

VENETIAN CARNIVAL PROGRAM NOTES

During the 17th and 18th centuries, the Serene Republic of Venice—with its picturesque canals, spectacular art and architecture, and lively social scene—was an obligatory stop on the Grand Tour. Its artistic riches proved irresistible to well-healed European travelers, whose reports enticed contemporaries with vivid impressions of a must-see locale. The annual carnival season especially kept locals and visitors entertained with the latest theatrical and musical extravaganzas, while Venetian-style sonatas and concertos became the rage throughout Europe.

The advent of opera around 1700 engendered a new kind of instrumental music in Venice and other northern Italian cities. Vocal monody (speech-like song) found its instrumental counterpart in the *stile moderno* sonatas of Biagio Marini, Dario Castello, and numerous other violinist-composers. These rhapsodic works typically comprise multiple sections, which may or may not be clearly demarcated by changes in musical texture. The charm of this music lies in its unpredictability, its seemingly irrational flamboyance, and its strong sense of rhetorical play.

Biagio Marini's "Sonata in Ecco," as its title suggests, employs echo effects throughout. In his Op. 8 collection (1629), Marini himself specified that top line of this piece, the first of three violin parts, should dominate the texture while the others remain "hidden" in the background. By contrast, the title of his Op. 22 "Sonata a quattro" (1655) specifies four melody instruments—including one in the bass register—above the basso continuo. This more old-fashioned sonata, a descendant of the Venetian canzona, has multiple short sections defined by contrasting motives and sprightly rhythmic interplay.

The most striking element of Dario Castello's Sonata XVI, part of his second published volume (1629), is the *stile concitato* writing of its second section. A Venetian invention, the "excited style" involves rapid-fire repeated notes or chords that mimic the agitated sounds of warfare. As an esteemed member of the "company of instrumentalists" at St Mark's Basilica in Venice, Castello worked directly with Claudio Monteverdi, who first experimented with this texture in his *Madrigals of Love and War*.

By Antonio Vivaldi's day, the Venetian republic had lost significant power and prestige but none of its cultural capital. A precocious virtuoso, the young Antonio also studied for the priesthood. Ordained in 1703 and nicknamed the "Red Priest" because of the color of his hair, Vivaldi never took up liturgical duties. Instead, he took a job as music master to an orphanage, the *Ospedale della Pietà*, where he produced an enormous body of music, including over 500 concertos.

The fast movements of Vivaldi concerti usually begin with the whole ensemble delivering a complete musical sentence, one with a clearly discernable beginning, middle, and end. Bits and pieces of this “ritornello” return multiple times as the movement progresses, in alternation with solo writing that may or may not engage with the same material. Vivaldi’s slow movements range more widely in design and temperament, from the tender and song-like to the dramatic and unstable. Solo episodes in all movements are often accompanied by reduced textures, with only upper strings or the continuo supporting the virtuosic display.

The two violin concerti on this program exemplify this basic plan, though each has its individual twists (the solo noodling at the outset of RV 507, for example). By contrast, the flute concerto subtitled “La Notte” (Night) conjures a more mysterious and less predictable world in a series of short movements, two of which carry evocative subtitles: “Fantasmi” (Phantoms) and “Il Sonno” (Sleep). The Concerto in D Major RV 92, finally, is an example of a chamber concerto, in which three solo instruments are supported not by a larger ensemble of strings but just by continuo players.

Vive Venezia – and Happy New Year!

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