

The True story of ARCANGELO CORELLI

Johnstone-music note: the following information is of great interest to us today, for the simple fact that it was written in the nineteenth century and thus much closer to the action and events than we are today. The writing shows a deep understanding and respect of the day towards the musicians that it features ...

From A BIOGRAPHICAL DICTIONARY OF FIDDLERS
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CORELLI, ARCANGELO, born at Fusignano, near Imola, Bologna February 1653, died at Rome 18th January, 1713. He is at once the greatest and earliest landmark in the annals of violin history of which we have an account. He was founder of the Roman school of violinists, the earliest known, as also the first to definitely fix the form of the sonata. He is said to have received his first instructions in counterpoint from Matteo Simonelli, of the papal chapel; his violin master being Giovanni Battista Bassani, of Bologna. Some writers aver that Corelli went to Paris in the year 1672, but was soon driven thence by the jealousy and violence of Lully. The question whether he did or did not make this journey is extremely problematical. That he visited Germany, after he had finished his studies, we are assured by Caspar Prinz, who informs us that he was in the service of the Duke of Bavaria in 1680.

Soon after this period he returned to Italy and settled at Rome, where, about 1683, he published his first twelve sonatas. In 1685, the second set appeared under the title of "Balletti da Camera" In 1690, Corelli published the third opera of his sonatas ; and in 1694 the fourth. About this time the opera was in a very flourishing condition at Rome, and Corelli led the band as principal violin. His solos, the work by which he acquired the greatest reputation during his lifetime, did not appear till the year 1700, when they were published at Rome under the following title, " Sonata a violino, e violone, o Cembalo, Opera Quinta, Parte Prima, Parte Seconda, Preludii, Allemande, Corente, Gighi, Saraband, Gavotte, e Follia". This work was dedicated to Sophia Charlotte, Electress of Brandenburg. Corelli's great patron at Rome was Cardinal Ottoboni , a great encourager of learning and the polite arts, to whom, in 1694, he dedicated his Opera Quinta, and in whose palace he constantly resided, "col spetiosa carattere d'attuale servitore" of his Eminence, as he expresses himself in the dedication. Crescimbeni, speaking of the splendid and majestic concerts, held at Cardinal Ottoboni's every Monday evening, observes, that the performance was regulated by Arcangelo Corelli, that most celebrated professor of the violin " famosi's simo professore di violino."

It was at Cardinal Ottoboni's that Corelli became acquainted with Handel, of whom the following anecdote is related. On one of the musical evenings a piece of Handel's music was ordered to be performed. Whether the style of the overture was new to Corelli, or whether he attempted to modify it in any way does not transpire; but Handel, giving way to his natural impetuosity snatched the violin from his hand. Corelli simply replied : "Ma caro Sassone, questa musica e nello stile Francese, di cV io iton m'intendo." "My dear Saxon, this music is in the French style, with which I am not acquainted."

The following anecdotes of this eminent fiddler were communicated by Geminiani, one of his most industrious pupils, and who was himself an eye and ear witness of what he thus related. At the time when Corelli enjoyed the highest reputation, his fame having reached the Court of Maples, excited a curiosity in the King to hear his performance; he was consequently invited by order of His Majesty to that capital. Corelli, with great reluctance, was at length prevailed upon to accept the invitation; but lest he should not be well accompanied, he took with him his own second violin and 'cello. At Naples he found Alessandro Scarlatti, and several other masters, who entreated him to play some of his concertos before the King. This he, for a while, declined, on account of his whole band not being with him, and there was no time, he said, for a rehearsal. At length, however, he consented, and in great fear performed the first of his concertos. His astonishment was very great to find that the Neapolitan musicians executed his concertos almost as accurately at sight, as his own band after repeated rehearsals, when they had almost got them by heart. Si-suona d Napcli," said he to Matteo, his second violin. "They play at Naples."

After this, he being again admitted into his Majesty's presence, desired to perform one of his sonatas, the King found the adagio so long and dry, that, being tired of it, he quitted the room, to the great mortification of Corelli. Afterwards he was desired to lead in the performance of a masque, composed by Scarlatti, which was to be represented before the King. This he undertook; but from Scarlatti's little knowledge of the violin, Corelli's part was somewhat awkward and difficult ; in one place it went up to F, and when they came to that passage, Corelli failed and could not execute it; but he was astonished beyond measure to hear Petrillo, the Neapolitan

leader, and the other violins, perform with ease that which had baffled his utmost skill. A song succeeded this, in C minor, which Corelli led off in C major. "Ricominciamo" (let us begin again) said Scarlatti, good naturedly. Still Corelli persisted in the major key, till Scarlatti was obliged to call out to him and set him right. So mortified was poor Corelli at this disgrace, and the deplorable figure he imagined he had made at Naples, that he stole back to Rome in silence. Soon after this a hautboy-player, whose name Geminiani could not recollect, acquired such applause at Rome, that Corelli, disgusted, would never again play in public.

