

Apollo's Fire: Fencing Match

Apollo's Fire

Jeannette Sorrell conductor, artistic director

Alan Choo violin

Emi Tanabe violin

Bojan Čičić violin

Davina Clarke violin

Daphna Mor recorder

Kathie Stewart traverso

Antonio Vivaldi (1678–1741)

Allegro, from Concerto in D for two violins and two cellos, RV 564

4'

Georg Philipp Telemann (1681–1767)

Concerto in E minor for flute and recorder

14'

Largo — Allegro — Largo — Presto

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750)

Concerto in D minor for two violins, BWV 1043 (c.1730)

15'

Vivace — Largo ma non tanto — Allegro

INTERVAL

Jean-Philippe Rameau (1683–1764)

Dances from Les fêtes d'Hébé and Dardanus (1739)

10'

Tambourin — Ballet — Chaconne — Tambourin

Vivaldi

Concerto in A minor for two violins, RV 522 (No.8 from L'estro armonico, 1711)

11'

Allegro — Larghetto e spiritoso — Allegro

Vivaldi, arr. Jeannette Sorrell:

La Folia, after Trio Sonata in D minor, 'Follia', RV 63 (1705)

8'

The court jester [said] that both of them ran like rabbits up and down the violin, the one playing like an angel, the other like a devil. [Leclair] with his practised left hand and through his neat and lovely tone knew how to steal hearts, while [Locatelli] brought forth great difficulties and mainly sought to astound the listener with his scratchy playing. But as far as being steady in the saddle and playing in time went, the French could, unless he applied himself with utmost attention, be easily unhorsed by the Italian.

With its evocations of rabbits, angels, devils and saddles, Dutch organist-composer Jacob Wilhelm Lustig's chronicling of a 1728 musical duel between virtuoso violinist-composers Jean-Marie Leclair and Pietro Antonio Locatelli deserves a prize of its own for literary flair. However while it's perhaps the most colourful description of an 18th-century musical battle, it was by no means a one-off. Staged musical face-offs – testing instrumental technique, emotional expression, improvisatory prowess and even national musical styles – were very much part of the worlds inhabited by the composers featured in this concert. In fact in 1717, at the Dresden court, a young, advancement-hungry Bach challenged top French harpsichordist Louis Marchand to a duel – only to be left standing on the agreed day, after the Frenchman, suddenly wary of Bach's reputed prowess, fled the city at dawn.

Perhaps surprisingly for such a reputed showman, **Vivaldi** doesn't appear to have gone head-to-head with another violin virtuoso. However it was at the Rome residence of his supporter, Cardinal Pietro Ottoboni, that Domenico Scarlatti and George Frederic Handel vied with each other on harpsichord and organ in 1707. Plus, Vivaldi's musical language – highly revolutionary when it first appeared – was tailor-made for dramatic dialogue with its major/minor interplay, and surprise contrasts of texture, tempo, dynamics and vigorous rhythms. Even the *ritornello* form he took to new heights – *tutti* 'returns' of a main theme, punctuated by elaborate solo episodes – was virtuoso-friendly.

L'estro armonico ('Harmonic inspiration') – 12 violin concertos for one, two and three violins – was the collection that officially crystallised this Vivaldi sound and sent his international reputation soaring when he published it in 1711. Its Concerto No.8 in A minor has two forwards-pressing, *ritornello*-form outer movements framing a slow movement whose soloist writing isn't just highly expressive, but particularly spotlighted, courtesy of a barely-there accompaniment.

The Concerto for two violins and two cellos in D, RV 564 wasn't published during Vivaldi's lifetime (only around a fifth of his 500-plus concertos were), but is believed to date from the same period. Its opening Allegro must have been tremendously impactful in concert: bright, open-strings-friendly D major tonality; contrast-rich interplay between its soloists' treble and bass-register colours; gloriously sumptuous and drama-laden soloist textures – listen to the four of them entering, one by one, with shimmering, string-crossing bariolage; and later, the virtuoso sparkle of the first violin's somersaulting semiquaver triplets.

'La Folia' (madness or folly) was not Vivaldi's original creation, but a Moorish-influenced Iberian folk-dance whose seductive three-time lilt and catchy ground-bass (i.e. a repeated bass line over which increasingly inventive variations could be spun) caught the attention of a number of virtuosity-loving Baroque

composers, Corelli and Geminiani among them. Vivaldi's 19 variations were published in 1705, within his Op.1 trio sonatas. Jeanette Sorrell's *concerto grosso* version now allows the whole orchestra in on its whirling energy.

Composed at some point between 1712 and 1721, **Telemann's** four-movement Concerto in E minor for flute and recorder cleverly played on the two instruments' contrasting sonorities and indeed ages (the newer transverse flute was already supplanting its older relative), taking cues from Italian concerto style, but with a stylistic variety and cosmopolitanism that was all Telemann's own. Note the myriad modes of dialogue through which they lovingly vie with each other, from intertwining, alternating and imitating, to locking in tight fusion. Note too the ravishing expressiveness of the two Largos, including the impact of the second's sudden blaze of E major sunshine. As for soloist virtuosity, this reaches its zenith in the final Presto, a folksy Polish *polonaise* cast in French *rondeau* form (i.e. constantly-returning refrains), which drew on Telemann's time as *Kappelmeister* in Sorau (now Żary), where he had studied French musical style, while making a beeline in his free time for the local countryside's fiddlers and bagpipers.

L'estro armonico would no doubt have been on **J.S. Bach's** mind as wrote his Concerto in D minor for two violins in around 1730. Fifteen or so years earlier, he had transcribed some of its concertos for harpsichord – incidentally an instrument for which Vivaldi never provided a solo concerto. Now this double violin concerto was as much about his own compositional virtuosity as it was about instrumental display: outer movements owing their teeming textures and urgent forwards thrust to dizzyingly complex fugal writing, punctuated by a major-keyed *Largo ma non tanto* taking expressivity to new heights. The concerto probably received its premiere at Leipzig's Café Zimmermann through the Collegium Musicum concert society, and one can only imagine what that first audience made of its combination of dark drama and tender, transcendental light.

When **Jean-Philippe Rameau** made his late-career switch from being a composer of harpsichord music to being a writer of opéra-ballets, the impact on 1730s Paris was arguably even more seismic than Vivaldi's style had been on Venice 20 years earlier. Rameau's orchestral accompaniments were so much fuller, and more vibrantly coloured and harmonically complex, than those of the Lully operas that had hitherto dominated the Paris stage, that a furious debate sparked up between Lullyste traditionalists and Ramiste modernists. *Les fêtes d'Hébé* (The festivities of Hebe) and *Dardanus* both premiered in 1739, and while the latter provoked the complaint from one unimpressed soul that 'for three whole hours the orchestral players do not even have time to sneeze', its lack of box office success was down to a poor libretto rather than poor music, as its *tambourins* make plain. *Les fêtes d'Hébé* on the other hand scored 80 performances in its first year, and its Chaconne serves as an interesting French counterpart to Vivaldi's earlier 'La Folia', being equally constructed upon a repeated ground bass.

All in all, as Ovid once put it, a horse never runs so fast as when it has another horse to outpace. The proof of that is in tonight's repertoire – and probably also in its performance...