

NOTES ON THE MUSIC

by Robert M. Johnstone

September 19, 2009

All of the works in this concert are first performances  
by the Richmond Symphony Orchestra.

*Concerto Grosso in F Major, Op. 6, no. 2*  
*Archangelo Corelli*

*Fusignano, Ravenna, Italy in 1653;* born in

*died in Rome in 1713*

*First Performance: unknown*

*Instrumentation: harpsichord; strings*

*Duration: 12 minutes*

One of the greatest composers of the High Baroque period, Archangelo Corelli was born to an aristocratic family living in straitened circumstances in the town of Fusignano in the province of Ravenna. Little is known of his childhood and youth, but by the age of seventeen he was an elected member of the celebrated Accademia Filarmonica in Bologna, a signal honor granted to only one other musician under the age of twenty---Mozart a century later. By 1675 Corelli had settled in Rome where he quickly won notice as a gifted violinist, composer, and teacher.

Though rich and world-renowned in his prime, Corelli was, as one contemporary put it, "remarkable for the mildness of his temper and the modesty of his deportment." He attracted many students and his works served as models for many composers---templates for the lesser breed, inspiration for the great ones. Notable in this regard is his pioneering of the "concerto grosso," a form that opposes a *ripieno*, or string orchestra with basso continuo ("ripienisti" translates loosely as "fillers-in"), against a *concertino*, consisting of two violins and a cello---the ensemble and solo parts alternating by turns. Corelli's Opus 6 set of twelve concerti grossi was published in 1712 during the last year of his life, although many of them may well have been composed earlier. The second of the set, in F Major, is one of eight in the "church" mode, called a "concerto di chiesa," with four movements of alternating fast-slow tempos.

Corelli's concerti grossi soon spread throughout Europe with his students, among them Locatelli, Geminiani, Torelli, and Gasparini, and through them reaching the likes of Vivaldi, J. S. Bach, and most notably Handel, who drew upon Corelli's Opus 6 concerti to produce his own two sets of 12 each, published as Opus 3 and Opus 6. Handel's may be said to have reached the high water mark of the form, soon to be replaced in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century by the solo concerto and the "sinfonia concertante."

*Concerto for Bassoon & Orchestra in F Major,  
Antonio Vivaldi*

*F. VIII, No. 20  
born in Venice in 1678;*

*died in Vienna in 1741*

*First Performance: unknown*

*Instrumentation: solo bassoon; harpsichord; strings*

*Duration: 8 minutes*

*Concerto for Two Violins & Orchestra in D Minor,  
Op. 3, no. 11, RV. 565*

*First Performance: unknown, possibly 1711*

*Instrumentation: two solo violins; harpsichord; strings*

*Duration: 11 minutes*

Today Antonio Vivaldi is recognized as one of the most important---and certainly one of the most prolific---of baroque composers. But it was not always thus; for over two hundred years after his death his music was largely unheard as he languished in the formidable shadows of Bach and Handel. Only since the 1950s with the "discovery" of his *Four Seasons* concerti has the Vivaldi renaissance occurred. Research in the dusty archives of European libraries and attics has unearthed well over 600 works attributed to Vivaldi, among them some 20 operas (he claimed to have written 90), 100 sacred works, and over 500 concerti (a form that he helped to pioneer).

Vivaldi was the eldest of at least seven children of Giovanni Battista Vivaldi, sometimes referred to as "G. V. Rossi" because of his flaming red hair (Antonio inherited this gene trait.) "G. V." was a barber and wigmaker, but also a journeyman violinist who played in the orchestra of St. Mark's, Venice, and who became Antonio's first music teacher. Antonio was the only member of the family to amount to much, his brothers winding up either in jail or in exile. He followed his father to St. Mark's, playing the solo violin when he was ten. By fifteen he was a budding virtuoso. At the same age, however, he entered upon his path to ordination as a priest, a calling to which his parents had determined him from infancy.

