

PROGRAM NOTES

For several centuries and despite numerous armed conflicts, Venice maintained strong diplomatic and commercial ties with the Ottoman Empire, particularly with its capital, Constantinople (now known as Istanbul). Paintings by many great artists, from Carpaccio to the 18th-century *vedutisti*, bear witness to this, showing people in turbans and oriental clothes strolling through the public spaces of La Serenissima (nickname for Venice). Both mutual rivalry and fascination continually wove links between the disparate civilizations of Venice and Constantinople.

Moreover, 17th-century Venice was *the* most musically vital city in Italy. This vitality was expressed mainly in an unprecedented boom in opera; in fact, the world's first public theaters exclusively for opera opened here. Venice also was home to the development of autonomous and virtuosic instrumental music. These two trends were key elements of the new Baroque esthetic. It is not surprising, then, that **Claudio Monteverdi** came to La Serenissima; he was hired in 1612 as the *maestro di cappella* of Saint Mark's basilica. He, and his work, came to exercise considerable influence. Using the new style of accompanied monody supported by basso continuo with unrivaled suppleness and fidelity, and setting Italian texts to music in dramatic forms such as the opera and light forms such as the *canzonetta*, he succeeded in his lifelong quest to find ways to express human emotions.

Barbara Strozzi was trained by the Venetian opera master, Francesco Cavalli. She was poet Giulio Strozzi's daughter, natural or adopted. Her father provided her with an excellent education, and numerous wealthy patrons encouraged her both as a singer and as a composer. Her work ranges from polyphonic madrigals to duets and cantatas for solo voice in which aria and recitative are clearly distinguished. The Roman **Stefano Landi** worked for a while in Padua, and for the rest of his life wrote in the style of the Venetian school. He mostly pursued his career in the Eternal City (Rome), working for the Borghese and Barberini families. Most of his music was vocal, both sacred and secular, and of high quality. **Tarquinio Merula**, born in the Duchy of Parma, occupied posts as *maestro di cappella* in Cremona, Bergamo, and Venice and spent time in Warsaw. But the plasticity and variety of his compositional style clearly identify him as belonging to the Venetian school.

For melody instruments, and particularly the violin, the ideal was to preserve the specific character of the instrument while, at the same time, sounding as much as possible like the human voice. At the beginning of the 17th century, music was being written for these instruments in such creative profusion that the terms *sonata*, *canzona*, *sinfonia*, and *toccata* had not yet acquired their current precise meanings and often became interchangeable. **Salomone Rossi**, a Jewish violinist and composer, worked in Mantua where he enjoyed the esteem of his patron, the Duke of Gonzaga. Rossi wrote in all the genres of his day, and even though his vocal music remained essentially polyphonic, he developed the innovative beginnings of the trio sonata and a new expressive style of writing for the violin.

Giovanni Girolamo Kapsberger was born in La Serenissima — his father was a German military official — and became one of the greatest lutenists of his time. He published his first book of pieces in Venice before moving to Rome where he acquired a reputation as a virtuoso on the bass lutes—the archlute, theorbo, and *chitarrone* with their added long bass strings. These low-register strings do not lie over the fingerboard, and thus are not used to sound various pitches by pressing down on them with the fingers of the left hand. Rather, when plucked, they vibrate at full length.

Many instrumental pieces of the time, and especially dances such as chaconnes, passacaglias, and bergamasks, used melodies or bass lines with a standardized and recurring chord progression over which composers spun figures and variations of their own invention. Initially, in fact, these figures were mainly improvised as in today's jazz; and so, today, performers can combine tunes by different composers into a single piece, mixing, as here, Kapsberger with **Andrea Falconieri**, and with **Marco Uccellini**.

It was at this time that coffee, which some travelers had already tasted in Cairo, Mecca, or Constantinople, came to Europe. The new beverage quickly became hugely popular, and the coffee trade began to acquire commercial importance. For quite some time, it was the fashion among the new European coffee fanciers to dress like Turks so as to further enhance the exotic pleasure of their favorite brew! The first coffee houses, like those common throughout the Near East and decorated in Turkish style, opened in Venice. They soon spread to London, Paris, and Vienna, bringing to Europe a new, thoroughly modern kind of sociability.

The several modes of cultural exchange that brought Ottomans and Europeans closer together did not include music; whether in its notation, modes, vocal technique, or poetic form, the East-West dichotomy was clear. Nonetheless, some characteristic intervals and vocal ornaments, as well as the military rhythms of the Janissaries and various percussion

instruments, made their way into Western compositions. These components gave more or less exotic flavors to the numerous *Turqueries* performed on European stages for more than a century, from the *Bourgeois gentilhomme* of Molière and Lully to *The Abduction from the Seraglio* of Mozart.

It is also likely that, like coffee fanciers in their elegant Turkish garb, musicians of the day could not resist the temptation to include elements from the Near East to give original colors and flavors to their playing, or even to play with colleagues from the eastern Mediterranean. The addition of percussion and of Persian plucked-string instruments, as well as the possibility of playing semi-improvised instrumental preludes and ritornellos, is very much in keeping with the great freedom musicians enjoy in realizing a basso continuo accompaniment. And Venetian music from the early Baroque admirably suits the musicians of the ensemble Constantinople.

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Translated by Sean McCutcheon