

## **Castrucci Reconstructed**

### **The Italians are coming**

Our leading man is one of many. They were traveling musicians. They could sing, compose, improvise and accompany. They had studied music theory and they were great virtuosi, but couldn't earn a good enough living in their homeland of Italy. So, they took to the north. Along with them came the modern musical style and the sizzling Italian manner of playing that was so popular in Northern Europe. Several of them tried their luck in London – the city with free market forces.

Our leading man is Pietro Castrucci. He and his brother Prospero left Rome, where they had studied violin with the unparalleled master Corelli, and they arrived in England in 1715. For the first six years they had jobs as musicians and servants to the Earl of Burlington. For the rest of their lives- with ever changing luck - they supported themselves as freelance musicians in London and Dublin.

### **Barbaric England**

The culture shock must have been tremendous. They came from a country where artists were sponsored by the nobility and the clergy, and landed in a risk filled society run by the market forces. The English language, the English temperament, the weather surely must have seemed foreign – not to mention the food! Food in England in the 1700s was hardly low cal. The best in the world was meat, and the more fat on it the better. Fish was served, but only occasionally as a variation. The Thames was so polluted that they had to import the oysters from afar. Root vegetables were popular, others weren't taken seriously. Pâtés and puddings were the thing, and then cake and desserts of all kinds. The sugar import in London quintupled during the course of Pietro Castrucci's life. French and Italian refugees used their heads. The English used their stomachs. The main meal of the day started in the afternoon before the theater. Afterwards there was room for a late night snack, if one wasn't a musician who had to get home to compose. The lowest paid were always working. Those were the conditions. Times could change, and even an Italian violinist could be out on the streets. Pension plan? Social security? Health insurance? Forget it. An artist had to make his own way. London was the city of opportunity.

### **Nearly a steady job**

Starting in 1720 Castrucci had work in Handel's opera orchestra as concert master, which in all practicality meant leader and soloist. He met the city's best musicians there. The travelling instrumentalists often "sat in" for short periods and were naturally given tailor-made virtuosic solos. Several of Handel's operas had difficult violin parts written for Castrucci and his brother. Some were even designed especially to fit their exclusive instrument Violetta Marina, a type of viola d'amore. One can be sure that the two brothers also had solos in the short concerti that were inserted between acts. Handel himself started leading the orchestra in 1729. His assignment was to compose new music in the Italian style, while at the same time controlling an orchestra made up of freelance musicians coming from all over Europe! He led the rehearsals and the shows, and was expected to present a profit. Castrucci was one of his permanent helpers. The task was nearly impossible, and yet a whole wave of new operas was written and

performed, many of which are considered masterpieces today. Written under pressure in an inhumane competitive environment.

### **Cacophony at the opera**

An evening at a baroque theatre would probably shock most people today. The Castrucci brothers undoubtedly had fanciful stories to tell about card games in the theatre boxes in Milan, amorous affairs among audience members in Venice and serving of food and drink in Rome – during the shows. They must have been used to fights and ridiculous outbursts or noisy intrigues initiated by the affectatious primadonnas of both sexes. But it wasn't necessarily anarchy, because the musicians in Italy's Baroque opera were brilliant, the decorations were made by the leading painters and there were even live animals on stage. Italians were experts in exceptional scene changes and fabulous costumes. And then the singers on top of that: World class virtuosos with years of education behind them. It was because of them that the operas were so successful. Things weren't quite as wild at King's Theatre, but it was a little like being in the bubbling, beautiful Italy. The shows started after dinner, around 6 pm, and the noise level was quite high in the auditorium. Few were sober by the time they arrived. There was room for 800, but only a fraction arrived for the start of the show. People came and went, some even came back after a little trip into town. Like today, there were many wares for sale near the opera house.

