

WIGMORE HALL

Friday 24 January 2025
7.30pm

The Contest of Apollo and Pan

La Serenissima

Adrian Chandler director, violin

Tabea Debus recorder

Miriam Monaghan recorder

Oliver Cave violin I

Guy Button violin I

Abel Balazs violin

Agata Daraškaitė violin II

Camilla Scarlett violin II

Ellen Bundy violin II

Charlotte Amherst violin II

Elitsa Bogdanova viola

Tom Kirby viola

Jim O'Toole viola

Vladimir Waltham cello

Carina Drury cello

Jan Zahourek double bass

Lynda Sayce theorbo

Robin Bigwood organ, harpsichord

Arcangelo Corelli (1653-1713)

Sonata a 4 in G minor WoO. 2

Giuseppe Valentini (1681-1753)

Concerto in F for 2 recorders, 2 violins and continuo

Pietro Gnocchi (1689-1775)

Concerto V in D minor for 4 violins, viola, cello and continuo

Antonio Vivaldi (1678-1741)

Violin Concerto in A minor RV355

Interval

Francesco Mancini (1672-1737)

Sonata No. 12 in A minor for recorder, 2 violins and continuo

Pietro Gnocchi

Concerto VI in B flat minor for 4 violins, viola, cello and continuo

Alessandro Scarlatti (1660-1725)

Sinfonia Prima di Concerto grosso in F for 2 recorders, strings and continuo



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The influence of the civilisations of Ancient Greece and Rome had a profound impact upon the arts of Renaissance Europe. Even during the 18th Century, artists, writers and musicians continued to look to the myths and legends of Arcadia for their inspiration. It is no surprise, therefore, that composers associated groups of instruments with their classical equivalents: thus, music for strings was considered to be Apollonian, whilst music for woodwinds was linked with either Marsyas, master of the aulos, or with the piper, Pan.

Ovid's *Metamorphoses* contains two stories detailing the musical triumphs of the sun god Apollo. In the first, he defeats the satyr Marsyas (who is then flayed alive for his troubles), whilst in the second, he overcomes Pan, the god of the wild, shepherds and rustic music. In the latter contest, King Midas (who was also present) chose to challenge the judgement of the mountain god Tmolus and was promptly awarded a set of ass's ears by Apollo. Pan escaped with mere humiliation.

The idea of a contest worked well for composers of the *settecento*, particularly as it made musical sense to pit one timbre against another. Whilst it would be difficult in the absence of a descriptive title to argue that such works are musical representations of either myth, one can appreciate the way in which the strings and recorders are juxtaposed, particularly in the works by **Valentini** and **Scarlatti**. In both works, when the recorders play 'solo' material, the accompaniment is greatly reduced. In the case of the Valentini, the recorders sit out the opening movement in its entirety and leave the subsequent *ritornelli* almost exclusively to the body of strings. The Scarlatti is a little more complex with more interplay between the groups of instruments, but the idea is more or less the same.

Instrumental music in Italy at this time was predominantly string-led. Unlike the countries situated to the north of the Alps who regularly employed town bands, woodwind instruments were generally employed only in the larger musical centres. In addition, with the Unification of Italy almost 150 years away, many of these hubs subscribed fiercely to their own distinct characters, the most obvious of which was the great north-south divide.

Given these colossal cultural and geographical differences, it made sense that all musical roads should lead to Rome, Italy's musical melting pot, where composers such as the Bolognese Valentini (nicknamed *Lo Straccioncino*, or 'The Little Ragamuffin') rubbed shoulders with the Sicilian Scarlatti, born in Palermo. **Vivaldi** also worked here for two or three seasons during the early 1720s, although the concerto in a minor was almost certainly written for performance in the Veneto, if not his native Venice itself. This work, possibly one of the earliest by him to survive, probably dates from the first decade of the

18th Century. It was, for a period, deemed to be inauthentic, but has recently been readmitted to the main body of his works. Despite its multi-movement format (as opposed to the typical three-movement plan adopted by Vivaldi from the 1710s), it is a little difficult to see what all the fuss was about given the number of motifs shared with his first published set of concertos, *L'estro armonico*.

Although Vivaldi's three-movement concerto form was quickly adopted by composers Europe-wide, certain composers retained the more antiquated layout of the concerto (a close relation of the sonata of the late *seicento*) particularly when composing for the church. This can be found in the concertos of **Pietro Gnocchi** whose collection of works for 4 violins, viola, cello and continuo (probably inspired by Vivaldi's aforementioned *L'estro*) is almost unique in the history of Western music. Shunning virtuosity for virtuosity's sake, these works display great craftsmanship and argue a strong case for a further exploration of the works of this extraordinary Brescian priest.

Whilst the violin was the undisputed king of the territory to the north of Rome, its influence was less keenly felt in the south. In Naples, the violin concerto was virtually spurned by native composers with instrumental music as a whole being poorly represented other than by works written for the salon. Given this state of affairs, the existence of a collection of 24 sonatas (described as concertos on the manuscript cover) for recorder and strings, mostly by Neapolitan composers, is a rarity. The composers most frequently represented here are Alessandro Scarlatti and **Francesco Mancini** (not to be confused with the contemporary painter of the same name). The works by Mancini are of a high quality and explain why he was a worthy choice as Scarlatti's deputy as organist at the royal chapel of Naples.

Despite the regional differences exhibited by the composers of the Italian peninsula, there were few musicians who disputed the greatness of **Arcangelo Corelli**, considered to be one of the most important composers in the development of the late Baroque style. Most of Corelli's surviving works are to be found amongst his six collections of sonatas and *concerti grossi* (a mere 72 works), with only a handful of others that are considered genuine. One of these is a sonata for strings and continuo in G minor that survives as a set of parts in London's Royal Academy of Music and for which a single viola part survives from a publication made by the Amsterdam publishing house of Le Cene. With music of this quality, one can see why François Couperin in his 'L'Apothéose de Corelli' chose to seat Corelli alongside Apollo on the slopes of Mount Parnassus.

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