

## ORYX 507 - *The Baroque Adagio*

The English word *Baroque* is derived from the Italian *Barocco*, meaning “bizarre”, though probably “exuberant” would be a better translation more accurately reflecting the sense. The usage of this term originated in the 1860s to describe the highly decorated style of 17th and 18th century religious and public buildings in Italy, Germany and Austria. Later, during the early-to-mid 1900s, the term *Baroque* was applied by association to music of the 17th and early 18th century, and today the term *Baroque* has come to refer to a very clearly definable type or genre of music which originated, broadly speaking, around 1600 and came to fruition between 1700 and 1750. Strangely however, while exterior and interior Baroque architecture was surely flamboyant, Baroque music was almost the opposite, for its focus was on symmetry, order and form, expressing what 18th century writers, artists and musicians saw as the fundamental order of the universe.

The Baroque Spirit expressed in music is: Order, Pattern, and Form. Here there is to be no disorder, no atonal meandering, no shapeless movements. At this time, the *concerto* was given the form we know today of three movements, fast-slow-fast, occasionally adding another slow movement at the beginning. In the Baroque musical repertoire we find Fugues, in which a given theme is repeated in different clefs, and the stricter Canon which is a ‘round’, each entry following or overlapping the previous one. There is also a whole group of Variations: variations on a chorale melody, variations on a single, repeating bass-line - Passacaglia - and variations on a popular theme - the Chaconne. Both the Chaconne and the Passacaglia originated in dances, the Chaconne apparently in Spain where it was also considered to be of native South American origin. These were slow dances of three-beats-in-a-measure, usually based directly upon a ground-bass, or planned in short sections similar to those resulting from a ground bass. The Chaconne theme in Baroque times was frequently derived from a popular tune. Thus the orderly forms into which Baroque music is shaped, contain the basic ingredients of tuneful melodies and folk rhythms.

Music which is melodious yet so constructed as to reflect the "perfect order" of the universe: that is the essence of the Baroque. In the words of Baroque composer and theorist Johann Joseph Fux: “A composition meets the demands of good taste if it is well constructed, avoids trivialities as well as willful eccentricities, aims at the sublime, but moves in a natural ordered way, combining brilliant ideas with perfect workmanship.”

These days more and more people are seeking a return to music for the mind, music combining beauty with the order of an underlying architecture and structure. So we are witnessing a resurgence of interest in the Baroque, and those who are fortunate enough to be as yet unfamiliar with it have a wonderful experience awaiting them.

While the faster movements in Baroque concertos are lively and tuneful, the adagios, the slower movements, would often provide a complete contrast, being thoughtful and introspective - and especially melodious. In cases where the concerto features a louder instrument like the oboe or trumpet, the soloist is often given a rest while the strings alone play the slow movement. Thus the typical Baroque *adagio* provides rich material for meditation, for moments of peace and quiet, or to “still the mind” after a troublesome day!

**1: Francesco GEMINIANI (1687-1762): *Preludio: Largo / Sarabanda: Largo, from Concerto No. 8 in e minor.*** [BMC 34] Francesco Geminiani was born at Lucca and at an early age he showed considerable talent on the violin after being taught by his father. Later he studied the violin in Milan and then in Rome under the celebrated master, Corelli. At the age of 20 he returned to his home town of Lucca where he played the violin in the Town Orchestra for three years. He then returned to Naples in 1711 to take up the position as Leader of the Opera Orchestra. In 1714, he tried his fortune in England, where his brilliant violin playing immediately met with great success. Geminiani gained much support from the aristocracy and leading figures at the Royal Court, and was invited to play the violin before George I, accompanied at the harpsichord by no less than Handel himself. He soon established himself in London as the leading master of violin-playing, with his concerts, his published compositions, and with his theoretical treatises.

**2: J.S. BACH (1685-1750): *Andante from Harpsichord & Cello Sonata in D Major, BWV 1028.*** [BACH 747] In 1717 Bach arrived at the small Court of Anhalt-Cöthen to hold the position of Capellmeister, the highest rank given to a musician during the Baroque age. His master was the young prince Leopold of Anhalt-Cöthen, barely twenty-five years old, the son of a Calvinist. Life at Cöthen was informal and easy-going; in this happy atmosphere Bach's days were completely devoted to music. During this period a large number of Bach's Sonatas, and in particular the three for Viola da gamba or Cello and Clavier, stem from his years in Cöthen. Bach surely wrote the latter with his patron in mind, for the prince would have been a ready and skillful performer either on the gamba or at the keyboard

