

Florence, January 1st, 1600. With the twelfth bell toll, the clock of history has bid farewell to the Renaissance. A musical revolution is at work among a cohort of humanists who, worn out by the atrocious perfection of *punctum contra punctum*, revel against everything held dear in art music hitherto. Their first request is not unreasonable: to understand the text. But the second request is bizarre: to be moved by the text. To command the passions, to become a soul puppeteer. A new style closer to regular speech was developed in order to maximize the dramatic setting of the text through music gestures that aimed to candidly convey these passions. A new instrument was even devised to accompany this modern style, - the theorbo (a lute on steroids), which was given a bassline only, while the manner to harmonize it and articulate it was entirely up to the player. The Baroque period had begun.

Although eminently a vocal phenomenon in its origins, instruments quickly follow through the new vogue. To be expressive was, inevitably, to imitate the voice; in other words, to find meaning in sound. But if instruments were incapable of speech, they had other unsuspected blessings at their disposal. By the second half of the century, the violin was on its way to establish itself as the *prima donna* of instruments. Not only did Italian violinists scrutinize the psychological depths of its sing-like virtues, they also capitalized on its aptness as bravura vehicle. Fast notes and lush melodies (read: ample opportunities for showing off) did the trick.

Preceded by their fame, Italian violinists found rich employers all over European courts. It was in this fashion that Antonio Bertali (Verona, 1605-Vienna, 1669) was hired by Emperor Ferdinand II in 1624, succeeding yet another Italian at that post, Giovanni Valentini. In Vienna, Bertali composed operas, oratorios, sacred, and chamber music. Of this production, about half of it is now lost. Some of his surviving works, however, are represented in different sources. The *Ciaccona* for violin, perhaps his best known piece, is transmitted in at least two manuscripts, not without significant textual disagreement among themselves: the Partiturbuch Ludwig (Germany) and the Ms. 176 from the Kroměříž Music Archive (Czech Republic). The version performed tonight comes from the latter. In its long history as a dance form, the chaconne mutated from an indigineous Latin American dance with a characteristic syncopation on the first couple of beats, first introduced by the Spaniards into the New World, to a set of variations on a ground bass. A particular, jaunty bassline established itself as the classic Italian *ciaccona* bass after which many composers (in and out of Italy) tried their hand at the task of finding variety within this most constrictive compositional device. In his extensive *ciaccona*, Bertali resorted to modulate to the relative minor and to the flat third degree, both extremely rare choices compared to the rest of extant contemporary *ciaccone*.

Alongside the challenges of conceiving ways to emulate the rhetorical and melodic qualities of the voice, we find the expansion of violin virtuosity through the development of more complex polyphony. German-speaking violinists saw in it a niche in which to advance their repertoire in an opposite direction from the vortex of Italian mastery. When Johann Sebastian Bach (Eisenach, 1685-Leipzig, 1750) was appointed *Kapellmeister* at Weimar in 1703, he must have made the acquaintance of the Dresdener violinist Johann Paul von Westhoff, employed there since 1699. Westhoff had published in 1696 his six Partitas for solo violin, essentially suites of four polyphonic dances invariably following the order Allemande - Courante - Sarabande - Gigue. Bach, whose musical duties at Weimar included a big deal of violin playing in the capacity of concertmaster, would have surely come across this collection. His own Sonatas and Partitas for solo violin, however, date from 1720 during his tenure at Köthen. Unpublished and undedicated, the beautiful autograph manuscript (today housed at the Berlin Staatsbibliothek) is painstakingly detailed in articulation and accurate in the musical text. The last work in the set is the Partita ("Partia" in the original) in E Major, the Frenchiest

of the collection. The prelude, a perpetual motion of sixteenth-notes, prepares us for the completely different rest of the work: six characteristic dances that flow between nobility (Loure and Menuets) and noble peasantry (Gavotte, Bourrée, Gigue).

Perhaps less “French” than Bach when Bach pretended to be, Frenchman Jean-Marie Leclair (Lyon, 1697-Paris, 1764) absorbed the Italian style during his stay in Turin, where he studied dance and violin with Giovanni Battista Somis. By 1728 he returned to Paris, where he was hired at the royal chamber under Louis XV and became a regular at several princely courts. Leclair published four books of violin sonatas, in which he probed the extremes of violin technique of the time. Book III or Opus V (1734), on the other hand, offers a few specimens that emphasize melodic invention over virtuosity. Whereas the odd movements usually survey bleaker sides of the psychic spectrum, the even movements delve into quasi-fugal writing and lighter dance aesthetics. Leclair’s Frenchness still scintillates in his richly dark harmonies and refined sensibility.

The last piece in the program wanders outside the canonicity of Italy, Germany, and France, into the realm of Spain, that proverbial outcast of Western European music. As an economic power in his own right, Bourbon Spain exhibited a plethora of wealth that attracted top talent from across the Continent. As with the rest of Europe, a handful of Italian violinists worked here, almost monopolizing the available jobs of Spanish institutions. Spanish violinists, who did not have a leg up on account of their origin, had a hard time flourishing against such competition. Among the few who did make it was Josep Herrando (Valencia, 1720-Madrid, 1763). Like Leclair, he served the highest nobility of his time. The author of the first violin treatise in Spanish (1756), Herrando chiefly wrote for the theatre, but the vast majority of his oeuvre is lost. The 24 violin sonatas and toccatas that were preserved at the Dukes of Alba’s Palace succumbed to the flames of the Spanish Civil War. Three of them, however, were spared oblivion thanks to a manuscript found and later edited by Lothar Siemmens at the private library of Count Fernán Núñez, Spanish ambassador in Lisbon. Among those lucky three is the preposterous sonata presented tonight. Bearing the extravagant title of “El Jardín de Aranjuez en Tiempo de Primavera Con Diversos Cantos de Pájaros y Otros animales” (‘The Garden of Aranjuez in Springtime with diverse bird calls and other animals’), the piece pays homage to a body of violin works that gloated in aping nature sounds, from Farina’s *Capriccio Stravagante* (1627) to *The Four Seasons* (1725). A musical promenade through Aranjuez (the Spanish Versailles), Herrando makes explicit what kind of bird he is illustrating: the canary, the nightingale, and cuckoo soar in the highest register of the instrument, while the dove and the quail quietly coo and peck on the ground. Other effects (not all of them easy to spot just by hearing) include the rustle of the wind through a grove, the murmur of water, and the menacing tempest approaching. The prompt of ‘other animals’ is left unfulfilled. This piece, together with the works of Francisco Manalt and Juan de Ledesma, gives testimony of the heights of violin playing in the Iberian peninsula - a neglected output that deserves further dissemination as we, performers and audiences alike, strengthen our efforts to diversify the face of classical music.