

BMC 18 *The Baroque Concerto*

The English word *baroque* is derived from the Italian *barocco*, meaning *bizarre, outstanding, exuberant*. 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 late 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 1650 and came to fruition between 1700 and 1750.

Musically, the Baroque Period was essentially a period of transition. It began with music based upon the old modes, of which composers had six at their command, the use of which was hemmed in by a mass of rules, hampering all but the composers who were great enough to express themselves in terms of beauty within the limits set to them, and to make their wearers unconscious of the shackles which bound them. It ended with music based upon what are now termed keys, two of the old modes only (the *Ionian* and the *Aeolian*), C-major and A-minor, transposed to various pitches, whose diatonic lines were in process of becoming pierced by the chromatic invader. Semitones, which were not a part of the scale, and were therefore termed "*colored*" or "*chromatic*," involving the use of accidentals to express them (a license rarely used in modal times and then only under the most stringent rules), began to make their way as independent factors in the harmonic scheme, and revolutionized the whole outlook of music, by enormously increasing its possibilities of vital expression. Thus many of the musical terms and forms in common use today either originated or were formally established during the Baroque period.

Major examples are: the *cantata* ('sung'), *toccata* (literally 'touched' indicating an often flamboyant solo piece for keyboard), the *sonata* ('sounded', an instrumental chamber music piece for one, two or three solo instruments and continuo), and the *concerto* (a piece for a group of players performing together, or 'in concert'). These forms were all established during the Baroque period, as were other styles of composition such as the fugue and canon in which a snatch of melody, or theme, is repeated throughout the piece, and the *passacaglia* or theme-and-variations. The sonata generally took the form of four movements, slow-fast-slow-fast, while the concerto gradually evolved from a three- or four-movement work to the more usual three-movement form of two outer livelier movements, with a slower, reflective middle movement.

It has often been said, and not without reason, that Baroque music began in Italy. The Baroque Period saw the resurgence of Rome as the Catholic Center of the world, after a long period of decline. Money poured into the City Coffers, artists and sculptors worked to make the Eternal City the living, open-air museum it is today. In music too we can look to Italy for the origins both of the *sonata* and the *concerto* – and more precisely, we can single out **Arcangelo Corelli**. With his famous *Concerti Grossi*, 1714, Corelli established the Concerto form as a composition for multiple players, in which a smaller group of instrumentalists (*concertino*), is set against the larger orchestra (*ripieno*), the two taking the theme and its development in alternation. This idea is the continuation of an older Italian church tradition, that of 'antiphonal' singing of verse and response 'echoing' one another.

From the '*concerto grosso*' with its alternating groups of *ripieni* and *concertanti*, the concerto for soloist and orchestra developed very naturally. The *concertanti* or smaller group would naturally be formed of the orchestra's better players, the first violinist being the 'leader'. It was quite a natural step for the lead violinist to take a solo part, with the orchestra then accompanying and/or alternating. This development had its precedent in the solo sonata for a single instrument and continuo of keyboard and cello. Here again Corelli took the lead, literally, being himself a gifted violinist. As the preeminent violin virtuoso of the day, he taught many leading violinist-composers of the 18th century.

Other Italian composers took up the violin-concerto model; based in Venice, **Antonio Vivaldi** wrote some 300 concertos for violin and orchestra, he again being a virtuoso violinist himself. Baroque Italy soon established itself as the home of the violin concerto, encouraged by, or encouraging, the great Italian violin makers and their dynasties, the families of Amati, Guaneri and Stradivari. Vivaldi did not confine himself to the violin in his compositions; writing for a student orchestra of highly-gifted young musicians with a wide variety of talents, for them he composed numerous concertos featuring a wealth of different instruments as soloists, among which were the bassoon, mandolin, guitar, and cello.

This wealth of musical development did not go unnoticed in the rest of Europe. Given the difficulties of travel and communication at that time, it might easily be assumed that composers would know relatively little of other composers and other countries. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Rome, as well as other Italian musical and cultural centers, was featured on the Grand Tour, which the wealthy gentry of Europe and especially England were enjoying in increasing numbers during the 1700s.

In addition to the standard fare of tourist visits to Europe's great monuments and artistic treasures, concerts would be attended and contacts made with leading composers and musicians. Music-making was highly prized by many of the Princely and Kingly Courts, and leading musicians would often be financed for their journeys to bring back the latest styles and compositions.