### **The city of opportunity?**

Life was hard for everyone in the 1700s, but for the lower classes it was senselessly brutal. If you had money, you could enjoy London - which was basically a social barometer for the rest of Europe. If you were an artist there was plenty of money to be had if you kept in mind that mode and style were capricious and that there was no help for a loser. In 1728 John Rich opened the small Lincoln Inn's Theatre with a common unsnobby opera with English text and easy listening music. The production was called *The Beggar's Opera*. It ran for 62 nights in a row and drew in a whole new audience from the middle class. This wasn't just a fancy cock and bull story, but a parody on everything – even Handel's Italian operas. Soon afterwards a theatre in Covent Garden opened where, for many years to come, one could see farces of Fielding until they were censured for political reasons. At the Royal Theatre in Drury Lane there were new productions of Shakespeare's plays with the fabulous actor Gerrick and wonderful, modern music by Thomas Arne. Was it any wonder that Handel's opera company was teetering on bankruptcy? Something had to be done about the personnel. Pietro Castrucci got fired from his leading post in the orchestra. Handel found a younger, talented violinist, but Castrucci continued in the orchestra until 1739. He was still performing as a soloist as late as 1750. If one couldn't be used as a soloist in the theatre, there were plenty of other places. Everywhere in town, actually. They were called taverns, but we'll call them pubs.

### **A thriving cultural life?**

There was a lot of drinking going on in London in the 1700s. The water in the city was downright dangerous, so the rich drank wine from Portugal and Germany. In all other social circles everyone else - men, women, and children - drank beer. The citizens of the city were basically drunk from morning till night. Cognac was

no longer stylish after several wars and restrictions on import, but over time, several thousand people had become addicted to the modern beverage called gin. In 1736, in the middle of the city, there were over 200 inns, 250 taverns 6,000 beer houses and 8,500 places to buy gin! Every fourth house in St. Giles was a pub. Many of the public concerts were held in pubs, and in Castle Tavern one could buy a subscription for the whole concert series. Many foreign virtuosi and opera stars performed in the Hickford Rooms. Castrucci surely must have been one of them. Concerts were held during the winter months because audiences able to pay spent their summers at their country houses. In addition, concerts were only held on the evenings that the opera was not running. That way, one could hire the stars from the theatre "The Best Hands in the Kingdom".

### **"The enraged musician"**

In 1741 a most brilliant painter and drawer, William Hogarth, published an engraving entitled "*The Enraged Musician*". A well groomed elderly gentleman wearing a wig is desperately trying to get peace and quiet so that he can practice his violin, but is constantly disturbed by the sounds of London. The picture is literally exploding with sounds. A parrot is squawking, a mother is singing *The Ladies Fall* to her screaming infant, a stack of bricks has fallen, (most likely with a lot of noise), and a little girl is playing with a rattle while watching a boy pee on the violinist's house. The boy has fastened something noisy to his leg, with which he will continue to make noise as soon as he is finished peeing. Add to this another boy with a drum, a shabbily dressed oboe playing musician giving it all that he has, a man with a horn, and a chimney sweep yelling on a rooftop accompanied by two threatening male cats. A flag is hanging on the church tower, so we can assume there is some kind of celebration, which means even more bell ringing than normal. The great violinist is very close to a nervous breakdown and Hogarth adds insult to injury: Someone has put a poster on the wall of his house. An advertisement for the Beggar's Opera! The rival's music! The only seemingly normal person is a lovely young milkmaid from the countryside, the only subject who looks out at the viewer. She lifts her skirts and thereby avoids all the dirt on the street. Hogarth's engraving is an illustration of stress, a description of the horror of the modern big city, and a depiction of London in the 1700s. According to tradition, interestingly enough, the violinist is a Pietro Castrucci look-alike. Scholars are hardly in agreement about this, but we just very well may have a (caricature) portrait of our leading man.

### **Professional music for amateurs**

Pietro Castrucci was an important musician and apparently a great composer. However, since we don't know much about him, we have to rely on circumstantial evidence. His first collection of violin sonatas was published in 1717 and reprinted in 1725. Yet another publication appeared in 1734. The 12 Concerti Grossi arrived in 1736, and most likely many unpublished works as well. It is rather remarkable that the Italians in London, apart from their busy concert schedules, even had the time to teach, compose and publish music - but they did, and quite a lot of music was published by them. The music was expensive, but there seemed to be plenty of customers. They weren't all masters, and often played other instruments than what the virtuosi played, but they were enthusiasts, and they demanded a constant flow of modern music in the Italian

style. The composers were obliged to respect this and comply with the wishes of their customers. Castrucci and his colleagues had their cabinets filled with suitable works that just needed a little altering here and there in order to please their customers. A sonata for oboe was perhaps carefully arranged to suit the flute, or a violin sonata was altered so that even recorder players could enjoy playing it. That's what happened to many of Castrucci's works and it was quite normal. You can hear some of those results on this CD.

Claus Johansen

English translation: Vicki Boeckman