietà orchestra included bassoonists, although no teachers appear in the Ospedale's records. Vivaldi wrote nearly forty bassoon concerti, a remarkable number for an instrument that was not supported by a Venetian tradition. Some of these may have been written for Gioseppino Biancardi, a local member of the guild of instrumentalists, since Vivaldi explicitly dedicated one solo concerto to him.

The concerto for oboe and bassoon probably dates from the decade following 1728 when Vivaldi was especially interested in the possibilities of colorful solo orchestration in his concerti. The two soloists serve as duo partners throughout the work. The opening Andante molto is lyrically galant in its melodic textures, pointing to Vivaldi's interest in emerging musical fashions. The slow movement is entirely given over to the soloists. The work concludes with a good-natured Allegro that uses one of the characteristic motifs of the eighteenth century, the post-horn, whose octave call would be immediately recognizable to contemporary audiences.

Our concert ends with one of the great concerti grossi of Arcangelo Corelli. Although these works were published posthumously in 1714, Corelli had been working on them for many years. We have records that he was performing versions of these concerti in the early 1680s with a concertino trio formed by himself, his longtime companion and second violinist, Matteo Fornari, his favorite cellist, Lulier, and the distinguished harpsichordist, Bernardo Pasquini.

The brilliant effect of this small concertino ensemble that contrasted with the larger band was integral to Corelli's work. His *Concerto in D major*, Op. 6 no. 7, offers a series of calls and responses between the soloists and the orchestra, propelled by his trademark walking bass line. This sonata is intended for church, rather than chamber; along with some brilliant passagework, it offers a highly meditative Andante largo and a spacious fugue. The concerto closes with what seems suspiciously like a Gigue, although it is innocently called "Vivace." Here the solo violins indulge in wonderfully exuberant sixteenth-note passages, answering the full orchestra's dance-like syncopations.

— Robert Mealy