

**Arcangelo Corelli**

***Concerto Grosso in F major, Op. 6 No. 2***

***Concerto Grosso in D major, Op. 6 No. 4***

Arcangelo Corelli was born in Fusignano, near Bologna, on February 17, 1653 and died in Rome on January 8, 1713 after a remarkably successful career as violinist and composer. He was arguably the most influential composer of the Baroque era, his meticulously honed works serving as standards of musical excellence throughout Europe. His twelve Opus 6 concertos were published in Amsterdam in 1714, one year after his death.

Life has never been easy for freelance musicians, but conditions in Rome during Corelli's lifetime were especially precarious. The opera houses and theaters, usually reliable venues for steady employment, were closed more often than not, victims of ecclesiastical prudence in the face of political turmoil and natural disasters. Musical activity was largely private and confined to those patrons rich enough to afford it.

But Corelli never had anything to complain about. From the time he emerged from Bologna, where he had been admitted to the elite Accademia Filarmonica at age 17, Corelli was employed by the well-heeled and influential. Two cardinals (Ottoboni and Pamphili) and one queen (Christina of Sweden) saw to it that the patrician violinist and composer stayed fully occu-

pled and well paid. The combination of steady income and discriminating listeners allowed Corelli the luxury of honing his works via frequent performances, so he never committed a piece to publication hastily or carelessly. Corelli was an exemplar of the 'pure' musician—i.e., dedicated to the highest standards of playing and composition, even if those ideals mandated a sharply limited output.

Corelli's last published collection, the Opus 6 Concerti Grossi—works for a few solo instruments backed up by a larger ensemble—occupied him from 1708 onwards, after his retirement from public performances. Both concertos on this program honor the sonata da chiesa ("church" sonata) tradition of four movements in alternating slow-fast tempi, often featuring rich contrapuntal textures.

Concerto No. 2 in F Major opens with a multi-sectional movement made up of three elements: a Vivace characterized by alternating solo and orchestral textures, an Allegro that sets up close imitations between the melody instruments, and an intervening Adagio in minor mode that allows for a bit of respite. A Largo andante ends the movement with a steady, gentle descent over harmonies that hint at minor mode while remaining firmly in the major.

The second movement Allegro starts in an etched fugal style that gives way to a more freely-formed series of alternations between solo

instruments and full orchestra. The third-place Grave again favors descending lines and hints broadly at minor mode, giving way to the concluding Allegro, a perky romp in binary (two-part) form.

Concerto No. 4 in D Major opens with a short curtain-raising Adagio, then launches into a dazzling Allegro that stirs discreet contrapuntal imitation into a mostly chordal soup. The Adagio movement that follows is vintage Corelli, a gravely beautiful processional in B minor, its occasional flashes of dissonance adding a discreet touch of drama. A triple-meter Vivace partakes of lively dance rhythms, sounding for all the world like a quickstep minuet or—to look forward a bit—a Viennese waltz. The energetic Allegro finale has a surprise in store: after spending most of its time in whirling compound duple meter, it treats us to a virtuoso coda in sturdy common time.

**Giovanni Lorenzo Gregori**  
***Concerto Grosso in A minor, Op. 2 No. 6***

Giovanni Gregori lived his life in the Republic of Lucca, from his birth in 1663 to his death in January of 1745. Primarily a violinist, he was also a distinguished teacher of music theory and published several influential textbooks.

Gregori's Opus 2 concertos are the first to call themselves grossi—i.e., for substantial ensembles with doubled string parts. The A minor concerto is short and uncomplicat-

ed, two fast movements flanking an intriguingly Vivaldian centerpiece that supports an ornate solo melody with march-like repeated chords in the accompaniment. Apparently Gregori knew his Corelli, given the concerto's ending with a repeated phrase, one of the great master's calling cards.

**Francesco Geminiani**  
***Concerto Grosso in D minor, Op. 3 No. 4***

Francesco Geminiani was born in Lucca, Italy in December 1687; the exact date isn't known but December 3 is a good guess. He died in Dublin, Ireland on September 17, 1762. He was an important figure in violin playing, and a strikingly original if not prolific composer. The Opus 3 concertos were published in London by Walsh in 1733, then revised by the composer in 1755.

Francesco Geminiani seems to have been a better violinist in theory than in actual practice. He was good enough to be accepted as a pupil by both Corelli and Alessandro Scarlatti, top-drawer masters indeed. But if we are to believe eighteenth-century historian Charles Burney, Geminiani was thoroughly outclassed by Italy's high-voltage string players, as a particularly humiliating sojourn in Naples made clear. So he settled in England, where technical standards were lower and where his association with Corelli ensured a warm reception from Britain's many

Italophiles. Like his contemporary George Frideric Handel, Geminiani spent a comfortable and successful expatriate career in England. Unlike Handel, Geminiani focused primarily on teaching, an activity for which he appears to have been supremely well-suited.

Geminiani's Opus 3 concertos were amongst his most successful works, written over the course of the 1720s and published in 1733. Burney praised them in no uncertain terms, claiming that they "established his character, and placed him at the head of all the masters then living." Part of that high esteem stems from Geminiani's adherence to Corellian models, then considered by the English as the ne plus ultra of musical art. But these are no slavish imitations. Geminiani's own voice is heard strongly throughout, particularly in the rich harmonic language that characterizes his mature works. Concerto No. 4 in D Minor opens with stately dotted rhythms that evoke the four-movement Corellian sonata da chiesa, followed by a freely fugal passage in triple meter marked Allegro assai. A brief Largo, notable for its daring harmonies, serves as a quasi-trio before the Allegro assai is repeated da capo. Solo violin interjections enliven the roly-poly Allegro finale, a gigue in all but name.

