

FANTAISIE

PROGRAM NOTES

Fantasy has a multi-layered meaning to musicians. There is the obvious flexing of the imagination-muscle. But it has more specific musical roots too, going back to early baroque ideals of sung recitative and creating music that can pivot on a dime, affectively speaking. For instrumentalists, it began with toccatas (“fancies” in Elizabethan English) and preludes and developed in various directions over time, including larger-scale, free-form works such as Liszt piano fantasies, and including such concepts as musical depiction, such as Berlioz’s *Symphonie Fantastique*.

Many of the tropes for baroque musical fantasy arose from imitation of singing, borrowing affective melodic figures that suggested laughing and sighing, for instance. As opera matured as an institution, composers crafted their instrumental music to accompany specific moods and heighten a scene’s emotional impact.

One composer with direct experience with French opera was **Johann Sigismund Kusser**, an early German exponent of the French compositional style developed at Versailles by Jean-Baptiste Lully (1632–1687). Kusser reportedly honed his craft in France under Lully’s tutelage before going on to have a career as a composer of theater music in Germany and Britain. He is credited with influencing an entire younger generation of German composers that included Bach, Telemann, Handel and Fasch.

In 1700 Kusser published three volumes in Germany of orchestral music in the French style with titles alluding to classical antiquity: the French-titled *Le Festin des muses* (the party of the muses), *Apollon enjoué* (Apollo at play), and the Italian titled **La Cicala della cetra d’Eunomio** (the grasshopper of Eunomius’ lyre). *Cicala* is texturally the richest set of the 1700 publications, employing three independent viola parts between the trebles on top and basses on the bottom, in keeping with the orchestra at Versailles, whereas his other two sets use a lighter orchestration of just two inner viola parts.

Eunomius was a legendary Locrian poet of classical antiquity. In those days, poets were like today’s singer-songwriters, intoning their verses and accompanying themselves on the instrument known variously as the kithara or lyre (thus “lyrics”). Eunomius was competing in a poetry contest when a string broke on his lyre just before he was to perform. But a grasshopper jumped onto his lyre and provided the missing notes through chirping, and Eunomius won the competition.

Kusser’s inspiration for these publications comes from the Paris opera’s curtain-raising overtures and choreographed interludes. Some particularly evocative

movements in the third suite from *La Cicala* include "Sleep," which vacillates in a twilight world of melodic fragments moving in and out of focus, and "Gladiators," written in a deliberately jagged and percussive manner to suggest the clattering of swords and shields.

The noted scholar and critic Anthony Hicks referred to **George Frideric Handel's** Opus 6 **Grand Concertos** as "an apotheosis of the baroque concerto...as well as an epitome of Handel's art, drawing on many sources and influences and uniting them in a style uniquely his own" (*New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*). To what Hicks stated so well, I will add that these concerti recall the freshness, ease and the joy in craft apparent in Handel's dramatic cantatas from his 20's in Italy, while unpressured by the need for commercial success in the years to come.

Handel's concerti grossi, the conventional term for what his publisher Walsh printed in the anglicized "grand concertos," follow the Roman concerto procedure popularized by Arcangelo Corelli earlier in the eighteenth century. It melds the trio sonata ideal of a pair of independent and equal solo trebles plus a bass instrument—with or without its own chordal continuo—with an orchestra. "Concertino" refers to the small group; "concerto grosso" to the large group.

This concerto follows the church sonata format of four movements in slow-fast alternation. The first violins dominate the opening movement with a tender yet sinuous melody, while the concertino stays folded into the concerto grosso. A fleet, angular theme forms the basis for the imitative second movement, in which all voices share equal importance. Only halfway through the movement does the concertino emerge as an independent entity, and largely without the concertino bass. The small and large groups reunite for the slow-lilting third movement, with the first and second violins engaged in a back-and-forth dialogue over sustained violas and a gliding bass line. For the snappy finale, Handel superimposes the Venetian concerto structure of Antonio Vivaldi by employing a three-part, segmentable melody as its theme. This is the only movement in which the concertino group—now with its bass—dominates significant stretches of the music.

Composer for King Louis XIV's Chamber, **Jean-Féry Rebel** was the first to write ballets for the purpose of placing the dancing front-and-center, as opposed to its usual supporting role in an opera and plays. His ballets were performed by some of the leading choreographer/ballerinas of the day, including Françoise Prévost (1680–1741), noted for her moving pantomimes, and two of her protégées: Marie Sallé (1707–1756), a favorite collaborator of Rameau and Handel noted for her sense of drama, and the athletic technician Marie-Anne de Cupis de Camargo (1710–1770), inventor of the *entrechat quatre* and the first female dancer to leap.

Rebel's musical output spanned three major stages of the French baroque. He cast his 1703 opera *Ulysse* in the conservative mold of Jean-Baptiste Lully's

(1632–1687) music, while his 1738 “symphonie nouvelle,” *Les Éléments*, joins Jean-Philippe Rameau (1683–1764) as part of the French baroque’s avant-garde. Between Lully’s death and Rameau’s emergence came a period of integrating Italian techniques into French music, and Rebel’s music from this time reflects that movement. From 1711 through 1729 he created a number of Italian-influenced ballets: *Caprice*, *Boutade*, *Caractères de la danse*, *Terpsichore* and ***Fantaisie***.

