

INSIDE THE CONCERT WITH ALBERT COMBRINK
Chamber Music with the Cape Town Philharmonic Orchestra
11h00, 22 April 2023 - Baxter Concert Hall

Giovanni Gabrieli (c. 1554/1557 - 12 August 1612)
Sonata Pian' e Forte (1597)

It is an interesting mind-experiment for audiences to imagine a time before modern conventions were pervasive. Imagine a time where instruments were not yet mechanically sophisticated enough to handle changes of volume, or could only play in a small range, or only in one key. Imagine how brand new it sounded when groups could play loud and soft for the first time, or when they had developed enough to play in different keys in the same piece... It is hard to think of modern equivalents of these, but perhaps the change to amplification, or the invention of film, or electronic sounds like the Electric Guitar or the ability to record ourselves, might be good contemporary examples. The work of Giovanni Gabrieli marks exactly such a historical moment of human and musical evolution.



Venetian born Gabrieli, scored a job as organist at the famous San Marco Basilica, where his uncle Andrea was the official composer, and barely 18 months later, on the death of his uncle, that title fell to Giovanni. San Marco had a long tradition of musical excellence and Gabrieli's work there made him one of the most important composers in the Catholic World.

The fame of his *Sacrae Symphoniae* (1597) was such that composers from all over Europe, especially from Germany, came to Venice to study with him. He encouraged the study of humbler and more popular songs and madrigals being written in Italy on the transition point, as it were, from the Renaissance to the Baroque. Composers such as Heinrich Schütz and J.S Bach took these elements back to Germany, and with the new mixture of intimate songs and great Polychoral pomp, waded in the Baroque.

Music of the Middle Ages had been mainly monophonic – simple songs and melodies, with undistracting accompaniments. The Renaissance brought in the concept of “musical dialogue” with polyphonic writing where more than one melody could be heard at the same time. The Venetians took this to an extreme in what is known as the “Venetian Polychoral Style”. It involved *Chori Spezzati* (literally *Separated Choirs*) which were placed at a distance from each other, singing in answer, echo, opposition, or unison with each other, creating a whole new vocabulary of music in the process. These elements were to grow into the cornerstone of Baroque music: the alternation of two contrasting bodies of sound, such as chorus against chorus, single line versus a full choir, solo voice opposing full choir, instruments pitted against voices and contrasting instrumental groups; the alternation of high and low voices; soft level of sound alternated with a loud one; the fragmentary versus the continuous; and blocked chords contrasting with flowing counterpoint.

Gabrieli's *Sonata Pian' e Forte*, published in 1597, was one of the first pieces in musical history to specify the use of dynamics (meaning different volume levels) and to apply the Polychoral Style of writing to an instrumental group: fittingly enough, a “Brass Choir”. *Sonata* refers to a specifically instrumental work, as opposed to *Cantata*, which would have been the vocal equivalent. Before, dynamics had been achieved by simply having more or less of the sound (instruments, strings or voices). Gabrieli used the space to explore the use of volume. The architecture of the magnificent Basilica di San Marc lent itself to spatial experimentation, as it had multiple choir lofts, and he had the budget to fill each loft with musicians. The rich sonority of these performances are hard to recreate even in recording, where the sheer space and scale of the venue can not be perceived. The San Marco is decorated with spoils from mostly the 4th Crusade which sacked Constantinople. An example of this, is the four bronze horses which guard the entrance, which are viewed as a symbol of the military triumphs of Venice. The rich (but metal) quality of the Brass instruments, alludes to this grandeur.

Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy (3 February 1809 - 4 November 1847)

String Octet in E-flat major, Op. 20

Allegro Moderato ma con fuoco // Andante // Scherzo: Allegro leggierissimo // Presto



This work remains one of the crowning achievements of not only Mendelssohn, but the entire Romantic period. It was written by a 16 year old, and its extraordinary high level of both skill and artistry, makes it absolutely unique.

Mendelssohn was a child prodigy - he played Dussek's Piano Concerto with orchestra at the age of 9. He was raised in an affluent, intellectual family. His grandfather Moses Mendelssohn was the most important Jewish Philosopher of the 'Jewish Enlightenment' of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. His father was a prominent banker and strict parent. Felix and his sister Fanny had a 5am wake-up deadline and scales and arpeggios started at 6. Private tutors in foreign languages, "Classics" and mathematics would arrive throughout the day. Around his home, Mendelssohn Senior created an intellectual environment and held regular salons with the most famous musicians, artists, poets and scientists. At these salons, Felix befriended Goethe, who became an important figure in his work. Importantly, here his compositions were introduced to the public by the most famous musicians in Europe, who happened to be visiting Berlin at the time.

Louis Spohr had recently composed a work for two string quartets playing together but spatially apart from each other, but Mendelssohn created the genre of the Octet: eight independent, individual voices, as the composer wrote: "to be played by all instruments in the style of a Symphony". He wrote it as a birthday present for his violin teacher Ferdinand Rietz (1801-1832) whom Mendelssohn considered a great mentor and friend. Rietz was a brilliant violinist, and the virtuosic First Violin part was clearly written with a superb soloist such as Rietz in mind. He would have been much more famous, had he not died of consumption at the age of 31 himself.

