

LOCATELLI AND THE EARLY ITALIANS

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Pietro Locatelli was born on 3 September 1695 in Bergamo. He was the greatest Italian violin virtuoso of his time and a brilliant composer.

He was a pupil of Arcangelo Corelli in Rome.

Corelli was born in Fusignano near Milan in 1653. His youth was spent largely in France and Germany as a virtuoso violinist. He returned to Rome in 1685 spending the rest of his life as a musician in the palace of Cardinal Ottoboni. Corelli amassed a fine art collection and died a very rich man. He had a great influence on Handel particularly with the Concerto Grosso form. His works are collections designated as six opus numbers as follows:

Opus 1. 12 Sonatas a tre

Opus 2. 12 Sonata da camera a tre

Opus 3. 12 Sonata a tre

Opus 4. 12 Sonata a camera a tre

Opus 5. 12 Sonatas for violin and cembalo which Geminiani arranged as some of his Concerti Grossi

Opus 6. 12 Concerti Grossi

His most famous work is the Concerto Grosso in G minor Op. 6 no. 8 for strings and continuo which dates from 1712 and intended as a concerto da chiesa (for church use) and was inscribed *Fatto per la Notte di Natale* (made for Christmas Night). He died the following year.

Another Italian composer and violin virtuoso, Giuseppe Torelli, who was born in Verona in 1658, wrote 12 concerti grossi, his opus 8, around 1709, also for strings and continuo, and his number six, also in G Minor, is a pastoral for the holy night of Christmas.

Locatelli settled in Amsterdam where he established concert series and developed new effects and techniques on the violin.

It is this that sets him apart. His work was original and non-conformist. His major work is *L'Arte del Violino* which consists of 12 concerti and 24 caprices for string quartet and continuo. They are works of extraordinary difficulty. He wrote six violin concerti, six string trios and sonatas for solo violin.

His music may not have the polished refinement of his teacher Corelli. His contemporary Francesco Manfredini, who was born in Pistoia around 1680, wrote concerti grossi and a set of 12 Sinfoni da chiesa in 1709 (he was the Choir Master at Pistoia Cathedral from 1734) but his work does not have the extended development or profound craftsmanship of Locatelli.

Manfredini had a son when he was in his late fifties. Vincenzo Manfredini had a Court post in Russia from 1758 to 1769 and, as music had 'moved on', he wrote ballets as well as opera and keyboard sonatas.

Reference was made above to Francesco Geminiani who was the first composer to utterly confuse me when I was a boy studying Italian concerti. His orchestration of the Corelli concerti bore his name not Corelli's. Where they merely orchestrations or complete reworking, that is to say adaptations, as the great Arnold Schoenberg made of concerti by Georg Monn? It is like the recent problem of Elgar's Symphony no. 3. It cannot be said to be Elgar's. It is Anthony Payne's Symphony on themes of Elgar as is Hindemith's Symphonic Metamorphosen on themes of Carl Maria von Weber. The star-billing is wrong.

Geminiani was born in Yucca in 1687. He too was a pupil of Corelli and Alessandro Scarlatti the father of Domenico who wrote those 550 single movement keyboard sonatas. Geminiani was in the Naples opera orchestra from 1711 to 1714 and lived in London from 1714 with extensive stays in Dublin from 1733 to 1740 and from 1759 until his death in 1762. He was clearly inspired by Locatelli since he produced *The Art of playing the Violin* in London in 1740, the first violin method to ever be published. It is also said that he invented the signs for

crescendo and diminuendo, or hair clips as we called them. He also wrote *The Art of Accompaniment* in 1755 and *The Art of Playing the Guitar* in 1760 which comprise 11 sonatas for guitar, cello and harpsichord. Apart from concerti grossi, 24 Violin sonatas and 6 Cello sonatas, he wrote a ballet *La foresta incantata* produced in Paris in 1754.

One of Geminani's pupils was Charles Avison who studied with him in London. Avison was born in Newcastle upon Tyne in 1709 and died there in 1770. He was the organist at the city's cathedral from 1736 until his death although he was tempted with more financially secure appointments elsewhere. His *Essay on Musical Expression* published in London in 1752 caused a stir. He wrote some 60 Concerti Grossi and three volumes of sonatas for harpsichord and violin.

Perhaps I should define Concerto grosso. It means Great Concerto. They are antiphonal works that means a small body of strings (usually) called a concertino, concertato or concertante, which alternates with a larger group called the ripieno.

The word continuo is another annoying word although figured bass is more accurate. This was the musical shorthand for the keyboard part, a mere bass line with a certain number of figures above or below them to tell the player what chords to play. So if a piece was in D major and the given bass note was A with 6/4 indicated it would tell the player that the chord was the second inversion of the tonic triad and the notes to fill in were a F sharp and a D and to obtain four part harmony one note would have to be repeated (the technical word is doubled) and you do not double the third so the F sharp could not be used twice. Often the continuo also had a bass instrument like a viola da gamba or cello also playing the bottom note on the keyboard part. This I have never liked as it can give too much prominence to the bass, a ghastly attribute used in so much pop music of our day

The other annoying thing about early music is ornamentation, another type of musical shorthand. These were decorations such as the trill, shake, mordent, acciaccatura and appoggiatura and so on. It was easier to write a sign that, as in the case of the trill and shake, umpteen more notes. But we do not know exactly what the composer wanted. Did he want the shake or trill to start on the given note or the note above? Is the trill or shake to end with a turn or not?