All these mortifications, joined to the success of Valentini, whose concertos and performances, though infinitely inferior to those of Corelli, were become fashionable, threw him into such a state of melancholy and chagrin, as was thought to have hastened his death. As Dr. Burney observes, this account of Corelli's journey to Naples throws much light upon the comparative state of music at Naples and at Rome in Corelli's time, and exhibits a curious contrast between the fiery genius of the Neapolitans, and the meek, timid, and gentle character of Corelli, so analogous to the style of his music. In 1712, his concertos were beautifully engraved at Amsterdam by Estienne Roger and Michael Charles le Cene, and dedicated to John William, Prince Palatine of the Rhine. The composer survived the publication of this admirable work but a few weeks; the dedication bearing date the 3rd of December, 1712, and he dying on the 8th January, 1713. Corelli was buried in the church of Santa Maria della Rotonda, the ancient Pantheon, in the first chapel on the left hand of the entrance. Over the place of his interment is erected a marble statue bearing the inscription "Corelli princeps mtisicorum," and represents the composer with a roll of music in his hand whereon are engraved a few bars of the Giga in his 5th Sonata, the expense of which was defrayed by Philip William, Count Palatine of the Rhine. The work was carried out under the direction of his rich patron, Cardinal Ottoboni. It is worthy of remark that this monument is adjacent that erected to the great painter Raffaele.

Corelli amassed a considerable fortune in the exercise of his profession, besides a valuable collection of pictures, the whole of which he bequeathed to Cardinal Ottoboni. This generous man, however, reserved to himself the pictures only, distributing the money (some six thousand

pounds, it is said), among Corelli's poor relations. For several years after Corelli's death, a solemn service, consisting of selections from his own works, was performed in the Pantheon by a numerous band, on the anniversary of his funeral, and this custom was continued so long as any pupils remained to conduct the performance. Of the private life and moral character of this worthy musician, nothing new is now likely to be gathered, but judging from what has been recorded of him, coupled with the mildness and sweetness of his music, we may well imagine that an acquaintance with him was a thing to be desired. As to the merits of Corelli's compositions, it has been said, with great truth, that his solos, as a classical book for forming the hand of a young beginner on the violin, has ever been regarded as a truly valuable work ; and it is said that his "Opera Quinta" took him three years to revise. Tartini formed his pupils on these solos, and Giardini, a pupil of Somis, spoke very highly of them, and remarked, that of any two pupils of equal age and abilities, if the one were to begin his studies by Corelli, and the other by Geminiani, or any other eminent master, he was certain that the first would become the best performer. The harmony of Corelli's concertos is so pure; the parts are so clearly and judiciously disposed ; and the effect on a large band so majestic, solemn, and sublime, that they almost preclude criticism. Geminiani, who was a favourite pupil of Corelli, remarked concerning the musical character of his master : " His merit was not depth of learning, like that of his contemporary Alessandro Scarlatti, nor great fancy, or a rich invention in melody or harmony, but a nice ear, and most delicate taste, which led him to select the most pleasing melodies and harmonies, and to construct the parts so as to produce the most delightful effect upon the ear."

At the time when Corelli was at the zenith of his fame, Geminiani asked Scarlatti, under whom he was studying counterpoint, what he thought of him (Corelli), who answered, that " he found nothing greatly to admire in his composition, but was extremely struck with the manner in which he played his concertos, and his nice management of his band, the uncommon accuracy of whose performance gave the concertos an amazing effect, even to the eye as well as to the ear." For, continued Geminiani, " Corelli regarded it as an essential to a band, that their bows should all move exactly together, all up or all down, so that at his rehearsal, which constantly preceded every public performance of his concertos, he would immediately stop the band if he saw an irregular bow."

His published works are

- (1) 12 senate a tre, due violini e violoncello, col basso per l'organo, Op. 3
i Rome, 1683
- (2) 12 suonate da camera a tre, due violini, violoncello e violone o
cembalo, Op. 2 Rome, 1685
- (3) 12 Suonate a tre, due violini e arciliuto col basso per l'organo, Op. 3
Bologna, 1680, Antwerp, 1681,
- (4) 12 suonate da camera a tre, due violini e violone o cembalo, Op. 4
Bologna, 1694 The Amsterdam edition of this work is called Balletti da
camera,
- (5) 12 suonate a violino e violone o cembalo, Op. 5 Rome 1700. These were
arranged by Geminiani as " Concerti grossi."
- (6) Concerti grossi con due violine e violoncello di concertino obligati, e
due altri violini e basso di concerto grosso ad arbitrio che si potranno
radoppiare, Op. 6 Rome, 1712.

The forty-eight sonatas (Op. 1-4), and the " Concerti grossi " (Op. 6), were published by Walsh at London in two volumes, and the same were revised by Pepusch. The only complete modern edition of Corelli's works is that by Dr. Chrysander, which is in score.

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