

Thursday, July 22, 2010

Baroque Orchestra

Concerto Grosso in F major, op. 6, no. 2, H. 320 (1739) George Frideric Handel (1685–1759)
Andante larghetto
Allegro
Largo—Adagio—Larghetto andante, e piano
Allegro, ma non troppo

Violin Concerto No. 1 in A minor, BWV 1041 (c. 1730) Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750)
Allegro
Andante
Allegro assai

Concerto Grosso in G minor, op. 6, no. 8 “Christmas Concerto” (pub. 1714) Arcangelo Corelli (1653–1713)
Vivace—Grave—Allegro—Adagio—Allegro—Adagio
Vivace
Allegro
Pastorale: Largo

Concerto for Four Violins in B minor, op. 3, no. 10, RV 580 (1711) Antonio Vivaldi (1678–1714)
Allegro
Largo
Allegro

George Frideric Handel (1685–1759)—*Concerto Grosso in F major*, op. 6, no. 2, H. 320 (1739)

Some twenty-five years *after* his death, Handel sparked a controversy. His music was still beloved by British people from all walks of life—all the way up to King George III himself—and plans were laid to hold a series of commemorative concerts that celebrated Handel’s legacy. The trouble was that several performances were to take place in Westminster Abbey—and some found it sacrilegious to honor a “mere musician” in a house of God. That the “Handelians” prevailed is an indication of the lasting esteem the German-born composer still enjoyed.

Handel had brought to England not only his German training but the fruits of his years in Italy as well. One work that reflected Corelli’s influence was Handel’s 1739 publication: an impressive set of twelve “Grand Concertos,” which were later given the designation “Opus 6,” perhaps in emulation of Corelli’s own “Opus 6” concerti grossi, published in 1714. Handel borrowed Corelli’s multi-movement structures to craft his own concertos, as is apparent in the *Second Concerto Grosso in F major*. It has multiple movements, each in a contrasting tempo; Handel also flexibly shifts the focus back and forth from the three string soloists to the full ensemble.

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750)—*Violin Concerto No. 1 in A minor*, BWV 1041 (c. 1730)

In sharp contrast with the posthumous reputation of Handel, Johann Sebastian Bach’s name was virtually forgotten after his death—not that it was ever widely recognized during his lifetime. This relative obscurity is astonishing to us today, but reflects the contrasting environments in which the two men worked: Handel, for the most part, entertained the general public, whereas Bach’s career focused on serving a series of aristocrats and then the town council of Leipzig (from 1723 to his death), providing music for the city’s four main churches, plus whatever secular music-making Bach could squeeze into his taxing schedule.

It is not at all clear when Bach found time to compose his *Violin Concerto in A minor*. The most likely opportunities were during his years in Cöthen (1717–1723), where he served a music-loving prince, or in Leipzig, when he occasionally contributed music to the concerts of the Collegium Musicum. Despite the relatively small sphere in which Bach had worked, he was aware of Italian trends, and his concerto reflects the fashionable three-movement structure favored by Vivaldi, in the customary fast-slow-fast tempo plan. Bach’s slow movement is especially eloquent, but he shakes off that pensive mood for a bouncy “gigue” finale.

Arcangelo Corelli (1653–1713)—*Concerto Grosso in G minor, op. 6, no. 8 “Christmas Concerto” (pub. 1714)*

The general format of Corelli’s twelve *Concerti Grossi* guided tonight’s opening work by Handel, but the eighth concerto in Corelli’s set also influenced both Handel and Bach. Corelli’s concerto ends with a “Pastorale,” and has been given the designation “Fatto per la Notte di Natale” (Written for the Night of the Nativity) because of that finale—since the pastorale resembles the music played by Italian shepherds (“pastori”) on Christmas Eve, when they would descend from the hills and play pipes (“pifferi”) in the village streets. The shepherds’ melodies traditionally followed a gentle sing-song rhythm, sometimes called a “Siciliano,” and Corelli seems to have been first to translate this folk tradition into an “art music” context. Similar pastorale settings found their way into Handel’s *Messiah* and Bach’s *Christmas Oratorio*, demonstrating the international effect that Corelli continued to have long after his death.

This G minor concerto has several other attractive features. A series of short, percussive chords give the work a forceful opening, followed by bursts of energy during allegro passages and sinuously intertwining lines during the slower passages. Corelli juxtaposes his three soloists against the orchestra in various combinations, and crafts long passages that drive inexorably forward, sometimes upward, and sometimes down.

Antonio Vivaldi (1678–1714)—*Concerto for Four Violins in B minor, op. 3, no. 10, RV 580 (1711)*

If you owned the 1713 edition of the “Visitor’s Guide to Venice,” you would read that a “must-see” tourist attraction was one “Antonio Vivaldi,” who was “among the best who play the violin.” Vivaldi was also among the best who *taught* the violin, and he was employed by one of Venice’s four orphanages to do just that. The progressive governors believed it was only sensible to give their wards some training in a profession—and music instruction had reached such a standard of excellence in Venice’s orphanages that children *with* parents competed for scholarships so they could be “admitted” to an orphanage and partake in that first-rate musical training.

Despite the local accolades, Vivaldi knew that real success would come from international recognition, and so he arranged for his third publication, twelve concerti grossi called *L’estro armonico*, to be printed in Amsterdam by one of Europe’s finest publishers, thus giving his Opus 3 widespread circulation. The tenth concerto in the set uses an unusual solo grouping of four violins, although the often-showcased cello almost becomes a fifth soloist. Unexpectedly, Vivaldi lets the soloists (not the orchestra) launch the first movement, and the concerto’s minor mode creates a stormy, dramatic atmosphere throughout.