

## PROGRAM NOTES

The works of the brilliant composer Henry Purcell represent the high point of the English Baroque, including those in the genre of “semi-opera,” in which light musical numbers and dance were interspersed with the spoken dialogue of a traditional play. The last of four such works completed by Purcell, *The Fairy Queen*, received its premiere at London's Dorset Garden Theatre in 1692, just three years before his tragically premature death at the age of 35. In the wake of the Restoration period, which had enjoyed the reopening of the theaters after the oppressively Puritanical interregnum rule of Oliver Cromwell, the joyous inventiveness and sensuality of *The Fairy Queen* reflect the newly regained freedoms of a liberalized society.

Two trumpets dominate the brief overture that immediately precedes the narrative of Shakespeare's popular play *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The first of the overture's two parts proclaims the majesty of the magical forest setting with rhythmically dotted figures in duple meter, before transforming into a spirited gigue that forecasts the comic escapades that are about to invade it.

Perhaps no composer is more identified with the concerto than “il Prete Rosso” (the Red-haired Priest) Antonio Vivaldi, who composed more than 500 in that genre alone. In contrast with the homophonic textures that typically dominate his concerti, his **Concerto Grosso, Op. 3 No. 11** is remarkable for its unusual amount of involved counterpoint. It is perhaps for this reason that his contemporary admirer J.S. Bach, who closely modeled his own concerti after those of the Venetian master, was inspired to transcribe this work as an organ concerto – one of several arrangements that Bach made of Vivaldi's concerti.

First popularized by Arcangelo Corelli, the concerto grosso represents the most important large-scale instrumental genre of the Baroque era. The ancestor of the solo concerto, it consists of a large ensemble, the *ripieno* (or *tutti*), out of which emerges a smaller *concertino* group of soloists. In place of similar musical material, Vivaldi imbued his *concertino* with contrasting figuration that effected an independent, almost antagonistic personality against the *ripieno*.

In place of Vivaldi's typical *ritornello* procedure, the form of the opening Allegro more closely resembles that of a prelude and fugue. The introductory section is set into motion by the two solo violins, who introduce themselves together in canonic interplay against an insistent tonic pedal point. A driving eighth note pulse, powerful triadic outlines, and repeated scale fragments are among the distinctive Vivaldi gestures that generate energetic momentum. Only upon entry of the third *concertino* member, the cello, does the *continuo* keyboard finally join to bring the introduction to a climactic closure with a series of harmonic sequences. A brief, pensively searching Adagio leads to the ensuing fugue, which is divided among the *ripieno*, alternating periodically with entries by the *concertino* group. An extremely prolonged pedal point on the dominant scale degree pulls the movement to closure, bringing to mind the great German organ works of Dietrich Buxtehude and J. S. Bach.

The rhythmic energy is relieved in the central movement, a lilting Siciliano bearing the

character of a lyrical vocal arioso. The continuo lies silent throughout, allowing a mournfully tender melody in the solo violin to soar above a gentle chordal string accompaniment. Expressively dark Neapolitan harmonies (those built on the flattened second scale degree) strongly recall the style of Alessandro Scarlatti and other composers of popular Neapolitan and Venetian opera of the day.

Imitative interplay and confident solos return in the final Allegro. Yet, despite its animated character, frequent harmonic suspensions threaten to cloud this parting movement with a tinge of pathos.

More traditional in its formal treatment of the genre is Georg Frideric Handel's **Concerto Grosso in C Major** from *Alexander's Feast*. Based on an ode by the great Reformation poet John Dryden, the plot of the entire work centers around a banquet in honor of Alexander the Great's victory over the Persian city of Persepolis and its vengeful aftermath, in which Alexander burns the city in retribution for his fallen warriors.

Handel's Concerto Grosso in C originally separated the two halves of the ode. Its movements follow the familiar slow-fast-slow-fast tempo pattern of the earlier *sonata da chiesa*.

Unmistakably Handelian from the onset of the first movement are the rhythmically incisive opening phrases of the *ripieno*, broken by crisp silences. With an authoritarian character deserving of the conqueror Alexander himself, the *ripieno* proclaims proudly and obstinately in a homophonic texture throughout the movement. Contrasting is the more active *concertino* group, that had been earlier established by Corelli – two violins and continuo. The *concertino* instruments venture into imitation, playfully trading off motives, and occasionally joining in agreement. The relatively quick alternation between the two groups further enhances the lively character.

Assuming the key of the relative minor, the brief Largo second movement waxes more plaintive in character. Each conversational phrase among the three *concertino* instruments is completed by a punctuating gesture of the *ripieno*, typical of Handel's style.

The joyous third movement abounds in vivacious fugal imitation, and the finale is an elegant march that defuses the energy of the work with a melody graced by delicate "Scotch snap" rhythms.

One of several successful collaborations between the playwright Molière and Jean-Baptiste Lully, court composer for King Louis the XIV, the five-act comedie-ballet *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme* (*The Bourgeois Gentleman*) satirized the pretentiousness of both aristocracy and middle class. Its exotic **March for the Turkish Ceremony** was inspired by increased contact with the declining Ottoman Empire, including a recent visit of Turks to Louis' court. The continuing European craze for Turkish culture would persist for more than a century, culminating in the vivid recreations of military march music of the Turkish Janissary band in works of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven.

Just three years after the October 1670 premiere of *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme*, Lully

invented the *tragédie lyrique*, which was destined to reign as the dominant form of opera during the French Baroque. With allegorical plots drawn from mythology and ancient history, these theater pieces were thinly disguised propaganda that aggrandized the ruling monarch, King Louis XIV. The style of the magnificent overtures that launched these lavish stage productions soon became models that would endure to the end of the Baroque throughout Europe. Indeed, the French overture would become a standard opening to large form works of J. S. Bach, Handel, and of Georg Philip Telemann, who, with over 3,000 works to his credit, towers as one of history's most prolific composers, and the most famous in Germany in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century.

Like that from Purcell's *Fairy Queen*, Telemann's **Overture in D Major** features two trumpets and Orchestra, but serves instead to open an orchestral suite. The work displays the traditional structure of Lully's French overture style. This two-part form consists of a grand opening section with stately "over-dotted" eighth note rhythms. The pompous pageantry yields to the customary lively aftermath, a gigue in lightly imitative texture.

The French overture and concerto grosso forms on today's program represent Baroque orchestral mainstays that would fade with the end of the era. By the dawn of the Classic period, the popularity of the French overture would give way to the more elaborate three-part Italian overture. During the next stage of the concerto's evolution, the sparkling individuality with which Vivaldi anointed his soloists would assume an increasingly powerful, even adversarial relationship with the orchestra in the solo concerto.

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