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## Musical Migration: The European Impact of Corelli's Op. 6

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# Musical Migration: The European Impact of Corelli's Op. 6

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## Introduction

In April of 1712, the renowned violinist, orchestra master, and composer Arcangelo Corelli (1652–1713) finalized a contract for the publication of his *Concerti grossi*, opus 6 with the Amsterdam publisher Etienne Roger. Corelli, who had been retired from playing for four years, was growing old, and was likely thinking of ways to extend his income in his later years. Based on the terms of the contract (discovered recently by Rudolph Rasch<sup>1</sup>), the composer had an extraordinary amount of control over how his copies would be distributed throughout Europe. Roger had already published Corelli's opp. 4 and 5; the latter, a set of virtuosic violin sonatas, was reprinted forty-two times by 1800. The popularity of his music ensured that Corelli had a profound impact on European musical tastes over the course of the eighteenth century. The publication of opus 6 would only further contribute to the composer's renown and the spread of musical techniques, forms, and procedures that are now known as distinctly "Corellian".

According to the terms of the contract, Roger agreed that Corelli would receive 150 copies of the first printing of opus 6. Only after Corelli received all 150 copies—presumably so that he could sell the copies for personal profit—was Roger allowed to print and distribute the publication. This kind of arrangement was not typical of the time, and demonstrates that Corelli's international renown ensured commercial success. Corelli's death in 1713 complicated matters of distribution. Nevertheless, forty-one original Roger editions of opus 6 survive today; such a high number, Rasch has argued, made it "one of Roger's most successful publications."<sup>2</sup>

Why was opus 6 so successful? How did Corelli's final publication affect the composition and performance of string music long after the composer's death? This essay will explore the stylistic and cultural impact of the opus 6 *concerti grossi* by considering the publication's reception (with a focus on England), its stylistic hallmarks, and the influence on *concerti grossi* by other composers (including those by Handel). It will show that the set of *concerti grossi* represented a watershed in the history of orchestral publishing, distribution, dissemination, and musical influence.

## Opus 6: Conception, Dissemination, Reception

Although Corelli did not live to see the fruits of his labor in published form, the composer would have likely been pleased by the commercial success of opus 6. The set of twelve *concerti grossi*

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<sup>1</sup> Rudolf Rasch, "Corelli's Contract: Notes on the Publication History of the 'Concerti Grossi... Opera Sesta' (1714)," *Tijdschrift van de Koninklijke Vereniging voor Nederlandse Muziekgeschiedenis* 46, no. 2 (1996): 82–136.

<sup>2</sup> Rasch, "Corelli's Contract: Notes on the Publication History of the 'Concerti Grossi... Opera Sesta' (1714)," 109.

has since become one of the most recognizable publications from the Baroque, largely due to the popularity of the eighth, or “Christmas,” concerto. Yet, opus 6 was not the first of its kind. Famously named the “inventor” of the concerto by Johann Joachim Quantz, Giuseppe Torelli published his opp. 5 (*Sinfonie a tre e concerti a quattro*) and 6 (*Concerti musicali*) in 1692 and 1698, respectively. Other Italian composers, such as Tomaso Albinoni and Benedetto Marcello, followed suit, issuing similar types of orchestral collections.

These earlier publications heightened the anticipation for and bolstered the subsequent popularity of Corelli's opus 6. The famed composer had been publishing his works since the 1680s (see Appendix), and although he had issued four sets of trio sonatas and a set of solo violin sonatas by 1700, his works for larger ensembles were still forthcoming. It was his large ensembles for which Corelli was so well known. Accounts exist of Corelli's orchestra, sometimes numbering more than 40 players, performing for oratorios, serenatas, and fireworks ceremonies—most of which were produced for private patrons. Any traveler on the Grand Tour—or any young musician lucky enough to study in Rome—must have been stunned, not only by the sheer performing forces, but also by the technical virtuosity of Corelli's performers. The chance to purchase Corelli's *concerti grossi*, which require a large orchestral ensemble, probably reminded professional and amateur musicians, as well as patrons, of Corelli's spectacular orchestral performances.

