

“False consonances of melancholy”

I

Henry Purcell (1659-1695)

Sonata 6, Z795

from Sonatas of Three Parts, 1683

7 min

Nicola Matteis (c. 1700)

Suite in A minor

from Ayrs for the Violin, 1685

Preludio, Adagio, Alemanda ad imitatione d'un tartaglia, Sarabanda Amorosa, Movimento Incognito, Gavotta

12 min

Henry Purcell

Sonata 10, Z799

from Sonatas of Three Parts, 1683

5 min

Nicola Matteis

Suite in G major

Preludio, Musica, Sarabanda, Giga “Al Genio Turchesco”, Aria Burlesca

9 min

II

Nicola Matteis

Suite in G minor

Preludio in ostinatione, Andamento malinconico, Grave, Aria for the flute, Giga

8 min

Henry Purcell

Ayre, A new Irish Tune, A new Scotch Tune, Air en Bourrée, A Ground (solo harpsichord)

10 min

Nicola Matteis

Suite in C major

Preludio Allegro, Vivace, Fuga, Aria, Sonata, Diverse Bizarrie sopra la Vecchia Sarabanda ò pur Ciaccona

15 min

GLI INCOGNITI

Amandine Beyer

Solo violin & musical direction

Alba Roca, violin

Baldomero Barciela, viola da gamba

Nacho Laguna, theorbo & baroque guitar

Anna Fontana, harpsichord

Short text

In the late 17th century, Neapolitan violinist Nicola Matteis, based in London, revolutionized English music by popularizing the Italian violin style, shifting the focus from French to Italian tastes. His personal style blended European musical traditions, and though initially unsuccessful, he gained fame after publishing his violin pieces. Matteis' influence extended to composers like Henry Purcell, who incorporated Italian elements with an English twist. The two composers are undoubtedly united by a heightened sense of detail and theatricality in their compositions.

Perhaps the "*Good advice to play well*" Matteis gives in *The False Consonances of Musick* would help us interpret their music: "*You must not play allwayes alike, but sometimes Lowd and sometimes softly, according to your fancy, and if you meet with any Melancholy notes, you must touch them sweet and delicately.*" Believe us, we will put all our efforts into finding those "melancholy notes" and sharing them with you!

Melancholy and bizzarrie in the works of Nicola Matteis

"Each time I play the music of Matteis I get a very special pleasure from it: the pleasure of crossing the frontier between our world and his, practically within a bowstroke of us, yet so assertive in its originality.

His music and his invention always oscillate between certainty and magic, the known and the impalpable. The path leading to Matteis is strewn with pitfalls because of the halo of mystery that surrounds him, but for me it has something of the initiatory quest, worthy of a fairytale, where each piece picked up en route is a pearl whose powers of evocation have been preserved intact. In my view, the uncanny power of his music comes from the juxtaposition of very familiar elements with pieces from a puzzle. On the side of the certainties lies the violinistic aspect of his compositions: melody, metre, harmony, each plays its well-established role. Matteis was an excellent violinist, and one immediately senses this when listening to and playing his music: everything falls under the fingers. The pieces are reassuring in formal terms: there is everything required to make up fine suites, with typical dances some of which seem to have stepped straight out of some universal folklore, simple and charming.

But alongside this, there is an ever-present aleatory element to amaze, confuse, destabilise us. Of course, the tone is violinistic, but more than once the harmonies are surprising, the melodic line seems suddenly to be seized by depression or madness, and the well-behaved rhythms grow obsessive to the point of giddiness. This must surely have something to do with Matteis's prickly character!

Although this may seem a highly empirical observation, I am convinced that, in a musician-composer, musical technique and invention are closely connected, and that if we try to get as close as possible to the way Matteis himself played, it can have a drastic influence on the performer's musical gesture. To bring our two worlds closer together, I have therefore tried a physically different approach to the violin. What follows is a brief attempt to explain this decision, which led me to call my habits into question in a fairly dangerous way. I hope the listener will feel it was worthwhile!

When learning to play a musical instrument, one always starts from bases more or less well established by tradition, with the aim of mastering 'a' given technique which then allows one to express one's musical ideas. But things are often rather different with period instruments, since in the seventeenth century the notion of a 'school' was not yet firmly established and almost every musician had his own technique. The case of Nicola Matteis gave us the chance to experiment, to look for and come up with extremely varied solutions.

Many descriptions have been preserved of this violinist's playing style after his arrival in London, where he apparently held his instrument very low (around the level of the lower ribs), a position to be seen in many seventeenth-century paintings (especially from the Netherlands) and which must surely be closely connected to folk practice. On trying out this low position (while of course taking account of female physiology!), one discovers that Matteis's music is perfectly suited to the technique, which in fact poses no insoluble problems (there are few shifts, and the double stops are carefully chosen). The two most surprising consequences are, first of all, the modification in the violin sound, which clearly becomes more resonant with more harmonics, and above all the effect on the bow, which in my opinion creates a transfer of weight that helps to concentrate the musical intention on the phrase rather than the instrument. One can play in a lighter, more relaxed way, and bring out the evocative, even melancholy mood of many of the pieces. Reading John

Evelyn's description of Matteis's playing in 1674 – 'I heard that stupendious Violin Signor Nicholao . . . whom certainly never mortal man Exceeded on that instrument: he had a stroak so sweete, & made it speake like the Voice of a man; & when he pleased, like a Consort of severall Instruments . . .' – one immediately grasps the notion that technique can also give us keys to interpretation.

Hence, in order to make all the changes of affect and bizzarrie perceptible, we have tried to follow the 'Good advice to play well' Matteis gives in *The False Consonances of Musick*: 'You must not play allwayes alike, but sometimes Lowd and sometimes softly, according to your fancy, and if you meet with any Melancholy notes, you must touch them sweet and delicately.' And please believe us when we say that every effort has been made to find those melancholy notes and share them with you..."

Amandine Beyer