

Tafelmusik

The Baroque Diva

PROGRAM NOTES

By Christopher Verrette

Opera was an invention of baroque Italy, and while other regions would create their own styles, opera sung in Italian would continue to be enjoyed in many cities and courts throughout Europe, including Dresden, Vienna, St. Petersburg, and London. **George Frideric Handel** began to present his Italian operas in London in 1711, and personally recruited singers from Italy for the task. These singers became celebrities in their new home. Contemporary accounts of these artists describe not only their voices, but also their manner on stage, and (sometimes unfavourably) their "person" or relative physical beauty. Rivalry among the singers could become quite public, with their respective fans creating disturbances during performances.

The "degrees of separation" between the various composers on this program are slight indeed. **Georg Philipp Telemann** holds the Guinness world record (posthumously!) for the most prolific composer of all time, at least on the basis of the sheer number of pieces he wrote. He also seems to have been one of the best-connected composers of his time. From his chosen city of Hamburg he had extensive reach. He wrote music for other courts, was involved in music education, publishing, and early copyright matters, took interest in ethnic styles of music, and corresponded regularly with many other composers and theorists, including his lifelong friend, Handel.

Another of his friends and correspondents was the extraordinary violinist **Johann Georg Pisendel**, a pivotal figure in music in the eighteenth century. A leading violinist with the famed Dresden Kapelle, many distinguished composers dedicated music to him, including Telemann, Albinoni, and Vivaldi. There are also strong connections between Pisendel and the Bach family. It was in fact Pisendel who brought to the attention of Telemann (also an accomplished poet) that he should eulogize the recently deceased Bach. Telemann responded with an ode, as he would for Pisendel himself some years later.

Pisendel met the violin virtuoso, composer, and priest **Antonio Vivaldi** while travelling in Venice with the ensemble of the crown prince of Saxony. While it is often said that he studied with Vivaldi, the relationship seems more likely to have been an opportune meeting between two peers with genuine respect for one another. He did not otherwise have the easiest visit to Italy: jealous violinists in the orchestra tried to sabotage his first solo appearance, which he survived by keeping his cool and beating his foot. On another occasion he was detained by authorities in St Mark's Square in an apparent case of mistaken identity, and it was Vivaldi himself who negotiated his release.

TELEMANN CONCERTO IN A MAJOR

Telemann's A-Major Concerto includes some virtuoso passagework that may reflect his knowledge of Pisendel's style, but the dominating feature of the work is its imitation of the peeping of frogs. The soloist initiates this, after the opening tutti, with an effect called *bariolage*, an alternation of an open string with a fingered note on the same pitch. This figure is elaborated and imitated, and soon we hear a whole chorus of frogs that the composer takes through some extended and unexpected harmonic sequences. In the second movement we hear the frog once more before the violin embarks upon a cantabile melody, but the frogs can still be heard in the viola part at times. The concerto concludes with an elegant minuet and no further amphibian interference.

HANDEL EZIO



Handel's *Ezio* had all the ingredients to be a commercial success: an excellent cast of singers, a libretto by Metastasio, and all new sets and costumes (a relative rarity), but it only lasted for five poorly attended performances at the King's Theatre in January, 1732, although the king himself attended all but one. Its female lead was the soprano **Anna Maria Strada** (pictured left) as Fulvia, a woman trapped between rival lovers and the murderous machinations of her own father. "Il mio costanza" comes in Act II, when she admits in front of the emperor Valentinian, who wishes to marry her, that she is in fact in love with the General Ezio, who has just been arrested (erroneously) for an attempt on the emperor's life. Strada was part of a second wave of talented singers imported by Handel to rebuild his company after a bankruptcy. While her singing was admired, she was criticized for her appearance and the faces she made while singing, earning her the nickname "the pig."

TELEMANN CONCERTO IN D MINOR

In the D-Minor Concerto, Telemann puts into opposition a wind trio of oboes and bassoon and a string group. In the first movement, they mostly play together in similar rhythm, like a big choir, but in the fast movements the two groups rarely play at the same time, as if in conversation.

VIVALDI MOTET "O QUI COELI"

Vivaldi is mostly associated with the city of Venice and the solo violin concerto, but he became increasingly interested in opera over the course of his career, and this would take him to other cities such as Rome, where his operas were presented during carnival in both 1723 and 1724. At this time he came into contact with Cardinal Ottoboni, a member of one of the wealthy families that employed many of the best musicians, including Handel at one time. The motet "O qui coeli" was probably written for Ottoboni. Perhaps it was intended for one of the singers who also performed his operas. The text calls upon the listeners to turn their eyes from the transient attractions of the earthly to the eternal promises of the heavenly.

PISENDEL SONATA DA CHIESA

Instrumental music was used widely in church to support and sometimes even replace parts of the liturgy. While noted as a virtuoso, Pisen del shows in the *Sonata da chiesa* (church sonata) that he can compose with disciplined contrapuntal technique. The austere five-note subject of the second movement is typical of this style.

HANDEL *ALCINA*

In 1733, Handel lost most of his singers to a rival company. Anna Maria Strada stayed though, and in 1735 played the title role in one of his greatest successes, *Alcina*. This sorceress is one of his most captivating characters, in more ways than one: she keeps people prisoners on her enchanted island in the form of rocks, trees, animals, and some as spellbound lovers. Her demise comes when she falls in love with Ruggiero: he escapes her spell and she loses her powers. She sings "Ah, mio cor" upon the realization that she has been deceived and deserted, powerfully expressed through her unaccompanied entrance. In the middle section, she breaks out of her despair just long enough to swear vengeance if he does not return.

PISENDEL CONCERTO DA CHIESA

The G-Minor Concerto reveals Pisen del's considerable talents as both a violinist and composer. The intricate high passagework for the solo violinist is typical of his style, but he was highly regarded for his performance of slow movements. The fugal opening of the last movement is unusual in a solo concerto.

HANDEL *RODELINDA*



The role of Rodelinda was originated in 1725 by **Francesca Cuzzoni** (*pictured left*), one of the notorious rival sopranos in Handel's troupe. "Mio caro bene" is the final aria of the opera, when Rodelinda is joyfully reunited with her husband, who had been exiled and believed dead. According to Horace Walpole, her performance was upstaged by her costume, which apparently scandalized the older audience but was adopted by the young as the height of fashion.

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Note about *Entwined*, by the composer

Over the next year, Canada will see numerous celebrations as part of the 150th anniversary of Confederation. Canada certainly has much to celebrate, but it's important to me that these celebrations don't come without acknowledging the darker parts of our past, especially the treatment of Indigenous peoples in our country. We have taken important steps in recent years — Canada 150, for its part, has made reconciliation one of its four main themes. But I feel strongly that these steps need to be seen in the context of ongoing systemic discrimination.

Canada as a country is only 150 years old, but the shared history between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples goes back much farther. The interwoven layers of *Entwined* are meant to suggest how our stories are (and will continue to be) diverse yet deeply connected, and how we all have a role to play in reconciliation.



As a composer, **Colin Labadie** writes notably un-classical music for classical instruments. Through simple patterning and subtle variation, he seeks to build intricate yet clear structures and sounds. As a performer, he does exactly the opposite: he creates noisy and chaotic textures, usually with mutant guitars or homemade circuits. He often roots around in thrift stores, hunting for odd sounds in the world of forgotten electronics. Colin currently lives in Kitchener-Waterloo. He has been fortunate enough to perform or have his work performed across Canada, as well as in many non-Canadian countries. When he isn't listening to music, he can usually be found trying to sniff out a good barbecue joint.