

In the 17th and 18th centuries, Italy boasted a great canon of high-calibre violinists and composers who contributed to the development of violin technique and writing for the instrument. Italian violinists were marvelled at across Europe; many virtuosi travelled abroad, showcasing their skills, and were hired as court musicians beyond Italy.

**Antonio Vivaldi** bears a lot of credit for developing the solo concerto genre and formalising the three-movement, fast-slow-fast, concerto structure. Vivaldi spent much of his career in Venice as the music director and violin teacher at the *Ospedale della Pietà* (Pietà): an orphanage and convent for nuns that provided musical education for orphaned girls. The Pietà was famous for the performances of its large orchestra and choir of skilled female instrumentalists and singers, which attracted listeners from near and afar.

Possibly one of the last works Vivaldi composed, **Sinfonia RV 149** was written in 1740 for a lavish performance at the Pietà for Venice's high society and the visiting Prince Frederick Christian, son of the King of Poland. The Sinfonia was performed as the overture for the cantata *Il Coro delle Muse* (*the Choir of Muses*) by the Neapolitan Gennaro d'Alessandro. The sinfonia survives bound together with three concertos written as instrumental interludes for the same occasion. In the second movement Vivaldi creates an unusual colour by the use of both *arco* (bowed) and *pizzicato* (plucked) violins in unison.

After touring in Italy and Germany as a successful violinist, in 1729 Italian **Pietro Locatelli** moved to Amsterdam, where he stayed the rest of his life. His concerto grosso ***Il pianto d'Arianna*** ("the weeping of Ariadne") is an unusual work in its drama and structure. Composed in 1741 in Amsterdam, the title refers to the mythological story of Ariadne from Ovid's *Heroides*. Though Locatelli provided no written description for the concerto, it no doubt refers to Ariadne's weeping over the abandonment by her lover, Theseus, and in its sentiment models Monteverdi's *Lamento d'Arianna*, an extended recitative and the only surviving fragment of Monteverdi's opera *L'Arianna*, written in 1608. Fitting with the text of Monteverdi's libretto, the music varies from undulating laments and sorrowful melodies, – *Let me die. And who do you think can comfort me in this harsh fate, in this great suffering?* – to stormy rage – *Ah, that you do not even reply! Ah, that you are deaf to my laments! Oh clouds, oh storms, oh winds, submerge him in those waves.* The concerto is indeed like opera for strings, with expressive recitative-like sections in which the solo violin takes the role of the vocalist, the weeper.

**Vivaldi's concerto RV 582 for violin and double orchestra** was likely written for his star violinist, Anna Maria at the Pietà. (The children left at the orphanage typically had no surname.) Titled as *Concerto in due Cori per la SS Assunzione di Maria Vergine*, it is fair to assume it was written for the feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary. The rich double orchestration of the outer movements is contrasted by the bare two-part writing of the second movement. The highly technical fireworks of the solo violin part are a testament to the high level of mastery of Vivaldi's pupils at the Pietà!

The chamber concerto in **C major RV 88** is a delightful example of Vivaldi's chamber concerti: despite the lack of a full orchestra, it is divided into distinct *tutti* and *solo* sections. The original scoring is for flute, oboe, violin, bassoon and continuo; we have opted to use a second flute instead of oboe in today's programme. The solo sections of the outer movements feature the flute and bassoon in

virtuosic duets, whereas the second movement gives the flute a lyrical melody line above the rich harmonies of the accompaniment.

Originally from Verona, **Evaristo Dall'Abaco** spent much of his career as a court musician in the Bavarian court in Munich. Dall'Abaco also had the chance to spend extensive time in France and deepen his knowledge of French style. Like *Il pianto d'Arianna*, Dall'Abaco's *Concerto a più strumenti* Op. 5 No. 3 could pass as programme music with its dramatic and expressive changes of mood and sentiment. The concerto is a hybrid between Italian and French styles, which perhaps explains the call for flutes, a popular instrument in 18th century French music. The opening movement is fiery Italian instrumental writing, whereas the following cantabile is distinctly French in flavour. The third movement alternates between manic, raging string playing and calm and soft flutes, the two groups reuniting in a sombre Largo. The tranquility is awakened by a pair of cheerful *passepieds*.

**Arcangelo Corelli (1653–1713)** was the most celebrated violinist of his time, and is also credited for developing the genres of sonata and concerto grosso. He was hailed for the quality of his tone, and his array of students included Vivaldi, Geminiani, and possibly Locatelli also. Corelli's fame as a violinist and composer was appraised far beyond Italy; when **Francesco Geminiani** travelled to London in 1714, being Corelli's alumnus served as a useful calling card. Geminiani quickly established himself as a musician in London and, though an accomplished composer in his own right, using Corelli's material in his first publication of orchestral works made good business sense. Corelli's Twelve Violin Sonatas Opus 5 were first published January 1st, 1700; Geminiani reworked Corelli's sonatas into two sets of Concerti Grossi published in London in two sets, in 1726 and 1729. **The Concerto Grosso in A Major H. 140** heard today leaves the original solo violin and cello part almost entirely unaltered. Geminiani imaginatively colours and fills the score with inner parts and divides the sonata into contrasting tutti and solo sections, turning the piece into a fulsome and joyous orchestral homage to his former teacher and the great father of concerti grossi.

Native of Bologna **Giuseppe Antonio Brescianello's** early musical activities are completely undocumented. It is known, however, that in 1715 for one year he worked as a viola player at the same court in Munich where Dall'Abaco was the concertmaster. From Munich Brescianello moved on to work as a music director at the Württemberg court in Stuttgart, where he stayed for the rest of his career. The popular baroque dance *Chaconne* derives from a suggestive dance from late 16th-century Spain. It evolved into a highly popular dance in French courts in the 17th century, and composers throughout Europe adopted the form. Based on a repeated harmonic progression, it gives an opportunity for endless imaginative variations to unfold over it. The Chaconne heard today is a beautiful testament to the musical melting pot that was Europe in the 18th century, and its many fruits that we still enjoy today!