The *concerti grossi* in opus 6 are scored for two groups of string instruments as well as a basso continuo ensemble. All twelve concerti include a large orchestral ensemble (called the *ripieno*), a “back-up band” made up of at least two violins, a viola, and the basso continuo. Playing against the *ripieno* ensemble is the *concertino*, a smaller group of solo instruments, modeled on the scoring for a typical seventeenth-century trio sonata. It is the dynamic between the *concertino* and the *ripieno*, along with tonal harmonic structures, that propels each movement forward.

While he maintained orchestrations typical of the *concerto grosso*, Corelli also composed these works with the utmost flexibility in mind: the title page of Roger's edition announced:

#### CONCERTI GROSSI

Con duoi Violini e Violoncello di Concertino obligati e duoi  
Altri Violini, Viola e Basso di Concerto Grosso ad arbitrio,  
Che si potranno radoppiare [*sic*]<sup>3</sup>

Roger's edition proclaimed that the accompanying *ripieno* ensemble (the *concerto grosso*) could be included at whim, and otherwise was unnecessary if performing forces were unavailable. Indispensable, however, were the solo instruments making up the *concertino*. As Peter Allsop argues, such flexibility was surely one more marketing strategy on the part of both Corelli and his publisher. In essence, a purchaser would get both chamber pieces and larger orchestral works for the price of one—perfect for a performance at home or in a concert hall setting.

<sup>3</sup> “CONCERTI GROSSI / With two violins and cello of the *obligato concertino* and two / Other violins, viola and bass of the *concerto grosso* arbitrarily, / Which you can double.” Translation by the author.

This marketing strategy worked. Opus 6 received performances and reached audiences across Europe; even in France, where Italian music was often met with lackluster enthusiasm, publishers sold Roger's edition. It was in England that opus 6 received its most welcome reception. *The Post Man* advertised Roger's edition in January 1715, almost immediately after the first printing, and later that year, the popular London publisher John Walsh issued his own set of parts. Others, such as Benjamin Cooke (1728/1732), John Johnson (1755/1760), Robert Bremner (1765), and Benjamin Preston (1790), printed their own editions throughout the eighteenth century. Such late printings, nearly 100 years after their initial publication, is a testament to Corelli's continued musical influence and popularity.

The sustained admiration of opus 6 in England indicates that these works were performed with some regularity in London's thriving concert scene. Even diarist Roger North observed that Corelli's concertos "are to the musitians [sic] like the bread of life" (*On Music*, ca. 1695-1728).<sup>4</sup> Many violinists who moved to London and performed on the concert circuit would claim to have studied with the famous Arcangelo Corelli. Renowned violinists such as Francesco Veracini and Francesco Geminiani (who studied with Corelli in Rome) took to the stage with Corelli's works in the 1720s. Although nearly all of these virtuosi were composers themselves, many became more famous for their performances of Corelli than for their own compositions.

As soloists, these violinists probably played solo sonatas from opus 5, but it is more than likely that the *concerti grossi* were also performed when larger ensembles could be formed. Allsop has also attributed the lasting popularity of opus 6 in England to concert societies in villages and towns outside of London, more than 50 of which subscribed to Corelli's publications, including opus 6. Advertisements from English newspapers in the mid-eighteenth century make clear that Corelli's opus 6 received plenty of performances; Allsop counts 79 performances between 1776 and 1790. Despite Corelli's untimely death, it is clear that his grip on London's concert life remained steadfast well after his death.

