

THE NAPLES CONSERVATORIES: Teaching Europe

The entrance into Naples is through a fine fauxbourg of which the streets are very wide, well build and paved with lava. It is amazingly populous and has the air of bustle and business beyond even London or Paris.

Charles Burney from *Music, Men, and Manners in France and Italy* 1770

Today, after a visit to Rome and Milan, a tourist might be surprised to learn that, next to Paris, Naples was the largest metropolis in 18th century Europe, with 300,000 inhabitants, a royal palace, four conservatories of music and Europe's largest opera house. The center of a substantial realm known for centuries as *The Two Sicilies*, Naples moved from the hands of the Habsburgs to those of the Bourbons in the early 1700's.

If the Paris *Conservatoire*—the focus of Four Nations' January program—was founded in a world of revolutionary chaos, Naples, with its more ancient music schools, did not need political unrest to produce constant noise, movement and social chaos. Then, as now, Naples remains a city that shakes and shoves. It aggresses with sights and sounds, and confuses at every corner. Today, the sidewalks can only make an attempt to protect the walker from the automobile. Sun-baked garbage on the streets plays a fragrant duet with overripe produce in the marketplace, and the mix of fish and sea conjure Naples' distinctive perfume. Palaces dating back to the 17th century have been divided into apartments, the ropes extending from their noble and large windows allowing sheets and underwear to dry and wave like ceremonial flags in the breeze. And this display pays no heed to the horrifically forceful volcano that overlooks these city scenes. Today, visitors to Naples make their way through this world to discover a treasury of art and history that rivals any in Europe. Vitality can come from contrast and conflict. Naples is capital in this realm.

I went to the opera and was there honoured with a place in our Minister's, Mr. Hamilton's box. It is not easy to imagine or describe the splendour and grandeur of this theater when doubly illuminated as was the case tonight. In the front of each box there is a mirror 3 or 4 feet long by 2 or 3 wide, before which are two large wax tapers. These by reflexion being multiplied and added to the lights of the stage and to those within the boxes make it too much for the aching sight... The stage, the scenes, dresses and decorations were extremely magnificent, and this theater is superiour, I think in these particulars (as) well as in the music to that of the great French opera at Paris. It surpasses all that poetry and romance have painted. But with all this, I must own, that in the magnitude of the building and the noise of the audience, one neither can hear voices or instruments distinctly...

Charles Burney from *Music, Men, and Manners in France and Italy*

Yet from all this noise emerges the most lyrical vocal and instrumental music in Western history!

The ancient conservatories, or *Ospedale*, of Venice and Naples seem to parallel and mirror each other. In both cities, they provided support and education to orphans, wards of the state or church, and gave focused music education so that the students, in serving as performers for civic and religious events, could earn their keep. Both cities attracted and maintained the services of some of the most important, powerful and influential composers of the 17th and 18th centuries. Niccolò Porpora and Johann Adolph Hasse were students and teachers in Venice and in Naples. But there are differences that set Naples apart, elevating its influence and adding to its importance in the history of music.

Naples gives us its genius for melody and lyrical art. Among the composers who today claim wide recognition and inspire our affection shine Alessandro Scarlatti and Vincenzo Bellini, illustrative of two very different peaks in the *bel canto* tradition. Giovanni Battista Pergolesi's comic opera *La Serva Padrona* may have been the most influential for over half a century. Porpora, whose influence rivaled Handel's in

London, taught Hadyn in Vienna. Yet these giants are only cornerstones of an edifice of influence that emerges from the Naples conservatories. The great castrati who reigned over other cities throughout the 18th century, Farinelli included, studied in the city.

Composers and instrumentalists, and especially singers, counted on a few years in Naples as apprentices under Porpora or Francesco Durante or Leonardo Leo, to help launch their international careers. Early in the history of Naples' conservatories, they began serving not only orphans, but also young, paying, professional students who craved the guidance of their renowned faculty. But this was no Juilliard or Paris Conservatory. Ivory tower practice rooms and undisturbed study were not available to the young scholars!

