

Tafelmusik

Enchantress

Karina Gauvin, soprano

PROGRAMME NOTES

Vivaldi Concerto & Motet

For almost 40 years, Vivaldi was violin teacher and orchestra director at the Ospedale della Pietà in Venice, a female orphanage at which the pupils received extensive musical training. One of Vivaldi's principal duties was to provide several concertos each month for performances by the Pietà's renowned orchestra. The orchestra was one of the leading ensembles in Europe, and the regular concerts performed by the young women were among the tourist attractions of the city at that time. Although most of Vivaldi's over 400 extant concertos feature the violin, the constant demand for new and novel concertos inspired Vivaldi to turn to instruments not often given solo roles in the orchestra, including wind and brass instruments. He wrote some 20 solo concertos and three double concertos for oboe, an instrument also favoured by fellow Venetians Albinoni and Marcello.

Although it is for his innumerable concertos that Vivaldi is remembered today, Vivaldi was equally renowned in his day as a composer for the voice: he composed some 48 operas, 59 cantatas and over 60 sacred works. Among the latter are several motets for solo voice: settings of specially composed Latin texts designed to be inserted at a suitable point during the celebration of Mass or Vespers. These motets helped to fill in moments of relative silence during the service, and proved the ideal vehicle for individual expression or virtuosity on the part of the performer, and for contemplation or awe on the part of the worshipper. The standard form is two arias, linked by a recitative, and a final Alleluia. The motet "*In furore iustissimæ iræ*" is one of 12 extant motets by Vivaldi. The autograph manuscript is written on paper of Roman origin, so it has been conjectured that it was written during a period in the 1720's during which Vivaldi was in Rome.

Locatelli Concerto grosso "Il pianto d'Arianna"

Pietro Antonio Locatelli was born in Bergamo and studied in Rome. He performed concert tours as a solo violinist throughout Italy and Germany before settling permanently in Amsterdam in 1729. There he worked as a teacher, music publisher and editor, and director of an amateur orchestra, as well as continuing to concertize. His renown as a virtuoso violinist was widespread, and he is often described as the Paganini of the 18th century. One observer claimed his performance of a Corelli Adagio "would make a canary fall from its perch in a swoon of pleasure," whereas another suggested

that he “played with such fury as to wear out dozens of violins a year.” Some praised the power and brilliance of his playing, though the German musician Lustig considered it “unbearable for delicate ears.”

Locatelli’s compositions consist primarily of violin sonatas and concerti grossi. Several of his concerti grossi have descriptive or programmatic titles. One of the most remarkable of these is “*Il pianto d’Arianna*,” a work that more closely resembles a cantata than a concerto, in which a solo violin is given the role of the tormented Ariadne. In the tenth epistolary poem of Ovid’s *Heroides*, Ariadne laments her abandonment by Theseus on the island of Naxos. Ottavio Rinuccini wrote an opera libretto based on the poem, set by Monteverdi in Mantua in 1608. The music for the opera is lost, but for the remarkable “*Il lamento d’Arianna*.” This in turn inspired many composers to set laments on this and similar texts, and Monteverdi’s original setting or those of his successors may have been in Locatelli’s mind when he wrote his instrumental version. Locatelli goes so far as to include recitatives for the solo violinist, but leaves the text to the player’s and listeners’ imaginations.

Handel *Alcina*

Handel arrived in England in 1710, fresh from opera successes in Italy and eager to introduce Italian opera to the London theatres. The English responded with enthusiasm, and for over 20 years he regaled London audiences with a steady stream of opera productions at the King’s Theatre in the Haymarket. By the 1730’s, the passion for opera was starting to wane. The public was intrigued by the new English oratorio, and increasingly drawn to lighter entertainments such as John Gay’s *The Beggar’s Opera*. Handel met a further challenge with the formation of a second opera company: in 1734 the Nobility Opera took over the Haymarket Theatre, and took with it many of Handel’s best singers. The impresario John Rich came to his rescue offering him the use of his newly-built theatre at Covent Garden for two nights each week. The theatre was wonderfully well equipped, with a large stage and lavish stage machinery. Rich had also engaged the dancer Marie Sallé and her company for the 1734/35 season. Handel was inspired to produce five operas in what was to be his most sumptuous season ever, and was relieved when audiences flocked to see the new productions. The last of these was the opera *Alcina*, which opened at Covent Garden on April 16, 1735 and ran successfully until July 2. It is often referred to as Handel’s last great opera – although he continued to produce operas until the end of the decade, he devoted ever more time and energy to the composition of oratorios.

The libretto of *Alcina* is based on Riccardo Broschi’s *L’Isola d’Alcina*, which in turn was inspired by Ariosto’s *Orlando furioso*. It is a “magical” opera, resplendent with supernatural effects. Alcina herself is a sorceress who entices people to her magic island and transforms them into trees, animals or stones. Her most recent captive is Ruggiero, who has thus far been spared the fate of his predecessors because Alcina has fallen in love with him and has cast a spell to ensure his love in return. Ruggiero’s fiancée Bradamante, disguised as her own brother Ricciardo, arrives with a magic ring she hopes will

break the spell. Ricciardo becomes the object of affection of Alcina's sister, Morgana. Various intrigues embellish the plot, but at the heart of the story is Alcina's ruin. Ruggiero is given the ring and is persuaded to forsake Alcina and to shatter the urn containing the source of her magical powers, releasing her prisoners to their human form.

The delightful aria "*Tornami*" is sung by Morgana at the end of the first act: Ricciardo has just left the stage after feigning assurance of 'his' love for her. The final two arias are sung by Alcina as she learns of Ruggiero's betrayal ("*Ab! mio cor!*") and begins to lose her magical powers. She summons the spirits to come to her aid ("*Ab! Ruggiero crudel/Ombre pallide*"), but in vain, and is left to despair as her entire dominion falls to ruin around her. To these arias is added the opera's overture, and a few of the dances written to display the talents of Marie Sallé, the foremost dancer of her generation. She inspired Handel to write a wealth of dance music for the operas presented during the 1734/35 season.