## Corelli's Stylistic Profile and Influence

Opus 6 represents Corelli's mature style, one that continued to be admired and imitated well into the eighteenth century. Vivaldi's three-movement, ritornello-driven, brazenly virtuosic concerto style held lasting influence in the later eighteenth-century concerto, but composers throughout Europe also openly imitated Corelli's distinctive compositional style. Some composers even paid tribute to Corelli's earlier publications by evoking him in their titles, including Telemann in his six *Sonates corellisantes* (1735). As David Kimbell has put it, Corelli's music gave tonal and thematic order to the sprawling musical language of the seventeenth century. The tonally articulated forms (built around tonic/dominant relationships), elegant string writing, and chains of tension-filled suspensions and resolutions became a new musical *lingua franca* of instrumental writing in the early eighteenth century.

Corelli's opus 6 consists of twelve *concerti grossi* in either the *da chiesa* or *da camera* form. The

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<sup>4</sup> John Wilson, ed., *Roger North on Music* (London: Novello, 1959), 310–11.

eight *da chiesa* concerti alternate between fast and slow movements, featuring either the full ensemble or the *concertino* against the *ripieno*. The four other *concerti*, in the *da camera* style, include dance movements, such as allemandes, correntes, gavottes, sarabandes, gigue, and minuets. In this way, Corelli's *concerti grossi* represent two traditions—the older, more formal church style, and the new, cosmopolitan chamber style.

The juxtaposition of these works' musical qualities goes well beyond their overall movement structure. Throughout the set, Corelli uses a diversity of forms and approaches to string writing that distinguish each concerto from the next without sacrificing stylistic unity. While many of Corelli's movements are in binary form, there are just as many that break with formal convention. For example, opus 6, no. 4 in D major combines *allegro* binary form movements with slower through-composed structures, which are used either to introduce the binary form movements or provide thematic and tonal linkages between movements. Movement 2, an *adagio*, forgoes the *concertino/ripieno* interplay, and instead features the full ensemble sneaking chromatically from B minor to a half-cadence on F# major—preparing the following binary-form *Vivace* in D. Such procedures ensure that no one concerto is entirely predictable, although each movement within the concertos proceeds with formal and tonal consistency.

The opus 6 *concerti grossi* are equally as diverse in the types of string writing that Corelli uses to differentiate the *concertino* from the *ripieno*. While chains of suspensions and melodic sequences are a hallmark of Corelli's style, in opus 6 the composer also alternates between highly virtuosic passagework and elegant, less showy, types of figures. In op. 6, no. 11 in B-flat major, the second movement's *Allemande* features a virtuosic *concertino* cello part underneath the accompanimental texture of the rest of the ensemble. It is clear, in this case, that the cello is the star of the show. Other movements offer virtuosic figurations in the *concertino* violin parts. In the first movement of op. 6, no. 4 in D major, the solo violins play *moto perpetuo* rhythms, chugging along in the *concertino* with *ripieno* interjections. In the following concerto (op. 6, no. 5 in B-flat major), both the *concertino* violins and *ripieno* orchestra share arpeggiated passagework, echoing each other's virtuosic runs. All the while, each of these concertos also feature movements in which virtuosity is sacrificed for clarity, elegance, and harmonic interest, especially those that are based on dances. Overall, such diversity, as well as consistency of tonal plan and "Corellian" techniques, created the appeal of the opus 6 *concerti grossi*.

It was such diversity—according to Terence Best<sup>5</sup>—that attracted George Frideric Handel to Corelli's compositions. Handel worked with Corelli while living in Rome between 1705 and 1710, and he continued to study the Italian composer's works throughout his life. Best argues that, "So many of the melodic figures, harmonic sequences, and especially cadences and violin figuration that we think of as typically Handelian, derive from Corelli."<sup>6</sup> Handel's own opus 6, entitled *Twelve Grand Concertos in Seven Parts*, was modeled on Corelli's monumental publication. None of the concerti are in three movements, and only a handful of movements use the more modern ritornello form promoted by Vivaldi and his contemporaries. Instead, Handel

<sup>5</sup> Terence Best, "Handel's Op. 6 and the European Concerto Tradition." *Göttinger Händel-Beiträge* 6 (1996): 70–84.