Charles Burney gives us the most detailed look into several of these institutions, making it clear that life and work in these schools was as chaotic as life on the streets. Only the castrati who had frail constitutions were provided with heated rooms; most instrumentalists and composition students developed "chops" if not finesse:

*This morning I went with young Oliver to his conservatorio of S. Onofrio, and visited all the rooms, where the boys practice, sleep and eat. On the 1st flight of stairs was a trumpeter screaming upon his instrument till he was ready to burst-on the 2nd a French horn bellowing in the same manner- in the common practicing room was a Dutch concert (*a concert in which every performer plays a different tune), consisting of 7 or 8 harpsichords, more than as many fiddles, and several voices all performing things in different keys-other boys were writing in the same room, but it being holiday time not near all were there who study and practice in the same room... The beds which are in the same room serve for seats to the harpsichords, etc. Out of 50 or 40 boys who were practicing I could discover but 2 that were playing the same piece... There are in this college 16 castrati, and these lye by themselves in a warmer apartment upstairs than the other boys for fear of colds, which might endanger or injure the voice... They then begin the winter practice of rising 2 hours before daylight, from which time they continue their exercise, an hour and ½ at dinner excepted till 8 o'clock at night, and this constant perseverance for a number of years, must, with genius and good teaching produce great musicians.*

Tonight's Program

The earliest work on our program comes from the most visionary and "modern" composer. **Domenico Scarlatti**, son of the great opera and cantata composer Alessandro and gifted with an astounding imagination and the most transcendent approach to the harpsichord, stands above all other keyboard players of the 18th century. We know his skills were brilliant as a young man, but his early desire to take his place alongside his father and his colleagues at the opera house prompted him to write several operas. He then left for Portugal and Spain, where he became the harpsichord teacher to the Queen. *Narciso* was the only opera of Scarlatti's to be performed outside of Italy, and it marked the beginning of a Scarlatti craze in London that remained vibrant through the early 19th century, when Muzio Clementi published selected Scarlatti sonatas revised for piano. Many more keyboard players, trained in Naples, would bring Scarlatti's style and approach to London through publications, performances and lessons to English aristocrats and music lovers.

These two Scarlatti arias, rarely heard, are touching and beautiful. They already attest to Scarlatti's particular, alluring mastery of harmonic language. Written when Domenico was 29 years old, they make us wonder what would have emerged if he had continued work for the stage. Would his operatic work have equaled the genius so abundant in the harpsichord sonatas?

Domenico Zipoli took his Neapolitan training further afield than any other of the graduates of the city's conservatories. Coming from his native Rome to work with Alessandro Scarlatti, he ultimately took orders and concluded his life in South America, where he composed vocal music for the celebration of

the Mass for newly converted populations of Argentina, Paraguay and Peru. His suite of four keyboard pieces in G minor evoke Handel's sensuous approach to the harpsichord, and include aspects of Corelli's sonata structure, transferred to the keyboard.

Francesco Alborea is the earliest in a group of Neapolitan composers who loved and wrote sonatas and concertos for the cello. Known as *Franciscbello*, there are reports of his performances that equal in enthusiasm the accolades usually reserved for singers. He played the continuo in cantata performances with Alessandro Scarlatti. (Johann Quantz heard him perform at least one of these in 1725.) The next year he took a position in Vienna, following in the footsteps of so many of the Italian musicians who were prized at the Austrian court. He performed trios with Franz Benda, who said he tried to imitate Alborea's lyrical cello style on the violin.

Alborea's sonata, like Zipoli's, follows the Corelli format. He finds a lyricism in his instrument that confirms his Neapolitan origins. A free fantasia or toccata prelude begins the work, and is followed by a *corrente*-like allegro, an ornamented aria and a gigue.

It was exceptional for composers from Naples not to focus on music for the voice and for the stage. In a city where musical royalty consisted of men of the stage, from Alessandro Scarlatti to Bellini, heated discussions about music all concerned the nature and power of opera. That said, the concertos and sonatas of these vocal masters were imbued with a finesse and lyricism that continues to inspire and challenge string players and instrumentalists today.

