

Program Notes

By the eighteenth century, Venetians could claim a heritage of more than two hundred years of glorious music and illustrious composers. Looking back to the sixteenth century, they could point to Adrian Willaert (1490–1562) and his pupils Andrea (1532–1585) and Giovanni (1554–1612) Gabrieli, all of whom served as music director at the Cathedral of Saint Mark. From the seventeenth century, they could boast of Claudio Monteverdi (1567–1643), Francesco Cavalli (1602–1676), and Giovanni Legrenzi (1626–1690). During the course of the eighteenth century, the era of Antonio Vivaldi, Tomaso Albinoni, and the superstar castrato Carlo Broschi, popularly known as Farinelli, the city's vibrant cultural life also inspired a school of cityscape painters whose achievements are among the most brilliant of the period. The exhibition *Venice: Canaletto and His Rivals* celebrates the rich variety of these painted views of Venice, known as *vedute*, through masterworks by Giovanni Antonio Canal (1697–1768), popularly known as Canaletto, and his rivals, including Michele Marieschi (1710–1743), Francesco Guardi (1712–1793), and Bernardo Bellotto (1720–1780). Responding to an art market fueled largely by the Grand Tour, these gifted painters depicted the famous monuments and vistas of Venice in different moods and seasons. This evening's program brings together works by some of the city's most illustrious resident and guest composers, providing a vivid and at times licentious look behind the scenes depicted in the *vedute*. Remaining on view in the East Building until May 30, 2011, the exhibition will be complemented by three additional concerts, performed by Red Priest (February 27), the National Gallery of Art Vocal Ensemble (March 13), and the Venice Baroque Orchestra (April 10).

One of the most versatile Italian composers of his day, Alessandro Stradella produced more than three hundred works, some of which are now lost. His innovations in the concerto grosso style appear to be the model for Corelli's famous *Concerti Grossi*, op. 6. Arriving in Venice in 1677—after leaving Rome in haste to avoid punishment for nefarious money schemes—Stradella was hired to teach music to a nobleman's mistress, Agnese Van Uffele. As might be expected, Stradella was shortly

involved with her, and had to flee when their liaison was discovered. The nobleman hired a gang of thugs to follow him and kill him, which they narrowly failed to do. (In one account, they heard him in performance and forgave him for the sake of his talent.) Stradella went next to Genoa, where he wrote operas and cantatas. Once again he was involved in an affair with a poorly chosen woman, and this time a hired killer caught up with him at the Piazza Banchi in Genoa and stabbed him to death. Stradella's *Sinfonia for Violin and Cello* is dramatic, passionate, tricky, and flirtatious — much like the man.

Not a great deal is known about composer and wind player Dario Castello, except that by 1621 he held posts as leader of a wind ensemble and musician at the Cathedral of Saint Mark. As is the case with his *Sonata for Solo Instrument and Continuo in "Stil Moderno,"* many of his manuscripts do not specify the solo instrument. In this case, the virtuosic writing is well suited to the violin, if not entirely idiomatic. The compositional style is dramatic, juxtaposing sections of contrasting tempo and affect, which is typical of the *stil moderno*.

Giovanni Legrenzi was one of the most important composers of the latter half of the seventeenth century, and a powerful force in the development of the late baroque style in northern Italy for both vocal and instrumental music. Known to have been living in Venice by 1670, in 1681 he ultimately attained the much sought-after post of *maestro di cappella* at the Cathedral of Saint Mark. Considered to be his most forward-looking works, the opus 10 sonatas use through-composed forms, as opposed to the sectional dance forms that prevailed in seventeenth-century instrumental music, and well-developed functional harmony. They are seen as precursors of the *sonata da chiesa*: a four-movement work with both the fast and slow movements of such gravity as to be suitable for performance in church. Legrenzi's innovative handling of structure exerted a strong influence on the sonatas and concertos of Torelli, Vivaldi, and Johann Sebastian Bach, who transcribed one of his fugues for the organ.

A student of Legrenzi, the Bolognese composer Domenico Gabrielli was a fine composer of vocal music in his own right. He wrote a number of operas for performance in Venice, but he is most famous for championing the violoncello, an instrument that was new at the time. Bolognese string makers developed a new technique of wrapping gut strings in metal, making possible an instrument with the lower octave range and power of a bass violin, but without long thick strings, which would have inhibited virtuoso playing. Gabrielli advocated the use of this instrument in place of the bass viol, and composed his first pieces for it in 1687. His seven *ricercars* for unaccompanied cello demand great technical facility, maintaining at the same time a harmonic bass line and a clear melodic line. His output might well have been even more significant, had he not died in 1690 at the age of thirty-one.

It is very likely that Gabrielli helped introduce the cello to the prolific Venetian composer and cellist, Antonio Caldara, who, like Gabrielli, is presumed to have studied under Legrenzi. Caldara's instrumental music dates from the 1690s, when he made his living as cellist and freelance composer in Venice. His trio sonatas reveal his indebtedness to Corelli's *da camera* sonatas — sonatas consisting of a suite of several small pieces suitable for dancing, designed for domestic entertainment. They are unique in their intense moods and varying instrumental textures, ranging from closely integrated voices to overtly virtuosic passages for the first violin.

There is anecdotal evidence of a meeting between the great baroque keyboardists Domenico Scarlatti and George Frideric Handel at the Carnival of Venice in 1707. The Roman Cardinal Pietro Ottoboni, a great patron of the arts, supposedly invited them to a friendly competition, where they were judged as equals on the harpsichord. Inspired by this story, *Ottoboni's Contest* by Joseph Gascho is a light-hearted set of variations based on Handel's *Air with Five Doubles* from the *Suite in E Major*, HWV 430 — popularly known as *The Harmonious Blacksmith*. Interspersed with Handel's original variations are newly composed variations in the style of Scarlatti. Some of

Gascho's variations begin with an exact repetition of Handel's original theme, but with right and left hands reversed, a technique Scarlatti enjoyed. Other variations expand the hand-crossing technique, extend the range of the original with arpeggiated figures, transform the theme to the minor mode, or employ a flurry of repeated notes.

In addition to the alleged contest with Scarlatti, Handel visited Venice on a number of occasions. He may have been following the soprano Vittoria Tarquini, who often performed in Venice, and who was the object of his attentions during much of his time in Italy (1707–1710). It was during those years that he composed his *Trio Sonata no. 7 in F Major*, a tour de force for all instruments in the *sonata da chiesa* form.

Antonio Vivaldi was recognized throughout Europe for his innovative contributions to string writing, the concerto genre, and programmatic orchestral music. His opus 1 sonatas are firmly in the *da camera* style, although by his time such distinctions had become increasingly less important—dances were often included in church sonatas and expressive adagios in chamber sonatas. Vivaldi was one of a number of Italian composers, dating back to Corelli, who composed variations on the wild Portuguese dance *La Folia* (a mad or empty-headed person).

Like Handel, Vivaldi was an unabashed musical borrower and an improviser, often reusing his own material and modifying it for new purposes. His work was constantly evolving and changing, and each performance was most likely unique, responding to the nature of the room, the reactions of the audience, and the whims and passions of the performers. The exciting challenge for the Vivaldi Project and other contemporary performers is to recapture the spirit of Vivaldi and his exuberant age.

Program notes based on material provided by Stephanie Vial