

Tafelmusik

A Grand Tour of Italy

PROGRAM NOTES

By Christopher Verrette



Italy was the principal source of the musical trends that came to define baroque music in the seventeenth century. The innovative new forms of opera, sonata, and concerto were all developed there. Copious volumes of music were published, especially in Venice, and Italian musicians travelled across Europe, bringing their talents and compositions. This program moves freely between different generations of composers and different cities and courts, both within and outside Italy.

The **Bergamasca** was a popular dance that allegedly lampooned the citizens of Bergamo. Musically it was set to a four-note repeating bass line, over which parts could either be composed or improvised. Bergamascas have a playful affect that can be associated with performers: the mischievous servant character in Italian

Commedia dell'arte, named Arlecchino, is ostensibly a native of Bergamo, and the "Rude Mechanicals" dance a Bergomask in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. **Marco Uccellini** was a violinist based in Modena. His Bergamasca comes from his Opus 3, published in Venice in 1642.

We jump ahead a few decades to Venice under the spell of the prolific composer and violinist, **Antonio Vivaldi**. Although Venice had been a major centre for publishing—most of the music on this program was published there—Vivaldi preferred to have his music published in Amsterdam, as was the case with his Opus 9, entitled *La Cetra*. The title refers to a type of Ancient Greek harp and is no doubt a gesture toward its dedicatee, the Emperor Charles VI, who was himself a musician and music lover. The symbol relates the violin, as solo instrument in the concertos, to the instruments that accompanied classical drama, but also refers to the Hapsburg monarchs themselves, who frequently used the symbol of the lyre. A year after its publication, Vivaldi met the Emperor in person, who gave him gifts and engaged him in extended conversation (apparently to the chagrin of his ministers).

The title *La Cetra* had in fact been used many years before by **Giovanni Legrenzi** for a book of sonatas dedicated to another musical emperor, Charles' father Leopold I. Legrenzi had held positions in Bergamo and Ferrara prior to coming to Venice, where he published his Opus 10 in 1673. It is his last and most ambitious set. The scoring of one sonata for four violins is unusual, and is perhaps most striking in the first movement, when one can hear a number of short motifs being passed quickly from one violin to the next.

The interaction of four separate violin parts was also employed by **Giuseppe Valentini** in one of his concerti grossi, a departure from the usual two violin soloists. Valentini was part of the vital music scene in Rome during the heyday of Corelli, where there was lots of work at the various churches and in the households of influential families. It is unknown whether Valentini actually studied with Corelli, but he was certainly part of the pool of freelancers Corelli regularly called upon, and is known to have held positions with the Ruspoli and Borghese families as well. His music was circulated internationally and was frequently plagiarized.

Arcangelo Corelli was revered as a composer and violinist both during his career and after. His instrumental music represents a kind of benchmark for the forms that would dominate the later baroque. He is largely credited with developing the concerto grosso, in which a small *concertino* group interacts with a larger *ripieno*. Although he apparently composed and directed performances of concerti grossi throughout his career, they only saw publication at the end of his life, as his final Opus 6. The eighth concerto is a favourite for its seasonal content, the finale **Pastorale**, "written for the nativity." Another unusual feature in this concerto is the performance indication at the first **Grave**: "*come sta*," meaning to play it "as is," without the added ornamentation that would normally be expected of the performers.

Dario Castello was among the first generation of composers to explore the possibilities of the sonata in the early seventeenth century. Little is known about his life; on the title page of his first volume of sonatas he claims to be chief wind player at San Marco in Venice, and several of his sonatas do include parts for cornetto, dulcian,

and trombone, the principal wind instruments used in churches at the time. His works tend to be in many sections with bold changes of character.

Throughout the baroque era, Italian musicians travelled and frequently found successful positions abroad. The Hapsburg court in Vienna, the seat of the Holy Roman Empire, was noted for employing the finest Italian musicians, and it was here that the young Veronese **Antonio Bertali** found employment as an instrumentalist. He never returned to Italy, and would eventually ascend to the position of *Capellmeister*. An accomplished violinist, he is most noted for his sonatas today, but was also a composer of vocal music and had a great deal of influence over the development of Italian opera at the Imperial court, which continued for generations.

One of the best-travelled musicians of the seventeenth century was **Biagio Marini**. A native of Brescia, a major violin-making centre, he worked at San Marco in Venice under Monteverdi, at various Italian courts, in Germany, and as far away as Brussels. He eventually returned to Venice. He was a daring and innovative composer for the violin, creating what is some of the first solo repertoire for that instrument. The **Passacaglia** that closes his final opus, however, eschews virtuosity completely: a version of the passacaglia bass pattern is used as a recurring refrain, and while the intervening sections carry us through some striking harmonies, they never accelerate into fast notes, maintaining a state of gravity throughout.

We close with music by an Italian expatriate who not only never returned home, but went in a very different direction with his musical style as well. The Florentine **Giovanni Battista Lulli** was brought to France as a teenager for a position as an Italian tutor. Already possessing some musical and theatrical skills, he somehow continued his musical education in France, and became a favourite of the young Louis XIV. When Louis took over as ruler in 1661, he named Jean-Baptiste Lully his *Surintendant* of the royal music and granted him French citizenship. Lully led ensembles at court that were legendary for their discipline. Eventually he took on the challenge of creating a French form of opera, and obtained what was essentially a monopoly for its production. Dance always had a large role in these spectacles. The elegant **Chaconne** from his mature opera *Phaëton* was widely copied and transcribed in the period.

© C. Verrette 2016