One marker of Italianism in *Fantaisie* is a blurring of traditional French orchestral hierarchy. Lully’s style split the usual 5-part ensemble into soprano, alto, tenor, baritone, and bass. One part rarely crossed above or below its neighbor, maintaining prescribed ranges that mirrored societal ranks. Rebel opts for an Italian ideal of melody instruments that share equal status, so voice-crossing happens all the time, displaying a fluidity of status that mirrored Italian society. Rebel further marks his Italianism by eschewing the iconic Lullian overture in favor of a slow-unfolding prelude of the sort that typically opens an Italian sonata.

François Couperin wrote hundreds of instrumental works, most with titles in French that acknowledge people known to his audience (*L’Astrée*), states of mind (*La Prude*), places (*Les plaisirs de Saint-Germain-en-Laye*), and things or events (*Les Bacchantes*). An exception is his concept-suite ***Ritratto dell’ Amore*** (portrait of love), which stands out for having an Italian title. With a collection of movements that name such states of mind as *charme* (enchantment), *enjouement* (merriness), *grâces* (allures), *vivacité* (liveliness) *noble fierté* (noble contentment), and *douceur* (tenderness), it is possible that Couperin drew inspiration from such works as René Descartes’s 1649 *Les Passions de l’âme* (passions of the soul), an examination of human emotion. The *je-ne-sais-quoi* (I know not what) and the *et cetera* (and so forth) likely represent aspects of love that must be acknowledged for the sake of completeness but are too *risqué* to name.

Like Rebel, Couperin was also drawn to Italianism and began experimenting with melding French and Italian style as early as the 1690’s, an abiding interest that culminated in two mature, large-scope trio sonatas, *l’Apothéose de Corelli* of 1724, and *L’Apothéose...de l’incomparable Monsieur de Lully* the following year. Both are quasi-narrative, programmatic works in which French and Italian music, which he believed had parted ways, reconcile. The Corelli apotheosis concludes his publication *Les Goûts-Réunis*, which also contains *Ritratto dell’ amore*.

The *Ritratto* contains the movements of a typical French suite for chamber ensemble, a mixture of abstract, dance and character pieces. The truly abstract movement is “La Charme,” which takes the form of a French measured prelude. (There are also unmeasured ones for lutes and keyboards). Most of the other movements assume various dance forms: “L’Enjouement” is a lively allemande, “Les Grâces” a courante, “La Noble fierté” a sarabande and a very Italianate one with its large melodic leaps, “La Douceur a loure,” and “L’et Cetera” a minuet.

Commedia dell' arte, short for *commedia dell' arte improvviso*, is a centuries-old, semi-improvised sketch-theater tradition from Italy, practiced to this day by family dynasties that can trace their troupes' roots back centuries. Its *dramatis personae* consists largely of masked stock characters, as recognizable to its audience then as Bugs Bunny and Daffy Duck are to people now. Often in serious Italian 17th century operas, comic relief characters would appear as variations on commedia types, such as Valetto and Damigella in *L'Incoronazione di Poppea* as a variation on Pierrot and Colombine; or in *La Calisto* Satirino and Linfea a transformation of Mezzetin and L'Amoureuse.

Kusser and Telemann both raise the topic of commedia dell' arte in the titles of their respective suites' movements. In Kusser it's a passing mention whereas in Telemann it's the focus. A major difference in intent exists between the two sets, however. Whereas Kusser's music creates an apt setting for commedia characters to do their pantomime onstage, Telemann's music sets out to capture his character's spirit and *become* the pantomime. None of the standard dances that a lady or gentleman would dance go with any of the named characters—Scaramouche, Harlequin, Colombine, Pierrot and Mezzetin—because they are not ladies or gentlemen. They are clowns, so for the Scaramouche a loping forlane; for Harlequin a rigaudon; for Colombine a siciliana, for Pierrot an intentionally faltering gavotte, and for Mezzetin exotic-sounding pseudo-near-eastern music.

Commedia dell' arte didn't quite cross the Atlantic as a practice, but its characters have appeared in many familiar paintings. The following brief description of the attributes of each is meant to help match the music with the character.

- Scaramouche's name means "skirmish." He's a loudmouthed braggart who, if he doesn't flee, will take a beating.
- Harlequin is a trickster servant who thwarts the wishes of his employer. Recognizable by chequered outfit and red-and-black mask.
- Colombine, the coquettish and world-wise love interest of Harlequin and Pierrot, is the only commedia character in Telemann's suite who is not a complete idiot. She typically wears a bonnet, and her dress is often patched.
- Pierrot is an astute servant character, who dressed in a white skullcap, and his cheeks are always painted or powdered white. He loves Colombine.
- Mezzotint is a servant character, schemer, and awkward flirt whose name means "half-measure of booze" in Italian. His costume is frequently striped, and wears a hat and cape. He plays guitar in a famous Watteau painting.

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