



FRANCESCO GEMINIANI 1687-1762

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| 1 | Concerto grosso in D minor H143 "La Folia"
after Arcangelo Corelli's Violin Sonata Op.5 No.12 | 11.30 |
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ANTONIO VIVALDI 1678-1741

Violin Concerto in D major RV 211

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|---|----------------------|------|
| 2 | I. Allegro non molto | 5.36 |
| 3 | II. Larghetto | 3.46 |
| 4 | III. Allegro | 4.50 |

Violin Concerto in E-flat major RV 257

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|---|----------------------------------|------|
| 5 | I. Andante molto e quasi allegro | 4.50 |
| 6 | II. Adagio | 2.56 |
| 7 | III. Allegro | 3.10 |

Violin Concerto in B minor RV 386

- | | | |
|----|--------------------|------|
| 8 | I. Allegro ma poco | 4.46 |
| 9 | II. Larghetto | 3.47 |
| 10 | III. Allegro | 3.22 |

Violin Concerto in B-flat major, RV 583

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| 11 | (II. Andante) | 3.55 |
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NICOLA BENEDETTI violin

BENEDETTI BAROQUE ORCHESTRA

KATI DEBREZENI, JANE GORDON violin I

MATTHEW TRUSCOTT, MICHAEL GUREVICH violin II

LOUISE HOGAN, REBECCA JONES viola

JONATHAN BYERS, SARAH MACMAHON cello

NIKITA NAUMOV double bass

ELIZABETH KENNY lute

STEVEN DEVINE harpsichord

The Italian baroque, and in particular the music of Antonio Vivaldi, polarises musicians and music lovers alike. Many find it light fare: too populist, repetitive and predictable. It's often dismissed as the poorer, simpler cousin of the sophisticated German composer. But to compare Vivaldi to Bach is to do them both an injustice.

The sound world of early 18th-century Italy first came into full three-dimensional focus for me when I met Italian conductor, harpsichordist and founder of the Venice Baroque Orchestra, Andrea Marcon. Having listened obsessively to his recordings, I was both honoured and humbled by the opportunity. "Just bring your violin and see what happens." You can imagine how ill-equipped and ill-prepared I was feeling. I took comfort in assuming it would be more talk than playing, but that's certainly not what Andrea had in mind. To him, the music of Vivaldi is talking. It's the best kind of conversation you can conjure up and provides the fastest way to get to know someone. Just play, and play, and play.

Andrea greeted me warmly, but hardly said a word. We made no decisions about repertoire. Notes magically emerged from the harpsichord before he sat down. Music, which was exclusively improvised, was all he wanted to say and hear: chord sequences, harmonic progressions, embellishments, flourishes, gestures, marches, songs... these all had colour and variation and texture and meaning. Music poured out of his instrument. How did the humble harpsichord become so multi-dimensional?

After some time, I awkwardly tried to join in, occasionally recognising snippets of Vivaldi, Corelli, Tartini or Geminiani. Eventually, Andrea settled on the safe bet of the *Four Seasons*. I listened much harder than I played, trying desperately to soak up what was emanating from him. I was so moved and invigorated by his conviction and strength in expression. And so began our beautiful friendship. Tours with his Venice Baroque Orchestra, and many concerts with modern orchestras who, like me, were desperately trying to absorb and emulate the infectious bright light of this music, revealed to us through Andrea's vision.

I'm partly telling this story in order to adequately express my love for this style of music, and my love for Vivaldi in particular. But more importantly, it is an invitation inside the feeling of how the Italian spirit moves from person to person: the style of communication, sense of communality, way with humour and drama, storytelling, and perhaps most of all, love, in all its forms.

This music must be stepped into like you are stepping into an opera. We musicians are all acting, all giving and taking demonstratively and with fervour. The consistent rhythmic bass line is not repetitive - it is an engine! It is momentum, keeping us alive. It is not enough to play the rhythm; we strive to understand it. The theme at the opening of the D major Concerto isn't just a D major chord, but rather a grand entrance of fanfare and opulence. The final movement of the Concerto in E-flat is a hunt; the B minor Concerto, a love dispute gone wrong.

