

Ensemble Mirabilia: L'Eterno Ritorno | Friday, February 16 | 7:30 p.m.

PROGRAMME NOTES

This concert takes us into the world of the baroque Italian chaconne (otherwise “ciaccona,” “ciacona,” “chacony,” “chacona”), a dance popular throughout Europe for centuries. Despite its structural simplicity, the chaconne has inspired composers to reach the heights of virtuosity and harmonic richness. It has carved out a respectable place for itself in all classes of society: stemming from popular tradition, it has also figured in concert programs given in high society, thanks to the learned and inspired touch of Europe’s greatest composers.

The *Eterno Ritorno* (Eternal Return) of this programme’s title is an allusion to the concept of the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. It suggests that through the repeated motif in the bass—which underlies a series of melodic variations—we recognize the endlessly repeating cycle of days and years. Thus the obligation to commit one’s life to the creation one’s own destiny is echoed by the musicians, who must create variations with the same sense of responsibility towards themselves and their peers. Each end of the bass pattern is also the beginning of the next; through repetition, the recurring bass generates a sort of hypnotic trance.

The origins of the chaconne have prompted much speculation. It seems that Spain, with its Arab-Andalusian influences, first offered this dance form to the rest of the world, especially through its integration into the French dance suite (sometimes under the name *passacaille*). But is it really necessary to find a single source for the origin of the chaconne? Aren’t there grounds in England and tarantellas in Italy which use this same process based on the repetition of a bass line? Don’t musicians of all periods enjoy creating variations on a common bass that serves as a structure?

As well as accompanying dancing, ground basses often served as a vehicle for the improvisation and delivery of poetry. **Claudio Monteverdi**’s (1567-1643) “Quel sguardo sdegnosetto” is a chaconne in strophic variation divided into three parts, in which the vocal line, evolving over a ground bass, reacts to every suggestion made by the poetic text.

Luigi Rossi (1597-1653), like Monteverdi several decades earlier, is known to have taken inspiration from the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, the classic story of music’s power to move heaven and earth. Premiered in 1647, Rossi’s *Orfeo* was commissioned to celebrate the marriage of Louis XIV to Maria Theresa of Austria; that Rossi received this prestigious commission was a mark of his great renown as a composer at the time. In “Mio ben, teco il tormento più,” Orpheus expresses his pain and despair after losing Eurydice for the second time.

Rossi’s contemporary, **Tarquinio Merula** (1695-1665), made use of ostinato basses not only in his madrigals and arias but also in Mass and psalm settings destined for the church. “Su la cetra amorosa” is drawn from one of his published collections of madrigals; its music fits the movements of the text closely, cycling the ground bass through surprising changes of key and vividly depicting individual images, as with the bellicose repeated notes setting “guerra” and “à battaglia.” Influenced by Monteverdi, Merula was hired as an organist in several cities and even in Poland, which he left after being accused of behavior toward his pupils that was deemed

indecent. His chaconnes feature the syncopated rhythms characteristic of the Italian style of the time, inviting the upper parts to compete in virtuosity.

Giovanni Battista Vitali (1632-1692) was a pupil of Cazzati and a champion of the trio sonata texture: the combination of two high parts over a bass that was favoured throughout the Baroque and that is demonstrated by his Ciaccona, Merula's Ciaccona a 2 con violone, and **Grégoire Jeay's** (1962-) more recently composed *Chaconne en ré mineur*. By the time of **Antonio Caldara** (1670-1736), publishing such trio works was an important way to establish one's reputation as a composer. Caldara's early publications—including the Op. 2 collection (Venice, 1699) that contains his B-flat major Ciaccona—clearly did their work well; he went on to rub shoulders with some of the greats (Corelli, Handel and Scarlatti) while working in Rome, and later secured a coveted position at the imperial court in Vienna.

The wide emotional range of chaconne-type pieces is best displayed by their incorporation into the dramatic and semi-dramatic genres of the day: opera and cantata. **Benedetto Ferrari's** (1603-1681) "Amanti, io vi so dire" strikes a humorous tone, inviting us to flee rather than suffer the tortures of love; one of the fathers of Venetian public opera, Ferrari often set his own poems as arias and madrigals. **Giovanni Felice Sances's** (1600-1679) "Misera hor si ch'il pianto," by contrast, is a compelling *lamento* with an obstinate, haunting bass played by a bass viol; it is a piece of great harmonic richness in which the voice and the instrumental embellishments maintain a strange tonal ambiguity indicative of Sances' boldness as a composer.

