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Program Notes

Viola da gamba

Although the viola da gamba looks like a cello, it actually belongs to a separate family of instruments, the viols.

The instrument is played while being balanced between the legs ('da gamba'), unlike the violin, which was originally called 'da braccio' ('on the arm'). Viols have six strings (sometimes seven or less commonly five) rather than the violin family's four, and are also constructed differently, having a flat back and a fretted neck rather like a guitar. The body of a viol is very lightly constructed, of very fine wood.

Its light body and low tension of the strings makes the viol very resonant and responsive to even the lightest touch with the bow, but its sound is not powerful. The method of using the bow is the opposite to that used for a violin or cello. The bow is held underhand, with the palm facing upwards, so the amount of weight applied from the arm is reduced and articulation is more subtle. Viols were originally made in a range of sizes from treble to contrabass, and were extremely popular in the Renaissance and early Baroque periods. By the eighteenth century viols had virtually disappeared in Italy, their soft-grained sound having been overtaken by the more penetrating violin, but in France the bass viol was still considered the most sophisticated and aristocratic of instruments.



Program Notes

Arcangelo Corelli (1653–1713) Marin Marais (1656–1728)

Alessandro Scarlatti (1660–1725)

Antonio Vivaldi (1678 - 1741)

FOLIA PASTICCIO

The *folia* was a popular dance form which originated in Portugal in the late fifteenth century. Its name means 'mad' or 'empty-headed', and indeed the dance was so fast and noisy that the dancers seemed out of their minds. The musical framework of the *folia* was re-worked by the French composer Lully in the 1670s, and many composers throughout the Baroque period wrote sets of variations over its repeating bass line. In music a *pasticcio* (pastiche) is a work which contains music from a number of different composers, in this case drawing from the famous *folia* variations composed by Arcangelo Corelli, Marin Marais, Alessandro Scarlatti and Antonio Vivaldi.

Corelli was educated in Bologna but spent almost all his adult life in Rome, where he had become one of the city's foremost violinists by the age of only twenty-three. The publication of his six volumes of trio sonatas and concertos coincided with the boom in music publishing which occurred about 1700, and made him famous throughout Europe. His works remained enormously influential across Europe for many years, particularly in England where they developed almost a cult following, and his compositions and compositional style were much imitated. Corelli's *folia* variations were published as part of his Opus 5 set of violin sonatas in 1700.

Born the son of a poor Parisian shoemaker, **Marin Marais** was a viol virtuoso. When he was a child he began to have lessons with the famous bass viol player, Sainte-Colombe, and he was reputed to have exceeded his teacher in ability after only six months. A position in the orchestra of the Paris Opéra soon followed, in 1675, and this brought him to the

attention of the great composer and conductor Lully, who was to become his mentor. Marais was one of the first French musicians to gain a reputation as a soloist, and his performances of his own works for viol drew public acclaim for his playing 'like an angel'. Marais composed nearly six hundred works for viol. He based his *folia*, a set of thirty-two variations, on that of Corelli. Marais' life was the subject of the 1992 film *Tous les matins du monde*, starring Gerard Dépardieu as Marais.

Alessandro Scarlatti was as famous for vocal music as Corelli was for instrumental music. His compositions were considered the crowning achievement in Italian vocal music towards the end of the seventeenth century, and established him in his own time as the most famous composer in Italy and much of Europe. Scarlatti was born in Sicily but lived in Rome from the age of twelve. The pope banned operas from being performed publicly, so Scarlatti moved to Naples to further his career as an opera composer. He was a prolific composer in all genres, writing more than fifty operas, and hundreds of cantatas, motets and masses. His variations on the *folia* were composed for keyboard in 1715.

Antonio Vivaldi's version, entitled '*La Follia*', is in the form of a trio sonata (in D minor, Opus 1 No. 12, RV 63). It was published in Venice in 1705, only five years after the publication of Corelli's Opus 5. This is early Vivaldi, six years before the *L'estro armonico* set of concertos which made his name all over Europe, and ten years before the *Four Seasons* concertos. Vivaldi's version consists of a theme and nineteen variations in one long movement, and was clearly inspired by Corelli's original.

