

Dramatic Contrasts

Writing music that juxtaposed one or two soloists with a larger ensemble, composers at the turn of the 18th century explored new dramatic possibilities in music. The works on today's concert encapsulate this era with a selection of the most exciting genres of the day, including arias and concertos.

Although he wrote relatively few compositions, Corelli's legacy endured long after his death in 1713; there were some 17 editions of his music published between 1714 and 1790, with further editions issued in the 19th century. His music was imitated directly or used as source material by his contemporaries and successors. Corelli's Opus 6 Concertos, described by one contemporary commentator as the "bread of life" for a musician, directly inspired a set of concertos by Handel.

As shown by their (rather long) title—*Concerti grossi con duoi Violini, e Violoncello di Concertino obligati, e duoi altri Violin, Viola e Basso di Concerto Grosso ad arbitrio, che si potranno radoppiare*—Corelli's Opus 6 Concertos require two violins and continuo but leave optional the addition of other strings in a larger ensemble. Corelli also wrote that the number of instruments in the larger ensemble could be doubled so that there would be more musicians to a part, making these works adaptable for both smaller and larger groups.

Each movement of the Concerto grosso in D major, Op. 6, No. 1 alternates music for a smaller group of instruments with that for the full ensemble. Except for the final Allegro—a virtuosic display for the soloists—Corelli pairs slow (Largo) and fast (Allegro) sections in this concerto. Within this general structure, Corelli builds excitement through repetition as figures are passed back and forth between the soloists and the full ensemble.

Two arias from two different dramatic works by Handel offer a glimpse of the composer's skill at defining a character musically. Written for the Royal Academy of Music in 1724, Handel's *Giulio Cesare* centers on the love between Caesar and Cleopatra set against the backdrop of political struggle. In Act III, Cleopatra's armies have lost an important battle, she is now a prisoner, and Caesar is presumed dead. Cleopatra's dire situation is evident with the first line of her aria, "Piangerò la sorte mia," which she sings very simply. As she ruminates on her fate, her mood shifts, and she declares that she will haunt her enemy after her death. This resolve does not last, however, and Cleopatra again sinks into despair. Events later turn in Cleopatra's favor as she is reunited with Caesar and rules Egypt.

Handel composed *Semele* between June 3 and July 4, 1743; it was the first large-scale composition he had written in almost two years. That previous burst of creativity had resulted in two other oratorios, *Messiah* and *Samson*, both of which had been composed at break-neck speed as well. What makes Handel's quick composition time for *Semele* even more remarkable is that he had suffered "a paralytic attack" just two months before.

The Story of Semele, "after the manner of an Oratorio," premiered in February 1744. This mythological story centers on Semele, a mortal who is in love with the god Jupiter. Although she is about to be married, Semele pleads for Jupiter to take her away and the god sends an eagle to carry Semele to his palace. Here, Semele revels in her new life as she sings the buoyant aria, "Endless Pleasure, Endless Love." Unfortunately, all does not end well as Jupiter's wife, Juno, uses Semele's desire to become immortal against her.

Handel often performed organ concertos between the acts of his oratorios. His Organ Concerto in F Major, HWV 295 was first heard in 1739 at the premiere of his oratorio *Israel in Egypt*. The four-movement work is scored for organ without pedals plus oboes, strings, and

continuo. Each movement features an exchange of ideas between the organ and full ensemble; Handel may have improvised the longer solos passages with virtuosic figurations. This concerto is nicknamed “The Cuckoo and the Nightingale” due to the musical figures associated with each bird in the solo sections of the second movement.

Beyond being inspired by other composers’ music, Handel was known for adapting his own musical material for different compositions. The aria “Piangerò la sorte mia,” from *Giulio Cesare* most likely inspired a movement in one of Handel’s *Twelve Grand Concertos*. In addition, the Organ Concerto in F became the model for another concerto in the same publication, which Handel issued as his opus 6, directly connecting his set of concertos with Corelli’s Opus 6 Concertos. Johann Sebastian Bach also reused his own music. In 1736, he rewrote an earlier work, his Concerto for Violin and Oboe in C minor, BWV1060R, as a concerto for two harpsichords.

Beginning in 1729, Bach directed an organization of university students and other connoisseurs called the Leipzig or “Bachische” Collegium Musicum (the director’s name was traditionally incorporated into the title of the ensemble). The group performed at Gottfried Zimmerman’s coffee house and, in order to supply instrumental music for these performances, Bach sometimes arranged compositions he had composed earlier. Such is the case with the harpsichord concertos, the foundation for the solo keyboard concerto as we know it today. The Concerto for Two Harpsichords, BWV 1060, was adapted from an earlier concerto for oboe and violin. That first concerto, however, is lost and so, using knowledge gained by studying other concertos Bach adapted, the Concerto for Oboe and Violin in C minor, BWV1060R has been reconstructed.

Bach highlights each of the two solo instruments individually in this concerto, but an integral element of the music is the distinctive sound color of the oboe and solo violin playing together. In the second movement, the violin imitates the sweep of each oboe line as the two solo lines encircle one another in an exquisite musical dance. With wonderful moments that allow each soloist to shine, the final movement returns to the energy and interactions reminiscent of the opening Allegro.

Composed in the 1720s, Handel’s *Silite venti* shares some musical material with other Handel works, including his oratorio, *Esther*. The first movement opens in the style of a French Overture, a popular way to begin a dramatic vocal work. This structure typically has two sections: the first features a long-short rhythmic pattern, and the second is characterized by short passages that are imitated and passed between instruments. Handel, however, adds a twist to this. He interrupts the second section with the entrance of the soprano singing “Silite venti” (Silence winds), firmly establishing the voice’s central role in the rest of this beautiful work.

In the aria “Dulcis amor” (Sweet love), Handel sets the oboe and strings in a dialogue with one another as well as with the soloist. The recitative “O fortunata anima” (O blessed soul), accompanied by the strings, prepares the next aria, “Date sarta” (Give garlands). Like the previous aria, this da capo aria also follows a three-part structure. The first section is gentle, but the mood changes dramatically in the next section. Now driven, the instruments are a counterpoint to the shorter phrases sung by the soprano. There is also a change in meter—beats now grouped into patterns of three instead of two. The return to the opening music of this aria sounds all the more graceful because of the intervening music.

Handel writes virtuosity into every movement, but the final movement is a *tour de force*. As has been true since its entrance, the soprano part leads the way in this setting of the word “Alleluia,” but the instruments, in varying combinations, contribute virtuosity of their own to this

uninhibited expression of joy. The final measures of this movement are ingenious as all parts, vocal and instrumental, come together on a single chord before ending with a flourish.

Each work on today's concert adheres to the basic principle of alternating passages for larger and smaller musical forces. In Handel's vocal music the larger ensemble supports and expounds on the story being told with the voice. In each concerto, we also hear how the larger ensemble complements the solo passages, with some of the most dramatic moments resulting from the interplay between the soloist(s) and the full ensemble. Both exciting to play and to hear, it is no wonder these works continue to delight both performers and listeners alike.

Teresa M. Neff