Barbara Strozzi (1619-1677), one of the pioneers of the cantata, had the good fortune to be born into a world of creativity, intellectual ferment, and artistic freedom. She made a mark as a composer and singer, eventually publishing eight collections of songs—more music in print during her lifetime than even the most famous composers of her day. Her works were included in important song collections that found their way to the rest of Europe and England, yet she died in obscurity in Padua in 1677 with little wealth or property. This last section of *Hor che Appolo* is another extraordinarily emotive *lamento*; it mourns a final separation from the beloved as equivalent to death and "sweet oblivion."

Antonio Cesti's (1623-1669) *L'Oronthea* was a huge success when it was performed in Innsbruck in 1656 and in the following years. Cesti, who was born in Arezzo and followed in the footsteps of Monteverdi and Cavalli, reached the height of his fame with this opera. In line with the great Venetian tradition of the 17th century, *L'Oronthea* combines comic moments and moving passages, bringing together a dozen characters, including two in cross-dressing roles. It recounts the hesitations of Oronthea, Queen of Egypt, when faced with marriage: should she devote herself entirely to her royal duties—and enjoy her independence—or, on the other hand, enter into a diplomatic union, or even a true love marriage?

La Divisione del mondo by **Giovanni Legrenzi** (1626-1690), a work in three acts, was premiered on February 4, 1675, at the Teatro San Salvador in Venice. Its great initial success motivated many successive revivals. Legrenzi's opera tells the story of the Olympian gods who, after their victory over the Titans, must divide up the world. What ensues is a maze of amorous pursuits; in the end, it is all about sex, adultery, and even incest, as Venus arouses the desire of the gods and the jealousy of the goddesses. Hence, perhaps, the opera's enormous success, reaffirmed by 1699

by no fewer than thirteen different productions throughout Italy. This aria, “Lumi potete piangere,” expresses the pain resulting from the wounds of betrayed love.

Chief among the works of **Benedetto Marcello** (1686-1739) are his cantatas for one or more voices; the library of the Brussels Conservatoire holds several volumes of chamber cantatas composed for his mistress. He also composed a single opera, *La Fede riconosciuta*, performed in Vicenza in 1702, but he had little interest in the genre. Marcello is known for having set out his opinions on the state of musical drama in a satirical pamphlet entitled *Il teatro alla moda* (published anonymously in Venice in 1720). This little work, frequently republished, is not only extremely funny, but also an important document in the history of opera. The aria “Chi Inviolabile” is about loyalty to one's faith.

Antonio Vivaldi (1678-1741) devoted his life to music and the priesthood. Neither his priestly duties nor his uncertain health prevented him from leading a hectic musical and extra-musical life. And the Venetian composer did nothing to go unnoticed. He wrote numerous operas and concertos, enjoyed a fine reputation, and earned a great deal of money. He undertook long and arduous journeys, traveling only by gondola or carriage and always accompanied by a cohort of women, whose presence he justified by saying that they knew his infirmities well and were a great help to him. But their presence at his side fueled the rumors: such "scandalous" behavior on the part of the Red Priest was the subject of Marcello's satirical book mentioned above, one of whose main targets is a certain “Aldiviva,” a transparent anagram of "A. Vivaldi."

Nicola Matteis (1659 – 1713) was, like Vivaldi, a violin virtuoso. Unlike Vivaldi and all but a few of his Italian compatriots, however, Matteis made his career in England, where he became a highly respected teacher and performer. His delightful collections of *Ayres for the Violin* (or *Arie*) include a set of variations on the chaconne, and bear out his reputation for rare technical skill.

The Neapolitan lyrics of the “Tarantella La Carpinese,” which comes from popular tradition, describe a game of seduction through an exchange of somewhat bawdy promises. According to tradition, the *tarantella* owes its origin to the bite of the tarantula, which, producing either great agitation or deep lethargy, was to be cured by the power of music and dance.

No less legendary are the two twentieth-century hits that come near the end of tonight's programme. Written (according to the composer) in two hours, **Léo Ferré's** (1916-1993) masterpiece “Col tempo” has been performed by a host of artists, including Céline Dion, Jane Birkin, Salif Keita, Dalida, and many others; Ferré wrote the Italian version himself. It is, of course, a chaconne with a descending bass progression. The remarkable bass line of **The Beatles's** “I Want You”—also typically that of a chaconne—inspired this arrangement, while the lyrics leave no doubt as to the desire expressed.

Notes by Grégoire Jeay and Connor Page