

About the Music.

Little is known about **Dario Castello**, the early-seventeenth-century musician who wrote the entrancing music that opens The English Concert's program today. Even the dates of his birth and death are disputed. However, we do know that he flourished in the glorious musical world of Venice, Italy, during a period when Claudio Monteverdi was the Maestro di Musica at the magnificent Basilica of St. Mark's, as well as at the lavish court of the Doge, ruler of Venice. A member of a musical family, he was a violinist at St. Mark's musical chapel and probably chosen for that post by Monteverdi himself. Since he led a Venetian company of *piffari*, or wind players, it is possible that he also played one of those instruments

Unfortunately, Castello's career was short: he is believed to have died in his twenties during the great plague that ravaged Venice in 1630–31. Nevertheless, in 1621 and 1629 he published two volumes comprising twenty-nine sonatas for mixed string and wind ensembles that sealed his immortality. These are beautiful and sometimes dramatic works that show him incorporating aspects of Monteverdi's revolutionary *stile concitato* used for operas and madrigals into a new Baroque instrumental style. Castello labeled these sonatas *in stil moderno* — "in the modern style."

Harry Bicket has chosen the **Sonata No. 14** (or *Sonata decimaquarta*), which comes from Castello's second book, published in 1629. It calls for two soprano instruments (generally

violins) plus two *trombone* or bass parts (which can be trombones or another low-voiced instrument such as Castello's favorite, the dulcian, a Baroque predecessor of the bassoon) over *violette* (continuo instruments such as harpsichord or cello). Thus there are several possible choices for instruments for this sonata that uses an intriguing blend of different colors.

Though the musical flow is essentially continuous in this piece, there are many internal sections moving between the fast and brilliant, like the thrilling Venetian brass music written by Andrea Gabrieli, and the slow and melodious — usually for the high instruments — throughout. The musicians need to be very alert, as there is much slowing down and speeding up within sections. This is splendid ensemble music that deserves to be better known.

Despite his short lifetime, 1659 to 1695, **Henry Purcell** is still revered today as perhaps England's greatest native-born composer. At only age twenty, he was appointed organist at Westminster Abbey. The Restoration of the Stuart monarchy in 1660 after Cromwell's short-lived Puritan republic ushered in a brilliant musical and literary period at the English court in which Purcell, a born musical dramatist, flourished.

One of Purcell's most popular pieces is the dazzling **Fantasia: Three Parts upon a Ground**, which may also have been one of his earliest compositions, as it is thought to have been composed around 1678 when he

was still in his teens. “Ground” refers to the repeated six-note bass pattern that underpins the whole work and was one of Purcell’s favorite forms for building pieces both vocal and instrumental. Dido’s great lament “When I am in Laid in Earth” from his operatic masterpiece *Dido and Aeneas* is another famous example. The descending ground bass Purcell used for this piece was not his invention; it was already a very well-known ground, used by many other composers. This compositional form is also known as a *chaconne*.

The composer wrote two versions of *Three Parts*: one in D Major for violins, and another in F Major for flutes or recorders. Some arrangements performed today even combine violins and recorders for the three upper voices. Over the bass line, the three upper voices are deployed in a stunning series of variations using many different contrapuntal techniques, including canons. Proudly showing off his mastery, Purcell labels them in the score. As the piece progresses, he frees the ground pattern from the bass and sends it to the higher voices. A particularly exciting sequence involves galloping dotted rhythms chasing each other from instrument to instrument, while at least one instrument always maintains the ground. While meters change frequently, *Three Parts* always has the feeling of a dance in three beats. The last variation is the most startling of all as Purcell allows his parts to collide with each other in wild dissonance. Emphasizing this

sequence’s strangeness, he adds the instruction “Drag,” commanding his players, in an old English style, to stretch their beats like taffy.

Though unfortunately too little known today, **Georg Muffat** was a tremendously influential composer and organist who used his extensive knowledge of French and Italian styles to infuse a polyglot musical style into German and Austrian Baroque instrumental music. Indeed, his rich and melodious music deserves a revival, which is already underway.