I: Allegro Moderato ma con fuoco – moderately quick pace with passion and energy

The supreme confidence and swagger which launches the work, both belies the youth of the composer, and the fact that he already written a dozen *String Symphonies*: youthful works, but brimming with ideas and revealing how fast he was learning from his own efforts. A sprawling *Sonata*, the movement is double length of any of the other movements. The Recapitulation also brings back the themes in reverse order, a compositional method we would later encounter in Beethoven's symphonies.

II: Andante – moderately slow

The depth and emotional content of the movement again belies the age of the author. String texture is explored from throbbing heartbeats to sprawling melodies with choral accompaniments or Brahmsian unisons. The movement is unsettled despite its slow tempo indication. The genius of the composer shines through in the fact that all eight voices remain independent and yet the argument never descends into eight-voiced chaos – the melodic ideas are always clearly defined and the accompaniment styles so sophisticated it puts many to shame. Cascading chains of thirds and suspensions create a deep sense of yearning.

III: Scherzo: Allegro leggierissimo – sprightly, light and delicate

In the manuscript of this extraordinary movement, there is not a single correction or adjustment by the young composer: It is as neat and clean as if a copyist had written it out from a pre-existing score. Musically it gives the same impression: a quicksilver Scherzo bursts forth as if it came from somewhere else and we stumbled upon it already mid-journey. Shivering tremolos and lightning flashes of trills remind us of his music for Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream*. Goethe wrote: "It seems strange, yet familiar" and indeed, based on their correspondence at the time, there is a case to be made that the *Walpurgis Night's Dream* from Goethe's *Faust* was the inspiration for the movement.

IV: Presto - Quickly

The case for the *Faust* inspiration is even stronger in the 4th movement when an eight-part *Fugato* erupts in a quotation of the melody of "And he shall reign forever and ever" from the *Hallelujah Chorus* of Handel's *Messiah*, alluding to the conclusion of *Faust*.

The composer also transcribed the piece as a piano duet with violin and cello *ad. lib.* and orchestrated the third movement (with alterations) as an alternative third movement to his First Symphony.

Antonín Dvořák (8 September 1841 - 1 May 1904)

Serenade for wind instruments, cello and double bass in D minor Op. 44, B. 77

Moderato, quasi marcia // Minuetto – Tempo di minuetto // Andante con moto // Finale: Allegro molto



Dvořák desired to create a Czech nationalistic idiom in his music, using the European Symphony as model in both form and orchestration, but not emulating the Germanic symphonic ideal. His first composition was only played in public when he was 31. He needed to survive as a composer, and submitted 15 works for the “Austrian State Stipendium Award”. This serenade was one of the works which attracted the attention of Brahms, who then introduced him to his publisher Simrock, who published the highly successful *Slavonic Dances* composed at the suggestion of Brahms. As a result, Dvořák became famous very quickly.

The Serenade deliberately sets out to evoke an “old-world” atmosphere at the castles of the Rococo period where the worlds of the aristocracy and the commoners merged. It is written in a “Slavonic” style, though not quoting folksong directly. The Habsburg territories of Bohemia and Slovakia had outdoor bands called “Harmonie”, themselves a traditional hangover from the invasions of the Ottoman empire, whose marching bands struck terror into the hearts of the Viennese and Hungarians who had suffered under the sieges. Their cymbals and triangles became part of the European Symphonic language with various musical tributes such as Mozart’s *Rondo alla Turca* and *The Abduction from the Seraglio*.

I: Moderato, quasi marcia – moderate pace like a march

The work starts with a formal, royal march recalling the grandeur of Mozart’s great Wind Serenade K361. Jovial bassoon accompaniment and pastoral oboe melodies bring the movement to a gentle close.

II: Minuetto – Tempo di minuetto – slow and graceful

Two folk dances create a ternary minuet. A lyrical *sousedská* has a calm swaying character of a couple dancing a romantic exploration. Low strings and bassoon maintain a light bouncy dance feeling while the woodwinds sweetly twirl above the pair. Two clarinets in duet push the music to the “B-Section”: a *furiant*, a rapid and fiery Bohemian dance alternating in 2/4 and 3/4 time with frequently shifting accents. A sense of humour is detectable in the fact bassoon and horn scales which signal the return of the lyrical “A-Section”. The ancient Lute is recalled in the bouncy bassoons.

III: Andante con molto – slowly but with motion

The use of three horns enables the playing of chords, making the accompaniment harmonically full, without resulting in too thick a texture. Clarinet and Oboe sing a gentle love-duet while the ensemble keeps the feeling of motion going with pulsating chords. The movement builds to a passionate outburst where the pulsating chords propels the emotion and tension in spite of a slow harmonic movement.

IV: Finale: Allegro molto – very fast tempo

The final movement rewords the opening March into an energetic dance with gentle interludes. A bouncy *Polka* slowly builds to a joyful ending with triumphant horns. The first movement March is quoted as a memory of a an extremely formal ballroom – as perhaps from Mozart’s operas *Don Giovanni* or *The Marriage of Figaro* before returning to the village square for a festive party to welcome back the military from a successful exploit against some or other marauding horde.

The Serenade is written for two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons and three horns. The composer later added parts for cello and double bass to enhance the force of the bass line. The contrabassoon part was attached *ad lib*, since in Dvořák’s time it was not easy to obtain this unusual instrument.