

## Seattle Baroque Orchestra Program Notes SeattleBaroque.org

### *The Grand Tour* 2004 - 2005

By Ingrid Matthews

For the English traveler of past centuries, one of the most highly prized experiences was that custom known as the “Grand Tour.” This was a cultural pilgrimage to the great capitals of Europe, from which one returned home enriched and inspired by cultural marvels encountered abroad. Tonight’s musical offerings duplicate what might have been heard during such a voyage circa 1688 (inspired in part by John Wills’s book *1688: A Global History*). The year is representative of a time of great political and scientific changes, which were accompanied by artistic ones; our program samples the fruits of this golden age.

We begin in London. The Restoration of 1660 brought the re-opening of theaters and a surge of interest in dramatic works. Both songs and instrumental music were commonly used in plays; and while Italian-style opera was still largely frowned upon, large-scale dramatic works which included masques or ceremonial scenes provided composers with substantial opportunities. **Henry Purcell** (1659-95) was one of the most important composers of music for the theater. While he lived to be only 36 years old, Purcell was staggeringly prolific, and even his earliest published works (*Sweet Tyranness* appeared when he was eight; does it refer to his mother?) show astonishing technical mastery of the composer’s art. He is still considered one of the greatest musicians Britain has produced. Our opening suite from *The Fairey Queen* demonstrates the unmistakable style of Purcell’s instrumental music; it is rhythmically charged (the two hornpipes in particular), highly tuneful and pungent with dissonance.

One of Purcell’s important predecessors, whose chromatic style influenced him greatly, was **Matthew Locke** (1621-77). Like Purcell, Locke was a major theater composer; he wrote for some of the biggest hits of the day, which were adaptations of Shakespeare. Seventeenth-century English playwrights were very interested in producing what they considered to be more accessible, modernized versions of Shakespeare’s works. *The Tempest*, with its storms, magic and other possibilities for stage business, lent itself particularly well to their efforts. Locke’s *Curtain Tune*, along with music by several other composers, is found in a 1674 version of *The Tempest* by Thomas Shadwell, which was in turn based on a 1667 revision of the Shakespeare. *The Curtain Tune* depicts the wild storm for which the play is named, and its score contains some of the earliest instances of dynamic markings, such as “louder by degrees” or “soft and slow by degrees.”

Paris is the next port of call on our “Grand Tour.” The court of Louis XIV in Paris was

one of unparalleled sophistication and glamour, and its most powerful and influential musician was **Jean-Baptiste Lully** (1632-87). Lully was in fact the Italian Giovanni Battista Lulli by birth, but was brought to France as a teenager by a nobleman whose niece wished to learn Italian. In this fashionable household, Lully became extremely accomplished as a composer, violinist and dancer; in 1652 he was tapped by the 14-year-old monarch, who appreciated his performances as a dancer and comic mime, to join the court. The king himself loved to dance, and the two frequently appeared on stage together. It was the beginning of a long relationship of patronage which allowed Lully to write prodigiously, laying the foundation for French opera. *Armide* is an example of his great *tragedies-lyriques*, large-scale theatrical works in which music, poetry (in this case Quinault's), dance and staging were intertwined with great mutual sensitivity. The instrumental music from *Armide*, including that on tonight's program, became popular throughout Europe and was published as far away as Amsterdam.

**Ennemond Gaultier** (1575-1651) was the elder of a family of lutenists, and wrote the *Tombeau pour Mesangeau* for the lute. The transcription of it for harpsichord is found in a 1680 collection published by

Perrine, of whom little is known (not even his first name!). Harpsichord transcriptions of lute music were common during the 17th century, and demonstrate the shifting of French tastes. The *tombeau* heard here was originally written in honor of Rene Mesangeau, another lutenist and composer, on his death in 1638. It represents well the sober gravity of the genre.

While some French composers were transcribing lute music for the harpsichord, others were developing a new, uniquely expressive style of keyboard writing. Paramount among these was **François Couperin** (1668-1733). From a family of important French musicians, Couperin held an honored post at the court of Louis XIV. He greatly admired his celebrated older colleague Lully, but was also enamored of the Italian style (so much so that he once wrote a Corellian sonata under a pseudonym; it was so well-received that he penned many more, gaining considerable repute for his alter-ego). While François Couperin is best-known for his keyboard writing, the Sonata on this program, *La Sultane*, is a chamber piece scored for an unusual ensemble: the standard trio-sonata group is supplemented by an extra bass. The piece is a vivid mix of French elements, like the tender treble and bass duets of the central *Air*, and Italian influences, heard in the contrapuntal *Légèrement* and the boldness of the rousing final *Vivement*.