**3: Tomaso ALBINONI (1671-1751): *Adagio / Grave, from Symphony a Cinque in A Major, Op. 2, No. 3.*** [BMC 45] Tomaso Albinoni, eldest son of a wealthy paper merchant, was born in Venice in 1671. At an early age he became proficient as a singer and, more notably, as a violinist, soon turning his hand to composition. Until his

father's death in 1709, he was able to cultivate music more for pleasure than for profit, referring to himself as "dilettante" - a term which in 18th century Italy was totally devoid of unfavorable connotations. Under the terms of his father's Will he was relieved of the duty (which he would normally have assumed as eldest son) to take charge of the family business, and this task devolved on to his younger brothers. Henceforth he was to be a full-time musician, who according to one report, at one time ran a successful academy of singing. He resided in Venice all his life, though visits to Florence (1703) and Munich (1722) are recorded. After a long period of inactivity he died in 1751.

**4: Francesco GEMINIANI (1687-1762): *Preludio: Largo - Concerto No. 9 in A* [BMC 34]**

**5: Domenico ZIPOLI (1688-1726): *Adagio for Oboe, Cello, Organ & Strings* [BMC 14]**

**6: G.F. HANDEL (1685-1759): *Largo, from the Opera "XERXES"* [BMC 46].** This Opera was composed between 26 December 1737 and the 14<sup>th</sup> February 1738. It was given its first performance on the 15<sup>th</sup> April 1738 in the King's Theatre, Haymarket, London with five following performances through to the 2<sup>nd</sup> of May of the same year.

**7: Francesco Antonio BONPORTI (1672-1749): *Adagio Assai - Concerto a Quattro in F Major, Op. 11/5*. [BMC 11]** Bonporti's initial intent was to become a priest. However while completing his theological studies in Rome he took lessons in music from Pitoni, Fornari and Corelli. Ordained in 1695 he continued his musical activities when church duties permitted. Much of his music was printed, often at his expense, and was pirated throughout Europe making his name widely known.

**8: Francesco GEMINIANI: *Preludio: Adagio / Sarabanda: Largo, from Concerto No. 10 in F Major*. [BMC 34]**

**9: J.S. BACH: *Sinfonia from Cantata 156 "Ich steh' mit einem Fuss im Grabe"* [BACH 746]**

**10: J.S. BACH: *Sinfonia from Cantata 21 "Ich hatte viel Bekümmernis"* [BACH 746 - Sinfonias]**

**11: J.S. BACH: *Adagio, from Brandenburg Concerto No. 6 in B-flat Major, BWV 1051*. [BACH 742]** Bach's Six Brandenburg Concertos are rightfully regarded as being among the most popular orchestral works of the Baroque period, combining as they do the Baroque arts of counterpoint with a light and tuneful quality, making them instantly and universally enjoyable.

**12: G.F. HANDEL: *Larghetto, from Lute & Harp Concerto in B-flat Major, Op. 4/ 6*. [BMC 49]** Of the set of six Organ Concertos published by Walsh in 1738 as Handel's Opus 4, at least two - Nos. 5 and 6 - were not originally composed for Organ. While the 5<sup>th</sup> was originally scored for Harp and Orchestra, No.6 was composed as a '*Concerto per il Liuto e l'Arpa*', to be played during the first act of Alexander's Feast (first performed on 19th February, 1736). In all the printed editions of this work from Handel's time to our own, the music has appeared in a mutilated form, lacking the whole of the Lute part, as well as the written-out Organ continuo part to be found in the British Museum. The missing Lute part has not yet come to light, but the existing text of the Concerto enabled the late harpsichordist and musician Thurston Dart to reconstruct it with some confidence.

**13: Tomaso ALBINONI: *Adagio / Grave, from Symphony a Cinque in g minor, Op. 2, No. 6*. [BMC 45 – Albinoni Orchestral Music]**

**14: Antonio VIVALDI (1678-1741): *Concerto a 4 "Madrigalesco" in d minor, RV 129*. [BMC 4]**

Though Vivaldi wrote many fine and memorable Concertos, such as the *Four Seasons* and the Opus 3 for example, he also wrote many works which sound almost like five-finger exercises for students. And this is precisely what they were. Vivaldi was employed for most of his working life by the Ospedale della Pietà in Venice. Often termed an "orphanage", this Ospedale was in fact a home for the female offspring of noblemen and their numerous dalliances with their mistresses. Many of Vivaldi's Concerti were indeed exercises which he would play with his many talented pupils, whose varied expertise in a wide variety of instruments is born out by Vivaldi's equally varied instrumental repertoire. The unusual and exceptional D minor *Madrigalesco* Concerto, RV 129 is one of the few Concertos for which the composer supplied nicknames. This "*Madrigalesco*" Concerto seeks, in the contour and flow of its melodies, to create a distinctly "*Madrigal*" vocal quality which the listener will surely perceive.