Pietro Locatelli (1695–1764)

VIOLIN CONCERTO IN D MAJOR IL LABERINTO ARMONICO, OP. 3, NO. 12

Allegro, Capriccio

Largo, Presto

Allegro, Capriccio

Locatelli is often regarded as the founder of modern instrumental virtuoso playing. He was born in Bergamo in northern Italy, and travelled to Rome at the age of sixteen to study the violin with the fine players associated with the great violinist and composer Arcangelo Corelli. During the 1720s he toured extensively throughout Europe, creating a sensation with his spectacular style of playing, which was 'like a devil', according to one listener. As a player, he was revolutionary. He experimented with new kinds of articulation and extended the range of notes of the violin into an extreme high range then unheard of, expanding the boundaries of violin technique in ways that still challenge players today.

In 1729, at the age of only thirty-four, Locatelli retired to Amsterdam where he remained for the rest of his life, supervising the publishing and sale of his compositions and giving private concerts (one observer commented that 'he never will Play any where but with Gentlemen'). Unusually, he did not teach, and indeed an Englishman who heard him wrote, 'he is so afraid of People Learning from him, that He won't admit a Professed Musician into his Concert'.

In 1733 Locatelli arranged for the publication in Amsterdam of his Opus 3, entitled *The Art of the Violin*. It consisted of a set of twelve concertos, each with the by then standard three movements, as well as a *capriccio* for solo violin at the end of the first and last movements of each concerto. A *capriccio* (or caprice) is the term for a whimsical, fantastical piece of music. The concertos were described by a player later in the eighteenth century as 'long and very difficult ... well-known rocks for a thousand shipwrecks ... One difficulty follows the other, daredevil intricacies come in rapid succession'.

The *capriccios* are not really part of the musical structure of the concertos, are often longer than the movement to which they are attached, and are meant to be played at breakneck speed. As they called for techniques which few if any violinists then possessed, they were incredibly difficult, and remain extremely challenging. To play them successfully the eighteenth century violinist needed to use the bow in quite different ways, and the extreme high notes and difficult chords call for exceptional dexterity in the left hand. Locatelli was well aware of what he was asking for, and wrote on the score '*Il laberinto armonico: facilis aditus, difficilis exitus*' – 'the harmonic labyrinth: easy to get into, difficult to get out of'.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The first and last movements of this concerto are similar in structure to those by Vivaldi, with the full orchestra alternating with episodes for the solo violin. Unusually, however, the first movement begins with a long introductory passage for solo cello which is then joined by the full orchestra taking up the same theme. The writing for the solo violin is virtuosic, with chromatic passages and long phrases consisting just of double stopping (playing two strings at once). The orchestra drops out completely for the *capriccio*, then re-joins the solo violin with a restatement of the theme.

The central movement opens with the full orchestra playing a series of slow moving chords before the solo violin enters with long expressive lyrical lines, accompanied by solo cello. Unusually there is a much faster second section to this movement, with the solo violin playing rapid leaps at the absolute upper limit of its range. The final movement in an energetic dance rhythm features the solo violin playing an arpeggiated figure throughout. As in the first movement, everything stops for the treacherously high *capriccio*, then the orchestra joins in for the conclusion.

“Locatelli must surely be allowed by all to be an earthquake ... What bow strokes! What fire! What energy! He plays with so much fury upon his fiddle, that in my humble opinion, he must wear out some dozens of them in a year. ... He has the most affected look just before he begins to play, that I ever saw in my life...”

AN ENGLISH AMATEUR WHO HEARD HIM IN AMSTERDAM IN 1741

Antonio Vivaldi (1678–1741)

CONCERTO FOR TWO VIOLINS & VIOLA DA GAMBA IN G MINOR, FROM *L'ESTRO ARMONICO*, OP. 3 NO. 2, RV 578

Adagio e spiccato

Allegro

Larghetto

Allegro

Vain, egotistical, boastful, grasping, and with an extraordinary zest for life – these words, among many others, have been used to describe Antonio Vivaldi, who was known as ‘the Red Priest’, supposedly because of the colour of his hair. He was ordained as a priest in 1703 but had to stop saying mass only three years later because of a debilitating chest complaint (probably bronchial asthma). ‘I almost always stay at home and go out only in a gondola or carriage, since my chest ailment ... prevents me from walking.’ His ill health did not stop him from becoming one of Italy’s most successful opera composers in the first decades of the eighteenth century. He claimed to have written over ninety operas, although so far only forty-nine have been identified.