Born in Savoy, now part of France, Muffat was steeped in the graceful elegance of French court music during the six years he spent studying in Paris, probably under Jean-Baptiste Lully, Louis XIV’s principal composer. He then moved to posts in the German-speaking lands, finally settling for ten years at the Salzburg court. Additional exposure to international trends came during the period of 1681–82, when he was granted leave to study in Rome and fell under the spell of Arcangelo Corelli (1653–1713) and his peerless trio sonatas. It was there that Muffat wrote the five gorgeous sonatas of *Armonico Tributo* (“Harmonic Tribute”), and it was at Corelli’s house in Rome where they were first played. When he returned to Salzburg in 1682, they became his first published works.

In fact, these sonatas represent the early stages of the popular Baroque concerto grosso genre. They include a small orchestra (the *tutti*) and, drawn from this ensemble, three soloists in

Corelli's trio-sonata formation of two violins and cello. And they intermingle standard Baroque suite dances in the French style with movements simply marked Allegro or Adagio, which are treated in the Italian style. The sonic differentiation between these two groups is skillfully managed to create a lovely chiaroscuro effect.

In the **Sonata No. 5 in G Major**, the last and finest of the set, Muffat dispenses with the customary lively Allegro movement and instead gives us a courtly Allemande dance in a stately tempo — an evocation of Lully's ceremonial style. (In fact, the only fast movement is the third, the Fuga.) Then comes a smooth, chordal, not very slow Adagio in Italianate style, featuring the unified ensemble. This brief movement leaves us on the doorstep of the Fuga, whose subject is introduced by the solo trio, then picked up by the tutti. Indeed, the soloists remain the leaders throughout this intricate counterpoint, announcing each new phase of the fugue. Next is another Adagio, this time a very dark and solemn one. It displays a signature slow-movement style Muffat borrowed from Italy: upper voices delivering beautiful suspensions, or held notes, that create passing dissonances atop an unflappable walking bass line.

These movements are all relatively brief. The magnificent fifth, the Passacaille, is as long as all of them put together. Also known as a passacaglia, this is a French dance created over a repeating ground bass theme — a form similar to that used in the previous

Purcell piece. Here, there are twenty-five variations on a bass pattern that is similar to the one used in Bach's much later "Goldberg" Variations. Again, the theme and its ground are introduced by the solo trio. The marvelous array of moods Muffat creates from his simple ground and the superb interplay between the soloists and the orchestra throughout provide ample testimony that Muffat's music should never be forgotten.

We next hear the intoxicating "**La Follia**" variations based on the eponymous tune that has been fascinating composers and music lovers for centuries. This captivating three-beat melody has been around since the 1400s, when the Spanish and Portuguese adopted it for a dance so riotous that a 1611 Spanish dictionary dubbed it *La Folia*, meaning "mad" or "empty-headed."

During the Baroque period, creating variations on "La Follia" became a mini-obsession; famous composers such as Bach, Alessandro Scarlatti, and Vivaldi displayed their imaginative skills on this theme. The Italian violin master Arcangelo Corelli concluded his Op. 5 Violin Sonatas with twenty-five beautiful "La Follia" variations. When Corelli's pupil **Francesco Geminiani** moved to London in 1714, he transformed Corelli's original version, scored for solo violin and continuo, into the **Concerto Grosso in D Minor** for string orchestra, expanding the virtuosity from a single violinist to many players. String ensembles were proliferating at this time in

London, and Geminiani's variations immediately became a popular hit.

In Geminiani's colorful adaptation of the more restrained Corelli original, the emphasis is on showy virtuosity and excitement. The variety of moods it encompasses is extraordinary, from dreamily romantic and pensively melancholic to fiery, fast-tempo explosiveness. And in his closing group of variations, Geminiani creates a thrillingly climactic drive to the finish line.

The prolific **George Frideric Handel** frequently composed major works at breathtaking speed. The most famous example is *Messiah*, which was completed in about three weeks. The twelve Concerti Grossi, Op. 6, are yet another instance, written in just a month's time in 1739 — or, as Baroque conductor Martin Pearlman has observed, at the rate of a full concerto every two and a half to three days! Some scholars rank them in importance with Bach's six "Brandenburg" Concertos.