Artists create for all sorts of reasons and with all sorts of things in mind. But this music, so rich in true song and dance, was written with Vivaldi's audience in mind. It's full of stories we all relate to and was intended to be understood and enjoyed. Early 18th-century Venice's public wasn't any old public, though. Everyone made music of some kind, be it at home, in the street, on or off-stage. Amateur music-making was shared, and inspired sharing. Music was a part of people's lives; written, played and sung for and by the people.

Now, I don't want anyone picturing Vivaldi churning out fun, little songs for the sole objective of "populist entertainment". A dedication to mastery was Vivaldi's life's calling, and his work as teacher, composer, director and virtuoso violinist was relentless. And so, it is between these two positions, the dazzling entertainer and the disciplined master of craft, where this man's work revolutionised music forever.

Playing this music, I almost feel like I know these Italian violinists or at least would like to have known them. Francesco Geminiani arrived in London in 1714. He first studied music with his father before heading off to Rome to learn with Arcangelo Corelli. Geminiani's dismissal from his job in Lucca due to "frequent absences" gives us a glorious glimpse of his character. And the English music historian Charles Burney confirms this for us, describing his "wild and unsteady" way of working: instead of "regulating and conducting the band, he threw it into confusion, as none of the performers were able to follow him in his tempo rubato."

Perhaps this is what attracted Geminiani to his teacher's Op.5, No.12, a variation structure rich in unpredictable metric and character changes. Geminiani reworked Corelli's Op.5 Sonatas for violin into two sets of six Concerti grossi. Transcriptions were a normal part of 18th-century compositional practice; indeed, it was often seen as a way to pay homage to a musical master. Yet when violinist Francesco Maria Veracini complained of riffriggitori – new works that simply "reheated" older ones – he may have had his rival Geminiani's commercial nous in mind. Geminiani's arrangement is an enlargement of Corelli's *La Folia*: he distributed the material between two concertino violins and cello, with a ripieno orchestra providing harmonic and rhythmic support.

With this fuller ensemble came an intensification of drama and heartbreakening emotion: Geminiani created textures that bring energy as well as a social nuance to the inherent dance and diminution structures of Corelli's variations. We chase and fight each other throughout this work, either competition or comradery always right around the corner. Though in Geminiani's setting, Corelli's violin part is largely unchanged, Geminiani gives rhyme and reason for the virtuosity: here, there is a community to show off for, a group of people to bounce off and spar with. It's friendship, war, love and tryst.

And who better to share this experience with than the most incredible group of musicians, most of whom I have grown to know over the years in



various legendary ensembles liked the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment and Academy of Ancient Music.

But this was a plunge in the deep end for me, to choose to direct a new ensemble of individuals without the comfort of someone else's vision or name. I guess we all need to jump at some point, just as Andrea has demonstrated to me over and over again. Dare to try, and if we are free and daring enough, our collective experience only deepens.

I'm deeply honoured to have been joined by:

Kati Debretzeni, Jane Gordon, Matthew Truscott, Michael Gurevich, Louise Hogan, Rebecca Jones, Jonathan Byers, Sarah MacMahon, Nikita Naumov, Elizabeth Kenny and Steven Devine.

And we hope you will jump into this journey of Italian storytelling with us all!



Nicola Benedetti





Executive Producer: **HELEN LEWIS**

Recording Producer: **ANDREW WALTON**

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Recording Editor: **ANDREW WALTON**

A&R Administration: **JOANNE BAINES**

Production Coordinator: **NICO ROONEY**

Orchestra Manager & Librarian: **JAMES HALLIDAY**

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Nicola plays the Gariel Stradivarius (1717), courtesy of Jonathan Moulds

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