Unlike most other musicians in the first half of the eighteenth century, Vivaldi was never employed on a long-term basis by either a member of the nobility or the church, but in his home town of Venice he was hailed as a teacher and violin virtuoso. He was particularly associated with the Pio Ospedale della Pietà, one of four Venetian *ospedali* which cared for orphans and children of the destitute and which maintained an all-female orchestra and choir as a means of providing the institution with a source of income. Under Vivaldi’s guidance their orchestra became one of the finest and most versatile ensembles in all of Italy and attracted travellers from throughout Europe. A number of the girls grew into renowned virtuosos, and many lived their whole lives at the *ospedali*, performing and teaching.

Vivaldi composed nearly five hundred concertos, of which two hundred and thirty were for solo violin. We know very little about the origins of most of the concertos, not even when they were written, or for whom. This particular concerto was composed by Vivaldi for two solo violins and solo cello, and was one of twelve concertos, published in 1711 under the title *L'estro armonico*. Their publication made Vivaldi famous throughout Europe and had an enormous influence on other composers who modelled their concertos on his. In this concert, the solo cello part will be played by viola da gamba.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Vivaldi pioneered the use of *ritornello* form, a concerto structure in which the orchestra plays a recurring refrain (*ritornello*) contrasted with episodes played by the solo instruments. Vivaldi’s limitless musical imagination created endless possibilities based on this simple foundation, as can be heard in this concerto, where the *ritornello* and episodes are continually varied to create interest and give the music momentum.

Most of Vivaldi’s concertos are in three movements, with the fast outer movements being in *ritornello* form, however here he begins with a dramatic slow first movement, marked to be played ‘*spiccato*’, a technique in which the bow is bounced on the string to give a detached effect. It leads without pause to a tension filled fast second movement in *ritornello* form. An implacably rising bass line, repeated by the violins along with brilliant episodes from the soloists, drive the movement to its conclusion. Vivaldi’s slow movements tended to be lyrical occasions for the soloist, but here the drama continues with powerful detached chords from the orchestra with just the occasional interjection from the solo instruments. The last movement relieves the tension in a bouncy dance.

Johann Gottlieb Graun (1702–1771)

AUSTRALIAN PREMIERE

CONCERTO FOR VIOLA DA GAMBA IN G MAJOR

Allegro

Adagio ma non tanto con sordino

Allegro

Violin virtuoso Johann Gottlieb Graun was the first musician hired by Prussian Crown Prince Frederick when he was starting his own small orchestra, which then became the orchestra of the royal court based in Berlin once the prince became King Frederick the Great in 1740. With virtually unlimited power and wealth and an almost obsessive interest in music, Frederick was able to employ the finest musicians in Germany as players, conductors and composers, and his orchestra with forty players was one of the largest in Germany. They included the flute virtuoso Johann Quantz, who was also Frederick’s teacher, J.S. Bach’s son Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach, a keyboard virtuoso, and Graun’s brother, the opera composer Carl Heinrich Graun.

Frederick was a great military tactician, and ran his court in a similar manner. Every night except Monday and Friday (when he went to the opera) private chamber concerts were held, beginning precisely at 7pm. It was part of Graun’s duties to compose music for these concerts, and also for the public court concerts presided over by Frederick’s wife Queen Elisabeth Christine (Frederick had been forced into marriage by his father and barely spoke to her). Over the thirty years that Graun was concertmaster of the orchestra, he produced an enormous number of compositions, including nearly one hundred sinfonias, a large quantity of chamber music, and forty-six concertos.