Handel wrote these enchanting works in the autumn of 1739, when he was absorbed in composing oratorios. They had a very practical purpose: he needed new instrumental works to perform during the pauses between the oratorios' sections. And there was another reason, related to the preceding Geminiani/Corelli piece. The English had a passion for the music of the by-then-deceased Corelli, who had created only a small body of work. Handel's publisher, John Walsh, urged him to write concerti grossi in

the manner of Corelli to meet this potentially lucrative demand.

Although Handel somewhat followed the concerto grosso model of Corelli's Op. 6, his concertos were considerably more elaborate and varied in style. In a flexible, improvisatory fashion, they included dance movements alongside purely abstract music designated by tempo markings.

The **Concerto Grosso No. 1 in G Major** opens with a movement marked *A tempo giusto*, which means simply "at the appropriate tempo." Here Handel has written this music in Baroque overture style, so the chosen tempo should be moderate and proud. In fact, this music is a reworking of a draft of the overture for *Imeneo*, one of Handel's late Italian operas, written at about the same time. Here the orchestra presents the majestic dotted-rhythm ritornello, and the solo instruments — two violins and cello — respond with lyrically flowing interludes. Movement two is a high-spirited Allegro in which the tutti's strongly etched opening measures keep repeating while the solo trio peeks out with contrasting material. Shifting to E minor, the coolly beautiful Adagio is dominated by the solo trio, as the tutti takes on a subsidiary role.

A vivacious Allegro, the fourth movement is fugal in style, with one of the solo violins spinning out the lengthy subject at the beginning. In the closing moments, Handel pulls off a Haydnesque trick: Just as we are expecting a final grand statement

of the subject, he abruptly stops the music in its tracks, then appends a tiny, whispered coda. Last is a merrily bouncing Gigue, a borrowing from a Baroque dance suite. Its theme is built on echo effects, which are then charmingly tossed back and forth between the orchestra and soloists.

Ever restless for new opportunities, in 1717 **Johann Sebastian Bach** abandoned his secure niche at Weimar to become composer at the much smaller princely court of Cöthen. The move seems odd, since the Cöthen court followed the Reformed or Calvinist faith, which permitted only unaccompanied hymns in its church services; Bach had to virtually abandon the organ. But there were positive inducements. Prince Leopold of Anhalt-Cöthen was a highly cultivated musician who maintained a fine orchestra and a rich program of secular music at his court. And he offered higher wages, an important concern considering Bach's rapidly expanding family: he was eventually to sire twenty children.

At Cöthen, Bach created much of his finest secular instrumental music, including concertos for solo instruments in the manner of Vivaldi. Since these were intended as ephemeral pieces to be quickly replaced by newer concertos, only a few survive today. In fact, we would not have the superb **Concerto for Two Violins in D Minor** if Bach had not later arranged it for two harpsichords in Leipzig in the early 1730s. Fortunately, the original violin parts were preserved as well.

It opens with a big and elaborate tutti with rich contrapuntal play between the orchestral string parts. Thus, the soloists present the illusion of less complexity as well as welcome airiness when they enter. The tutti and the soloists each have distinct themes: the orchestra's beginning with a rising four-note scale, the soloists' with descending scales and angular upward leaps.

Focusing on the soloists, the slow movement is one of the most sublime movements Bach ever wrote. It is a love duet in which the two violins curve around each other in dance-like imitative phrases. Notice the tender simplicity of the four-note descending phrases when the two come together in euphonious sixths. The poignant expressiveness of this music derives from the many stings of dissonance between the violins resolving into sweet consonance.

The lively third movement is one of Bach's most ingenious. Here the roles of the soloists and the orchestra are sometimes reversed, so that the soloists lead the opening tutti and then later imitate an orchestral accompaniment with energetic chords. The opening three-note motive that launches the theme is constantly repeated by the orchestra or echoed by the second soloist. And in his 3/4 meter, Bach happily accents any beat, or even portion thereof, in an infectious display of rhythmic vivacity.

— Janet E. Bedell