Leonardo Leo, renowned for his church music and stage works, has left cello concertos and this bright, brilliant flute concerto, as well. This work is in the Venetian mode, with three movements. Like Vivaldi, Leo gives the flautist center stage, not unlike the prominence given to a diva in great operatic arias.

Recent assessments of **Nicola Porpora** have suggested some discouraging conclusions. He may be criticized for a lack of dramatic power, and some will draw attention to his limited harmonic scope. In fact, he died in poverty in his native Naples, uncelebrated and out of fashion. His greatest competitor was Handel and in the eyes of history, he is a distant second to the composer of *Messiah*. Yet, a glimpse at other contemporary responses and connections make us listen closer. He was the beloved teacher of Farinelli, the greatest of singers. He held powerful and important teaching and composing positions in Venice and Naples, London and Vienna. He was friends with, and admired by, Metastasio, the ideal librettist of the 17th and 18th century. Finally, and possibly most important, Haydn claims to have learned *the true fundamentals of composition* from Porpora while serving as his valet and accompanist. If Haydn so admires him, should not we, too, look seriously at his work?

Porpora's cello concerto in G minor, performed by Ms. O'Sullivan last season, is as beautiful as any cello concerto of the Baroque era. The composer begins with Corelli's lyrical poise but adds a level of luxury and sensuality that is almost painfully beautiful. For our Neapolitan program, we look to Porpora for a violin sonata and a cantata.

Charles Burney tells us that Porpora's violin sonatas are more impressive and beautiful than Handel's. His extended adagios in this G minor work are as exquisite as those in the cello concerto, but the fugue is demanding beyond any work in Opus 5 of Corelli. As difficult as it is, Porpora understands the violin and makes it sound like a concerto grosso in itself.

The cantata *Gia la Notte* is a setting of a Metastasio text. (How delicious to compare this to the setting for two voices of J. C. Bach, another disciple of the Neapolitan school.) Published as Opus 1 in London during the opera seasons in the 1730's, it consists of two arias and a recitative. Porpora's vocalism clearly lacked the Germanic rudeness of Handel—or so Faustina, the famous soprano diva and wife of Johann Hasse, tells us!—and Porpora's response to the color and flavor of the words is uniquely sensitive.

With a wealth of newly recorded performances now available, it is heartening that Porpora is enjoying a well-earned rediscovery. But the roster of *Conservatorio* teachers and students in Naples is as varied and still undiscovered as manuscripts waiting for light in an ancient and uncatalogued library. Our concert offers a postcard—poignant, yet only a snapshot—suggesting dynasties of genius and decades of music most worthy of the Bay and the Volcano.

Andrew Appel

Monday, February 22, 2010
The New-York Historical Society

THE FOUR NATIONS ENSEMBLE

**NAPLES CONSERVATORY
TEACHING EUROPE**

Charles Brink, traverso Krista Bennion Feeney, violin
Loretta O'Sullivan, cello Andrew Appel, harpsichord and director
Guest Artist
Jennifer Lane, mezzo-soprano
with
Anca Nicolau, violin Daniel Swenberg, theorbo

PROGRAM

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| Sonata in C for cello and continuo
Presto
Allegro
Adagio
Vivace | Francesco Alborea
(1691-1739) |
| Two arias from <i>Narcissus</i> (1714)
<i>Si Si tu ben lo sai</i>
<i>Amorosa farfalletta</i> | Domenico Scarlatti
(1685-1757) |
| Sonata in G minor (1716)
Preludio-Largo
Corrente-Allegro
Sarabanda-Largo
Giga-Allegro | Domenico Zipoli
(1688-1726) |
| Sonata in G minor for violin and continuo, Opus 12, #5
Adagio
Fuga
Adagio
Allegro | Nicola Porpora
(1686-1768) |

INTERMISSION

- | | |
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| Cantata <i>Già la notte</i>
Adagio: <i>Già la notte</i>
Recit: <i>lascia un volta</i>
Allegretto: <i>non più fra sassi algosi</i> | Nicola Porpora |
| Concerto in G for flute, strings and continuo
Allegro
Largo
Allegro | Leonardo Leo
(1694-1744) |

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