

BachBeat

The Newsletter of the Bach Cantata Choir



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Newsletter

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The Birth of the Concerto

By Lorin Wilkerson – Bass

As lovers of early music well know, the concerto grosso (It. 'big concerto') was one of the most important orchestral forms to emerge from the Baroque era. One need only consider that Vivaldi's *The Four Seasons* or Bach's *Brandenburg Concerti* are iconic works of this era to understand the importance of the concerto grosso. Featuring a group of solo instruments (the *concertino*) and a larger ensemble (the *ripieno*), composers have for centuries delighted in the textural contrasts and sonic potential inherent within the structure of the concerto grosso and its descendants.

While Arcangelo Corelli (1653-1713) was the first composer to use the term 'concerto grosso' in the title of a composition, it was his friend Alessandro Stradella (1639-1682) who first wrote in the style that would become the concerto grosso, with his *Sonate di viole*.

The first concertos took a similar form to the trio sonata, which consisted of two high-pitched instruments (most often violins), accompanied by cello or viola da gamba, and supported by a harpsichordist who improvised harmonic accompaniment according to the bass line, together called the *basso continuo*. Thus a trio sonata was played by four instrumentalists.

The concerti grossi took the concept a step farther, and in place of the continuo there was a string orchestra, thus constituting a true *ripieno*. Stradella wrote operatic accompaniment in a concerto style. This may have passed directly to Corelli, whose Op. 6 Concerti Grossi are immensely popular to this day, and were vitally influential on that titanic composer of concertos, Antonio Vivaldi.

Vivaldi's instrumental writing instigated a virtual revolution in the concept of the concerto. He cemented the three-movement structure (fast-slow-fast) as the preferred style for concerto writing (though some composers used the *sonata da chiesa* style of four movements) and he also expanded the boundaries of the *ritornello*, wherein a principal theme is played by the *ripieno*, and parts of it are returned to time and time again in various permutations to allow the soloists to improvise and show off their technical ability.

Another aspect of Vivaldi's ingenuity in concerto composition was the variety of instrumentation for which he wrote the solo parts.* He wrote over 500 concertos in total, with 350 of these having one instrument as the soloist. Over 230 were for solo violin, but for the remainder he wrote for an amazing variety of solo instruments, including bassoon, cello, oboe, flute, viola d'amore and mandolin. However around 100 of them could be considered concerti grossi, with two or more instruments in the *ripieno*, including



Alessandro Stradella

some incredible examples wherein the ripieno consists of multiple violins, trumpets, theorboes, chalumeaux (forerunner of the clarinet), harpsichord, mandolins, trumpet marines...all in the same composition! He also wrote the first concerto known to have been composed for that new instrument, the clarinet.

Bach, Telemann and Handel were all deeply influenced by Vivaldi in their concerto writing, and Handel's Opus 6 concerti, published in the 1740s, have been called the paramount example of the Baroque concerto; the last great flowering of this oeuvre in the old age as the earliest stirrings of the *stil galante* began to presage the classical era.

In the early classical era the *sinfonia concertante* began to be favored over the strict concerto form of the Baroque; in this style the orchestra was given more prominence, a sort of equal partnership with the solo instrument(s). J.C. Bach, the youngest son of the Leipzig master, wrote a number of these in the 1770s which most likely influenced Mozart, who wrote his own. The concerto, both for solo instruments and for groups of instruments, has thrived in the traditions of Western art music ever since. ♪

*The BCC Chamber Orchestra will perform Vivaldi's Concerto for Two Trumpets in C Major, RV 537 at the SuperBach Sunday concert on February 6th at 2 pm.

Next Concert

Sunday, February 6, 2011 at 2:00 p.m.

"SuperBach" Sunday

Antonio Vivaldi (1678-1741) Concerto for Two Trumpets

Vytautas Miskinis (b. 1954) Cantate Domino

G. F. Handel (1685-1759) Foundling Hospital Anthem

J.S. Bach: Cantata #191 "Gloria in excelsis Deo"



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Tidbits about the Concerto and its composers:

Alessandro Stradella, the originator of what would become known as the concerto grosso, was a well-known lothario, and it eventually cost him his life. After leaving Rome to escape the powerful enemies he had made through his affairs, he fled for his life from Venice in 1677 when a nobleman (whose mistress Stradella took as *his* mistress) hired a gang of thugs to kill him. He was not so lucky in Genoa; in 1682, after spending a few years composing operas, Stradella again got into trouble with a nobleman's innamorata, and this time he was stabbed to death by a hitman in the Piazza Banchi. Friedrich von Flotow's 1844 opera *Alessandro Stradella* is based on the 'adventures' of the unfortunate (and perhaps unwise) composer's love life.

Two of Vivaldi's flute concertos have been rediscovered in the 21st century—in Scotland of all places. In 2010, a concerto known as 'Il Gran Mogol' was unearthed by musicologist Andrew Woolley in the National Archives of Scotland. It had previously belonged to flutist Lord Robert Kerr (d. 1746), the 3rd Marquess of Lothian. Its first known performance was in Perth, Scotland, in 2010. In 2000, another flute concerto had been discovered in Scotland's National Archives.

P.D.Q. Bach wrote a concerto entitled 'Pervertimento for Bagpipes, Bicycle and Balloons', with the concertino formed by those three 'instruments' listed in its title.