



**Francesco Venturini: Concerti**

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The reader who has never heard of Francesco Venturini may think that he is another of the many forgotten Italian composers of the early 18th century. That is not the case: his Italian name may well reflect the Italian taste of the time which had a large part of Europe in its grip. However, he was born in Brussels, and when he was a member of the court chapel in Hanover, his name was always mentioned alongside the French players. Hanover is the place where he worked all his life, and where for some years George Frideric Handel was his colleague. Hanover was one of the main musical centres of Germany, which in modern performance practice is probably given less attention than its importance would justify.

For some time, the court was entirely under the spell of the Italian style, and opera played a crucial role. Some of the main opera composers of the time, Antonio Sartorio and Agostino Steffani, were in the service of the court, the former from 1666 to 1675, the latter from 1688 to 1703. However, around 1700 operatic performances seem to have discontinued, for unknown reasons. From now on, instrumental music was the name of the game, and Venturini was one of the key figures in the court chapel. He entered the service of the court at Easter 1698 and remained there until his death. At that time the Konzertmeister was Jean-Baptiste Farinel, who had been appointed in this post in 1680. For some years Venturini acted as his deputy, and in 1713 he took the position of Konzertmeister himself. At about that time, he also composed his Concerti da camera Op 1, which were printed by Le Cène in Amsterdam. They seem to have found much appreciation, as many arrangements of these concertos were made.

This set is quite remarkable for their originality in form and instrumentation. Although they are specimens of what was then the most popular style in Germany, known as the 'mixed taste', in which French and Italian elements were mingled, they have little in common with the French suite or the Italian concerto. It is notable that these twelve pieces bear the title of sonata, but in their form they are in fact suites. The even-numbered sonatas open with a concerto in the Italian manner in ABA form. One of them is included here: the two sections of the concerto have the tempo indications allegro assai and adagio. The second movement is called canon, which concerns the treble and the bass, whereas the middle voices enrich the harmony. The piece ends with a passepied and trio. The instrumental scoring is rather unusual; in the opening movement the oboe has a solo part, which makes this almost sound like the movement from an oboe concerto. In the last movement, the trio is scored for two oboes and bassoon, very much in the French manner.



The odd-numbered sonatas open with a French overture, and these pieces show strong similarity with the orchestral suites which were written by the likes of Telemann and Bach. Two such sonatas are included here. In the Sonata No 9 in G minor, the overture is followed by three movements called aria, and closes with a pair of minuets. The second of the arias, called aria à 11 instruments, is the most remarkable because of its scoring, which includes pairs of bassoons and cellos; the music does full justice to the addition *affettuoso*. The second of the minuets is for two bassoons. The Sonata No 11 in B-flat has also an aria as its second movement, in which wind instruments play a solo role to an accompaniment of high strings. It is followed by a piece called Furies, which reminds us of the theatre. It is paired with a sarabanda with the indication *cantabile*; at the end the Furies section returns. After a gavotta, the sonata closes with a pair of minuets.

In addition to the three sonatas from the Op 1, which is Venturini's only collection ever to be printed, *la festa musicale* plays two pieces which have been preserved in manuscript and are now part of collections in Sweden (in Lund and Uppsala respectively). The *Ouverture à 5* in E minor comprises an overture and five dances, including an *angloise & trio* and a *rondeau*. The trio is once again for wind. The *Concerto à 6* in A is for strings and basso continuo and written in the manner of an Italian sonata da chiesa, with two *adagios* and two *allegros*. Two violins are given solo parts.

Considering that Venturini's sonatas are quite original in their concept and scoring, it is rather odd that they receive so little attention. As far as I know, this is only the second recording of some of these sonatas. In 2006, ZigZag Territoires released a disc with five sonatas from this set, performed by La Cetra under the direction of David Plantier. It is disappointing that *la festa musicale* selected two of the sonatas which are also included in that recording. If different pieces had been chosen, the number of sonatas available on disc would have increased substantially. On the other hand, the performances are clearly different in one respect; in three of the five items, *la festa musicale* adds percussion. I find this rather problematic and untenable from a historical point of view. In the Furies movement from the Sonata No 11 even a wind chime is used, which is appropriate for the theatre, but not for concertante performances. However, this is not music for the theatre; the title of the Op 1, *Concerti di camera*, speaks loud and clear. Even if it was meant for the theatre, that does not mean that nearly every dance needs the participation of percussion. In the Furies movement, Venturini has written the string parts in such a way that they suggest what the title refers to, and that should be enough. It is highly regrettable that the otherwise excellent playing of *la festa musicale* is contaminated with a virus I use to call *percussionitis*. It is quite infectious, but unfortunately a vaccine has not been found yet.

## Francesco VENTURINI (1675-1745)

Concerto di camera in A minor, Op 1 No 2 [10:51]

Concerto di camera in B-flat, Op 1 No 11 [16:30]

Ouverture à 5 in E minor [11:11]

Concerto à 6 in A [07:37]

Concerto di camera in G minor, Op 1 No 9 [17:09]

la festa musicale

rec. 2019, Studio of Radio Bremen, Germany

**AUDITE 97.775** [63:32]



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**Johan van Veen**

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