During the first half of the 1700s, German music adopted the Italian forms of the Concerto and Sonata, and with them, much of the Italian Baroque "vocabulary" together with the latest Italian compositions. Many eminent composers of the Baroque period sojourned in

Rome, and Corelli's influence was to spread itself throughout Europe. **Pietro Locatelli** was a pupil of Corelli who was to take Italian musical traditions northwards to Germany, then settling in Amsterdam where he set himself up as a music publisher.

Another important influence in spreading Italian, as well as other national musical styles, fashions and compositions throughout Europe was provided by the leading music-publishers, paramount among whom was surely Etienne Roger of Amsterdam. Roger began his music printing business in Amsterdam in 1697, enhancing and widening his reputation mainly through the high quality of his copper engraving and processing, always remaining in the forefront of current printing techniques. Numbering among his regular clients such great Baroque names as Vivaldi, Albinoni, Corelli, Alessandro Scarlatti, Lully, Lebègue, and Marin Marais, he provided not only some of Europe's highest quality printing, but also a well-organized Europe-wide distribution and information system. Roger numbered his Editions (about 500) and the books in stock, and issued catalogs between 1698 and 1716 which were distributed abroad and reprinted in newspapers. He authorized agents in Rotterdam, Liège and Brussels, London, Cologne, Hamburg, Halle, Berlin and Leipzig to sell his Editions.

Thus **Telemann** for example, whose Concerto for Recorder and Bassoon we hear on this disc, would have been able to browse the catalog, possibly review scores, and order any which interested him in his own city of Hamburg, where he spent most of his musical life.

Italian and other European musical fashions and compositions also spread across the Atlantic. Thomas Jefferson in particular was very fond of music, and frequently ordered the latest compositions and had instruments including a fortepiano, sent from Europe. The large collection of music catalogued by Jefferson in 1783 indicates the range of compositions enjoyed by the family. Chamber music for strings and keyboard forms the largest part, and Corelli was known to have been Jefferson's favourite composer.

It would be the German-born **George Friderik Handel** who brought Italy to England. Invited at the age of 18 by Prince Ferdinando de' Medici to visit Italy, Handel spent more than three years visiting the major Italian musical centers. In Rome, Ruspoli employed him as a musician to the household; here most of Handel's major Italian works were composed.

Settling finally in England under Royal patronage, Handel would show the influence of Italy in his lifetime preoccupation with opera – as well as Italian operatic "stars". His two sets of Concerti Grossi, Op. 3 and Op. 6, of which number 4 is here performed, bear witness to the influence of Italy and especially Corelli, with whom Handel had studied.

While concertos were being written for almost every imaginable instrument as soloist with orchestra, together with various combinations, the harpsichord remained the poor workhorse of Baroque music, its purpose being to act as continuo providing a background harmonic base and a thump to keep the orchestra in time. As Thurston Dart once remarked, "the continuo should be felt but not heard". It was **Johann Sebastian Bach** who would elevate the humble harpsichord to the status of concerto soloist, in a series of dazzling Harpsichord Concertos.

For several years after 1729, Bach took charge of a Leipzig Collegium Musicum; these were secular musical organizations, run mainly by the students of the city's famed university. Bach's Collegium gave concerts every week in the concert room of Gottfried Zimmermann's Coffee House on the fashionable Catherine Strasse, where compositions by Handel, Vivaldi, Telemann, Locatelli, Albinoni as well as Bach himself were performed. Gottfried Zimmermann equipped his establishment with the latest musical instruments for use by the Collegium and other musical guests, one of which was "a clavicymbel of large size and range of expressivity" which was a Leipzig attraction in itself. Thus Bach was given considerable encouragement to compose Concertos for Harpsichord, and having composed at least eight, he then went on to write Concertos for 2, 3 and 4 Harpsichords with Orchestra. Anyone who has attended a concert with the Bach Concertos for 3 and 4 Harpsichords will know what a lot of fun it can be! This particular performance is unique in that it brings together four of Europe's outstanding Harpsichordists. Interestingly, Bach's Concerto for 4 Harpsichords and Orchestra heard on this disc is an adaptation of a Concerto for 4 Violins and Strings originally by Vivaldi. Bach's Concertos for Harpsichord and Orchestra were to be the models for the future Piano Concertos by Mozart, Haydn and Beethoven through to the 'Romantics' such as Rachmaninoff and Tchaikovsky.

See the Website www.BaroqueMusic.org for biographies of all the leading Baroque composers.