In 1704 Vivaldi was hired to teach music at the Ospedale della Pietà, a home for female orphans in Venice that doubled as a music conservatory. He found this to be fertile ground for composition, writing much of his music there over the next 35 years. His success as a composer, however, required peddling his musical wares---and himself as a performer---over much of Europe. The extended absences of "The Red Priest" at last tried the patience of the Ospedale's directors who finally relieved him of

his duties and his steady income. Vivaldi's travels were extensive throughout his life, all the more remarkable because he was a lifelong victim of asthma, a condition then without any known treatment and which made even walking difficult, much less the itinerant life that Vivaldi led.

More than any other composer of his day, Vivaldi developed the solo concerto, a form which owed much to the earlier "concerti grossi" of such masters as Archangelo Corelli. Of Vivaldi's 350 solo concerti that survive, nearly 40 were for the bassoon, 7 alone in the key of F Major. These brief little gems are in the standard three-movement format---fast-slow-fast---using the "ritornello" form in the outer movements, in which the same theme recurs in different keys, with full ensemble alternating with the solo instrument.

Another popular Vivaldi genre was the double concerto, usually composed for two violins and strings. The D Minor Concerto is part of a set called *L'Estro Armonico*, his Opus 3, published in 1711.

*Suite in G Minor, "La Changeante"*

*Georg Philipp Telemann*

*born in Magdeburg,*

*Germany, in 1681;*

*died*

*in Hamburg in 1767*

*First performance: unknown*

*Instrumentation: harpsichord; strings*

*Duration: 20 minutes*

Sixty years ago Georg Philipp Telemann was barely known, even to the musically literate. Yet in his day he was more influential and more widely recognized than either Bach or Handel (his juniors by four years). His output resembled that of a musical "factory," as he churned out over 2,000 works, from formidable masses and oratorios to sonatas and songs---no one has surpassed this number of works, according to the Guinness Book of World Records.. His works were re-discovered only in the 1930s-40s (The Telemann Society, founded in the 1950s by a recording engineer and his music teacher wife, has promoted the composer's music with a pioneering zeal).

Born into a family of clergymen, Telemann had to struggle to develop his precocious gift for music against a mother who was determined that he become a lawyer. But talent will out; Telemann was an established composer and church musician by the age of twenty. He was an itinerant, moving from musical post to post throughout much of his long career, always it seems in pursuit of greener pastures of opportunity. In mid-career he settled---for the most part---in Hamburg, where he died at the age of eighty-six.

The orchestral suite was the most popular musical form at the midpoint of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. It usually consisted of an extended overture, followed by a set of loosely linked dance episodes. Telemann wrote at least 125 such suites, designed for modest resources to be played in the domestic drawing room. The Suite in G Minor, "Le Changeante," (literally, "The Changeable") is for strings only with figured bass. It consists of an Overture, followed by eight short dances: loure (a gentle 6/8 dance); "Les Scaramouches"; two minuets; "La Plaisanterie" (a pleasantry); a hornpipe; "avec douceur" (sweetly); and "canarie" (canaries).

*Sonata "La Battalia"*

*Heinrich Ignaz Franz von Biber*

*born in Wartenberg (Liberec) in the modern Czech Republic, in 1644;*

*died in Salzburg,*

*Austria, in 1704*

*First Performance: unknown*

*Instrumentation: harpsichord; strings*

*Duration: 7 minutes*

Heinrich Biber rose from humble origins to become the greatest violinist of his day, a sort of 17<sup>th</sup> century Paganini or Heifetz. He was also an accomplished and innovative composer, pioneering string playing techniques as well as musical forms. He was born in Bohemia (in what is now the Czech Republic), the son of a forester on a ducal estate. Little is known of his early musical training, though he was playing violin in central European court orchestras by the age of 20. In 1670 he joined the service of the Prince-Bishop of Salzburg, where he married the daughter of a wealthy merchant and rose quickly through the musical ranks to become Kapellmeister in 1684. By 1690 he received a title in the lesser nobility (hence the "von" in his name).

Biber's compositions cover a range of genres from operas (none has survived), sacred masses and cantatas, and a variety of instrumental works for small ensembles. He is most noted for his sonatas, either for solo instruments or trios, of which over 60 are available today. In fact it is through his sonatas---most notably the 16 "Rosary" sonatas unpublished during his lifetime---that Biber has won renewed recognition as a master of the high baroque. The Sonata "La Battalia," composed for small string orchestra, was published in 1673.