**Antonio Vivaldi**  
***Concerto for Alto Recorder in F major, "La tempeste di mare," RV 433***

***Concerto for Strings in D minor, RV 128***

Antonio Lucio Vivaldi was born on March 4, 1678 in Venice, where he was ordained as a priest in 1703. He spent much of his musical career at the Pio Ospedale della Pietà, an orphanage for musically talented girls, for whom he wrote the bulk of his 500-plus concertos, but he was also a prolific composer of operas, sacred music, and chamber music. He died on July 28, 1741 in Vienna, where he had gone to seek employment in the service of Emperor Charles VI.

Vivaldi's fluent inventiveness has sometimes worked against him. Eighteenth-century critics filed charges of carelessness, eccentricity, frivolity, and coarseness. Even now the dust hasn't altogether settled; until recently it was still considered sporting for commentators to crack wise about Vivaldi's writing the same concerto 500 times. But sage folk have always viewed the Red Priest of Venice differently—J.S. Bach, for example, who learned concerto writing by transcribing parts of Vivaldi's *L'estro armonico* for solo clavier. It is to Vivaldi that we owe the establishment of the ritornello form that allows instrumental music to break free of confining two-part structures and make the Baroque concerto, with its signature lob-and-volley between soloist and ensemble, possible. It is also Vivaldi who is turning out to be amongst the most challenging and enigmat-

ic composers of the Baroque. As newly-rediscovered Vivaldi works emerge from their long silence, our awareness of his sheer scope and astonishing fertility broadens.

Vivaldi had a decided flair for tone painting, as his ever-popular *The Four Seasons* demonstrates so vividly with its depictions of hunting, thunderstorms, and frost. In the first movement of the *Concerto for Alto Recorder in F Major*, Vivaldi evokes the hurly-burly of a sea tempest via a combination of fast scales (winds), string tremolos (flurries), and zippy triplet figures (more winds.) But the eye of the storm provides respite in the central *Largo*, as dotted rhythms in the ensemble support an undulating melody in the solo. It's difficult to determine just by listening whether the concluding *Presto* represents a return of the storm (it isn't particularly stormy) or offers a dance-like celebration for having survived the tempest. Given the delightful *F Major* burbles that conclude the movement, the latter interpretation seems the more likely.

Any number of Vivaldi's concertos eschew soloists, leaving the musical proceedings entirely to the ensemble, such as *Concerto for Strings in D Minor RV 128*. The opening *Allegro non molto* extracts a surprising amount of music out of the merest trifle of a motive, the first three notes of the scale. A terse *Largo* intensifies rather than relaxes, as surging lower strings underpin sharply dotted rhythms

in the melody. Soon enough a scintillating *Allegro* brings matters to a close, sounding almost Handelian with its sturdy repeated-note figures providing counterpoint to propulsive scalar melodies.

**Giuseppe Sammartini**  
***Concerto for Soprano Recorder in F major***

Giuseppe Sammartini, elder brother of composer Giovanni Battista, was born in Milan on January 6, 1695 and died in London in late November, 1750. A brilliant oboist, he left behind a fine body of chamber and orchestral music.

Sammartini was yet another of those expatriate musicians who found fame and fortune in England. From his first securely documented appearance in London in 1729 to his death in 1750, he was London's leading oboist and a frequent member of Handel's orchestras. The *Concerto in F major* is by far his best-known work, and for good reason: it is a lyrical delight, especially in its central *Siciliano*, an imaginatively-harmonized pastorate that offers the soloist abundant opportunities for expressivity.

**Alessandro Scarlatti**  
***Concerto Grosso No. 4 in G Minor***

Alessandro Scarlatti was born in Palermo, Sicily on May 2, 1660 and died in Naples on October 22, 1725 after a distinguished but somewhat uneven career. His "Six concertos in seven parts" were published posthumously in 1740 by Benjamin

Cooke of London.

There's something exasperating about Alessandro Scarlatti. His talent and skill should have allowed him a career as comfortable as that of his contemporary Arcangelo Corelli. He was lauded, honored, respected, and performed. But he kept falling off his pedestal. After a solid start in Rome he settled in Naples, where he was appointed to the faculty of the Conservatorio Santa Maria di Loreto on March 1, 1689 then fired for irresponsible behavior on July 15. Although he was aware that Rome was inhospitable to opera composers—the pope had forbidden theatrical productions—impulsively he moved back there anyway in 1702 and accumulated charges of unreliability as he bounced from job to job. During an unsuccessful stint in Venice he let himself get dragged into petty theatrical squabbles and wound up the target of a vicious and revealing satire. By age fifty he was back in Naples and, it would seem, cured of his self-destructive behavior. But he never had enough money to get by. Ten days before his death he begged the Neapolitan viceroy for assistance, apparently in vain.

Scarlatti's professional life might have been messy, but his music was not. His instrumental output is minuscule compared to his many operas, cantatas, and oratorios, but it has much to offer the discerning listener. *Concerto Grosso No. 4 in G Minor* bears no sign of theatrical frivolity; it evokes Corelli,

both in its stately mood and in its meticulous fit-and-finish. The opening Allegro ma non troppo is a stern fugal affair that primly avoids decorative folderol, followed by a lament-like Largo that floats a sustained lyric line over a steady rising bass line. Even the ultra-short concluding Allegro avoids anything unseemly; more ceremonious than celebratory, its dance rhythm is formal and stylized.

— Scott Foglesong, Scholar-in-Residence