He also wrote twenty-two major works for viola da gamba, including ten concertos, because Frederick’s orchestra included Ludwig Christian Hesse, a player who was described at the time as the greatest viola da gamba player in Europe. By this time the instrument was no longer fashionable, and the position of gambist only continued in the Berlin orchestra while Hesse stayed to fill it. When he left, after twenty-two years, his position was scrapped, and a cellist hired instead. Frederick’s younger brother August Wilhelm and his nephew Friedrich Wilhelm, later king, were also accomplished gamba players.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Graun’s compositions for viola da gamba show detailed knowledge of gamba technique and were clearly written for a virtuoso player. His concertos are considered to be among the most difficult music written for gamba. They use the full range of the instrument, with difficult chords and series of double trills.

Graun structured his concertos like those of Vivaldi, in three movements and using *ritornello* form, although his *ritornelli* tend to be much longer than those composed by Vivaldi. This is particularly effective when the viola da gamba is the solo instrument, as it allows for strong contrasts between the full orchestra and the solo episodes. The orchestral accompaniment to the gamba is very light so as not to drown out ‘the weak and somewhat husky sound of this otherwise tender and pleasant instrument’ as it was described by the German music critic Johann Adolf Scheibe, writing in 1739.

Program Notes

Antonio Vivaldi (1678–1741)

SINFONIA FOR STRINGS IN B MINOR, AL SANTO SEPOLCRO, RV 169

Adagio molto
Allegro ma poco

As is the case with many of Vivaldi's works, the reasons behind the composition of this short sinfonia are unclear. By the late 1730s, when this sinfonia is thought to have been written, Vivaldi's music was becoming unpopular in Venice, and he travelled to Vienna in 1740, hoping for work from the Austrian emperor Charles VI. The sinfonia's title means 'at the Holy Sepulchre', the church in Jerusalem containing the tomb where Christ was said to have been buried. It was a Viennese tradition to perform 'Sepolcro' oratorios in the week before Easter, and this sinfonia is in the same style as those composed by other Viennese oratorio composers. So it could be that Vivaldi wrote this and another work with the same title by way of a job application, to demonstrate his versatility to the Austrian court. In the end however his timing was off: Charles VI died at the end of 1740 and all the theatres, where Vivaldi could have hoped for opera commissions, closed until well into the following year. Perhaps too poor, or too ill, to return home, Vivaldi died there, in poverty, in July 1741.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

A sinfonia was a short instrumental work in three or occasionally two movements which functioned as an overture to an eighteenth-century opera. The mood created in this introverted work for four-part strings is quite different from Vivaldi's extrovert and flashy concertos. Its intense, chromatic melodies in a minor key and unstable harmonies suggest that it could have been intended for Holy Week (the week before Easter), as such music was often used in the Baroque period to represent Christ's suffering and death.

Program Notes

Renato Duchiffre (1962–)

CONCERTO FOR TWO VIOLAS DA GAMBA IN D MINOR

IV Tempo di Tango

Renato Duchiffre is the nom de plume of Baroque cellist and gamba player René Schiffer. He is a founding member of Apollo's Fire (also known as the Cleveland Baroque Orchestra). He has performed with period orchestras such as La Petite Bande, the Amsterdam Baroque Orchestra, and Tafelmusik, and has composed music theatre, choral and instrumental works. He wrote this concerto in 2001, writing that his aim was 'to show that the viola da gamba can be a strong instrument, and that Baroque and classical composers were wrong in their failure to provide us with true concertos for it'.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The Concerto in D Minor for Two Violas da Gamba was written for period instruments in the Baroque style. In the fourth movement the gambas, instruments once synonymous with the French aristocratic court, lead the orchestra in a ten-minute tango. Schiffer explained his reasons for this. 'Though the Tango is, of course, a twentieth-century genre, I felt it was the perfect ending for this concerto: in form because of the dance's signature elements of rhythmic simplicity and harmonic ostinato structure, which are also characteristic of many Baroque dance forms, used to conclude many pieces of the time; in substance because of its dark and violent character, which I saw as the fulfilment of the dark insistence of the Allegro.'



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