<sup>6</sup> Terence Best, "Handel's Op. 6 and the European Concerto Tradition," 73.

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looked back to Corelli's opus 6, assimilating older *concerti grossi* techniques with his own cosmopolitan flair. London publisher John Walsh released Handel's *concerti grossi* in 1739—twenty-five years after Roger's edition of Corelli's op. 6. Nevertheless, Handel must have known that Corelli's *concerti grossi* were still popular in London; his own publication, now considered a masterpiece of the late Baroque, helped to preserve Corelli's stylistic relevancy decades after the composer's death.

## Conclusion

In 1724, the French keyboardist François Couperin published a set of trio sonatas entitled *Le Parnasse, où, L'apothéose de Corelli* [Parnassus, or the Apotheosis of Corelli]. Meant as a tribute to the Italian composer, Couperin's trio sonatas synthesized the stylistic textures, such as the *ripieno* vs. *concertino* playing, and harmonic procedures, such as forms shaped by tonic/dominant relationships, for which Corelli had become so well known. While Couperin upheld Corelli as a paragon of instrumental writing, Corelli's opus 6 should similarly be seen as an example of the apotheosis of Baroque musical style. In these works, Corelli paired stable tonal forms and hallmark techniques, such as chains of suspensions, with a diverse array of movement types and a balanced use of both virtuosic and elegant string writing. Most importantly, the set of *concerti grossi* also provides insight into the early history of orchestral composition and commercial publishing and performance. Only the "Christmas Concerto" is performed with regularity today, Corelli's opus 6 became a model of its time for orchestral composition.

## Appendix: Corelli's Published Works

Opus 1: *Sonate a tre*, scored for 2 violins, violone/archlute, organ (Rome, 1681).

Opus 2: *Sonate da camera a tre*, scored for 2 violins, violone/harpsichord (Rome, 1685).

Opus 3: *Sonate a tre*, scored for 2 violins, violone/archlute, organ (Rome, 1689).

Opus 4: *Sonate a tre*, scored for 2 violins, violone (Rome, 1694).

Opus 5: *Sonate*, scored for 1 violin, violone/harpsichord (Rome, 1700).

Opus 6: *Concerti Grossi*, scored for 2 violins, violoncello (concertino), 2 violins, viola, basso (concerto grosso) (Amsterdam, 1714).

No. 1 in D major: *Largo-Allegro, Largo-Allegro, Largo, Largo, Allegro*

No. 2 in F major: *Vivace-Allegro-Adagio-Vivace-Allegro-Largo Andante, Allegro, Grave-Andante largo, Allegro*

No. 3 in C minor: *Largo-Allegro, Largo, Grave, Vivace, Allegro*

No. 4 in D major: *Adagio-Allegro, Adagio, Vivace, Allegro, Allegro*

No. 5 in B-flat major: *Adagio-Allegro, Adagio, Allegro, Largo, Allegro*

No. 6 in F major: *Adagio, Allegro, Largo, Vivace, Allegro*

No. 7 in D major: *Vivace-Allegro-Adagio, Allegro, Andante largo, Allegro, Vivace*

No. 8 in G minor ("Christmas Concerto"): *Vivace-Grave, Allegro, Adagio-Allegro-Adagio, Vivace, Allegro, Pastorale: Largo*

No. 9 in F major: *Preludio: Largo, Allemanda: Allegro, Corrente: Vivace, Gavotta: Allegro, Adagio, Minuetto: Vivace*

No. 10 in C major: *Preludio: Andante largo, Allemanda: Allegro, Adagio, Corrente: Vivace, Allegro, Minuetto: Vivace*

No. 11 in B-flat major: *Preludio: Andante largo, Allemande, Adagio-Andante largo, Sarabanda, Giga*

No. 12 in F major: *Preludio: Adagio, Allegro, Adagio, Sarabanda: Vivace, Giga: Allegro*

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