As odd as it may have been for Lully, who was Italian by birth, to rise so spectacularly in the French musical establishment, it is almost as surprising that the Viennese imperial court under Leopold I was dominated by a non-Italian, the Austrian **Johann Heinrich Schmelzer** (ca. 1620-80). In the first half of the 17th century, all of the German-speaking courts imported Italian musicians. That Schmelzer enjoyed great renown in his homeland can be attributed to his virtuosity as a violinist; he is considered the first non-Italian virtuoso and an important predecessor to Heinrich

Biber. Schmelzer was highly favored by the Emperor, who himself dabbled in composition and sought the violinist's instruction. Schmelzer is the author of three large collections of chamber music and a great deal of music for the ballets, pageants and spectacles, including horse ballets, which were popular in Vienna. *Die Fechtschule*, or *The Fencing School*, is a colorful suite of dances whose penultimate movement is a brilliant programmatic representation of a fencing match.

As Schmelzer was to the violin during this period in Vienna, so to the harpsichord was **Johann Kaspar Kerll** (1627-93). Kerll studied in Rome, where he absorbed the influence of the famous Italian Girolamo Frescobaldi. When he returned to the north, Kerll brought this dramatic style with him; his keyboard writing is characterized by abrupt contrasts, expressive use of dissonance and virtuosic passage-work. The *Toccata* I heard tonight is so italianate, and so masterful, that in one manuscript it has been wrongly attributed to Frescobaldi. The beautifully crafted *Passacaglia* is constructed of 40 variations over the repeated descending bass pattern.

No "Grand Tour" would be complete without a visit to Rome. During the middle of the 17th century, one of the important musicians working there was **Alessandro Stradella** (ca. 1644-82). By the 1660s he had established himself in the city as part of the entourage of creative artists surrounding the Swedish Queen Christina, who was exiled in Rome for her Catholicism. Despite some trouble with the law (regarding embezzlement from the Church, in a scheme devised by one of Queen Christina's violinists), Stradella gained a prominent place in Roman high society through his involvement with the operatic productions which fashionable families staged in their homes. Tonight's *Sinfonia* from *Il Damone* is representative of these endeavors and notable in particular for the chromaticism and high range of the violins. In the 1670s, Stradella left Rome for Venice, having fallen out of political favor. He was employed as a music teacher for the mistress of a nobleman; he fell in love with her, and they fled to Turin. They were followed by thugs hired by the lady's lover, who attacked Stradella fiercely. He recovered, only to be murdered in 1682 as a result of some other, less documented dispute.

**Arcangelo Corelli** was one of Rome's foremost violinists. He was patronized, like Stradella, by Queen Christina as well as the powerful cardinals Pamphili and, later, Ottoboni. While his output was relatively small, it was revolutionary in many ways, and his influence on both contemporary and subsequent composers cannot be over-estimated. Perhaps his most important contribution was the development of the *concerto grosso* form, which features a small group of solo instruments contrasted with a larger so-called *ripieno* ensemble. While Stradella and others had experimented with it earlier, the *concerto grosso* reached its mature form with Corelli, laying the foundation for the great literature of solo concerti to follow. Corelli's music was popular even into the 19th century and its wide dissemination during his lifetime was unprecedented. He is also known for raising the bar regarding musical discipline in unruly Italian orchestras, and he was sought after as a teacher by violinists from all over Europe. His compositional style is very orderly, providing a

rational framework for the Italian emotionality which is found here as well. The *Concerto Grosso XI* is a wonderful example of the form, featuring virtuosic cello writing in the *Allemanda*, a richly chromatic *Adagio*, and a characteristically sunny *Giga* to finish.

We return to London to close this program with the *Chaconne* from Purcell's *King Arthur*. While most of Purcell's theater music was made-to-order for existing plays, *King Arthur* was conceived in collaboration with the playwright John Dryden. It is considered one of Purcell's greatest works, and surely there is no finer example of his distinctive genius than this *Chaconne*.