Who cares?

Sadly, music examination boards do, and in most examinations, you have to play an early piece with ornamentation.

Musicologists have fussed about the authenticity of ornaments and even been dictatorial as to how they should be played. Some have gone overboard as to the use of period instruments and matters of authenticity.

In those times key signatures were usually confined to a maximum of three sharps although that is quite rare and three flats. Locatelli was more adventurous. He was a 'modern'. For example, the eighth of his twelve opus 1 Concerti Grossi is in F minor. Haydn was daring as well. He wrote a symphony in B (with five sharps), his Symphony no. 46. The previous symphony is in F sharp minor also very rare for his time and the Symphony no. 49 is in F minor.

The F minor Concerto begins with a sober elegance with an almost tragic feel but everything is measured. It may be rather too serious but, speaking personally, I would rather a composer took his work seriously. There follows a splendid fugue. Fugues tend to be predictable which is why they are not always valued but the energy generated here is very exciting and foot-tapping stuff. It has an immense swagger. This is followed by what I call lonely music. Haydn may have called it farewell music. A precursor of a scherzo comes next and has some curious modern sounds for the time. My performance contains a chamber organ which gives an aural impression of hollow woodwind. A leisurely well-controlled quickish movement follows and a type of pastorale concludes the work with its open air music but it is still rather lonely music.

Locatelli was a forward looking composer, more so than his contemporaries. But he suffered abuse. The fifth edition of Grove dating from 1954 says of Locatelli, "He oversteps all reasonable limits and aims at effects which, being adverse to the very nature of the violin, are neither beautiful nor musical, but ludicrous and absurd." The writer is being absurd just as Elgar was when he said similar and equally stupid things about Walton's magnificent Viola Concerto.

Here is a list of Locatelli's works

- Opus 1. 12 Concerti Grossi (Amsterdam 1721)
- Opus 2. Sonatas for flute (Amsterdam 1732)
- Opus 3. The Art of the Violin. 12 Concerti Grossi and 24 caprices (1733)
- Opus 4. Six introduzioni teatrali and six concerti (1737)
- Opus 5. Six sonatas a tre (1737)
- Opus 6. Six sonatas for solo violin (1737)
- Opus 7. Six concerti a quattro (1741)
- Opus 8. Trios for two violins and bass (1741)
- Opus 9. L'Art di nouva modulazione — caprices enigmatiques
- Opus 10. Contrasto armonico: concerti a quattro.

Like Corelli, Handel's patron at one time was Cardinal Ottoboni. Handel wrote 6 Concerti Grossi as his Opus 3 and 12 more as his opus 12, the last of which in B minor has a glorious slow movement well ahead of its time and was used as a signature tune to a Home service daily programme called Five to Ten a five minute religious programme on the BBC in those far off days when I was a boy.

In the twentieth century some composers revived the Concerto Grosso. Among them were Ernest Bloch, Vaughan Williams and Sally Beamish.

Of course, Handel was German until he was naturalized as an Englishman in 1726. I have heard it said that he wrote the first ever musical masterpiece namely The Messiah which was premiered in Dublin in 1742. Or do they mean the first ever British musical masterpiece? I have conducted it many times and it is still as glorious and spiritually uplifting as ever. When young I saw the wonderful Sybil Michelow in the contralto part and, at a Prom, Monica Groop excelled as well. It is a pity when a counter tenor sings the contralto arias particularly But Who may abide the day of His coming? The contralto voice has more power and depth to convey such words.

Another Italian violin virtuoso was Giuseppe Tartini. He was born in Pirano in 1695, the son of a wealthy nobleman. He learned the violin as a child and then went to Padua University. When he married secretly he fled from Padua because of disapproval of his marriage. He took refuge in the monastery of Assissi where he studied composition. Here he wrote his most famous piece The Devil's Trill sonata for violin and keyboard. He invented a new violin bow and gave recitals. Forgiven he returned to Padua in 1715. He was a violinist in the Court orchestra and became first violin at the Cappella del Santo in Padua from 1721 to 1723. He was Kapellmeister of Count Kinsky's ensemble in Prague from 1723 to 1725. On his return to Padua in 1728 he founded a school for violin playing. He composed many concerti and sonatas and died in Padua in 1770.

The last of the greatest Italian violin virtuosos was Niccolò Paganini who was born in Genoa in 1782, eighteen years after the death of Locatelli in Amsterdam on 30 March 1764. Clearly Locatelli's 24 Caprices inspired Paganini's 24 caprices for solo violin known as his Opus 1. Like Locatelli he introduced new effects and techniques and among these was the use of harmonics. The suggestion that when he played he appeared to be the Devil incarnate is probably unfair. Unlike Locatelli he was a showman which is a polite way of saying a show-off. His odd and rare appearances later in life was possibly due to the cancer of the larynx which eventually killed him in 1840.

The famous Paganini caprice has been used for endless sets of variations including those by Rachmaninov, Blacher and Lutoslawski. And so we have covered 300 years.

This is the text of an illustrated talk given by Dr David Wright in March 2002.

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