

PROGRAM NOTES

The connected realms of madness and enchantment were endlessly fascinating to the Baroque imagination. People who are mad, or who are under some kind of spell, act beyond themselves in unexpected and disconcerting ways. Perhaps because early modern culture was so highly hierarchical, 17th- and 18th-century composers found these moments where social rules were broken and things were not as they seem — these eruptions of disorder — as fertile ground for musical invention. Our concert today explores how some very different composers used these themes to create strange and wonderful works to delight and astonish their listeners.

We begin in late 17th-century England at a moment when London theaters were competing to stage ever more spectacular productions. Unlike in other countries, the idea of full-blown opera did not quite take root in England. Instead, the taste was for semi-operas where spoken plays shared the stage with astonishing special effects and elaborate musical numbers.

One of the biggest Restoration theaters in London was the Dorset Garden House, which opened in 1671. Its impresario, Thomas Betterton, had gone twice to France to study the theatrical machinery perfected by the Paris Opéra. Betterton went on to stage lavish versions of Shakespeare, packed with interpolated musical numbers and *coups de théâtre*. The last of these was a magnificent version of Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream*, now called "The Fairy Queen," produced for the 1691-92 season.

In between the acts of Shakespeare, Betterton introduced a series of Las Vegas-like show stoppers. A dance for six monkeys? A symphony while swans float down an onstage river? A chaconne for twenty-four Chinese dancers? Anything is possible in this world of enchantment, where things are not what they seem. And none of these have the slightest connection with Shakespeare's plot: instead, they are *divertissements*, entertainments for the eye and ear to show off the imagination of the producer and the composer. Luckily, Betterton had none other than Henry Purcell to work with as his in-house composer.

These Restoration spectacles were very much like Broadway shows. The productions would have months of rehearsal and required a huge investment from donors, all in hopes that the show would be a massive hit and turn a profit. Alas, as one contemporary remarked, "though the court and town were wonderfully satisfied with the *Fairy Queen* ... the expenses in setting it out being so great, the company got little by it." Its twelve-foot-high working fountain and six dancing real live monkeys have become notorious in theatre history as serious budget-breakers.

Moving from actual theater to the theater of the mind, we go next to Germany, where Georg Philipp Telemann was perfecting the overture-suite. Like many German composers, Telemann was fascinated with the possibilities this form offered. In its original incarnation, this would have simply been an extract of dances from an opera, prefaced by the opera's overture. But Telemann realized that this form had great potential for vivid orchestral effects. Instead of the standard court dances like courantes and sarabandes, for example, you could add character dances much like Purcell's witty movements for *Green Men* and monkeys. And the overture itself was a loose enough construction that it was easy to introduce Italian tricks of composition, with brilliant concerto-like episodes of virtuosity.

With his *Don Quixote* suite, Telemann had the smart idea of turning the overture-suite into a kind of musical novel, based on one of the most popular works of the day. Cervantes's *Don Quixote* is in the great tradition of chivalric romances, but with a twist: here the hero is totally crazy. He thinks he's living out the noble life of a knight errant, but he is actually just an old man on a broken-down horse.

Telemann frames his suite as one day in the life of Quixote. First Quixote awakens from a deep slumber, convinced now that he's a knight. Then he attacks the windmills, which he mistakes for fearsome giants. He sighs for love of the Princess Dulcinea (in reality, a peasant girl from the next farm over). His sidekick Sancho Panza suffers the punishment of being tossed in a blanket after Quixote leaves an inn without paying. Finally, after a portrait of their two horses (the noble charger Rosinante and Sancho Panza's donkey) Quixote drifts off to sleep, with dreams of galloping away...

One of the touchstones of Baroque madness was the popular ground bass pattern called *La Follia*. One early 17th-century writer explained that this Portuguese dance got its name because it was so fast and noisy that the dancers

seemed out of their minds. Like many dances, the Follia slowed down by the time it got to France in the late seventeenth century, and became a vehicle for increasingly elaborate sets of variations.

Perhaps the most famous of these variations is the set Arcangelo Corelli created to close his groundbreaking Op.5 collection of violin sonatas. In Corelli's hands, the tune goes through a huge range of characterizations, with the abrupt changes of mood that are the markers of insanity for the Baroque imagination. His student Francesco Geminiani moved to London where he discovered that the English were crazy for Corelli. Geminiani was quick to capitalize on this Corelli-mania by arranging his teacher's solo sonatas as *concerti grossi*. The Follia ground bass may have had a particular appeal in England since it was familiar as the subject of many sets of variations under the name of "Faronell's Ground."

With Francesco Durante's eccentric concerto, we come even closer to the heart of madness. Durante was one of the great figures in the influential Neapolitan music scene of the early 18th century, starting an aesthetic revolution that would lead to the wit and lightness of the Viennese Classical style. He himself taught such famous composers as Niccolò Jommelli, Giovanni Paisiello, Giovanni Battista Pergolesi, Niccolò Piccinni, and Leonardo Vinci, who all proudly referred to themselves as "Durantisti."

Durante mostly composed highly expressive sacred works, but he also produced a number of chamber concertos that are striking in their theatricality. His Concerto No.8, *La Pazzia*, breaks all the rules. Its opening ritornello starts normally enough, but becomes obsessed with one irritating figure. Suddenly everything stops, and we find ourselves in the midst of a passionate recitative by the solo violin. That peters out, only to be followed by the craziest idea of all: a lyrical duet for two violas. The rest of the concerto is equally quirky, if less formally bizarre. The slow movement is a sweet cantabile movement marked "Affettuoso," and the concerto closes with a brief energetic finale.

In the next generation of Italians, Luigi Boccherini is best known for his breathtakingly virtuosic writing for his own instrument, the cello. Along with composing over a hundred string quintets and another hundred quartets, Boccherini also found time to write nearly thirty symphonies, which are closely related to the opera overture of his day in their energy and brilliance.

With the highly dramatic D Minor symphony from his Op.12 collection, Boccherini creates a cyclic form by using the same slow introduction for the first and the third movement. The last movement is a reworking of Gluck's famous D Minor Chaconne from the ballet suite *Don Juan*, better known from its later appearance as the "Air des Furies" in the Paris version of *Orfeo*. Boccherini transforms Gluck's ordered chaconne into something far wilder, which led to a popular nickname for the symphony as a whole: "La casa del diavolo," a symphony direct from the house of the Devil himself.

— Robert Mealy