

Arcangelo Corelli

The music of Arcangelo Corelli (1653-1713) exerted an influence on the development of string music that far exceeded the implications of the modest number of prints in which they were circulated. Only six volumes of works, each containing twelve sonatas or concertos, were published, and the last after Corelli's death. Corelli's fame emanated from his playing in Rome, where the courts of cardinals offered much of the best, and best supported, music. Corelli's particular patrons and benefactors included Cardinal Benedetto Pamphili and his successor, Cardinal Pietro Ottoboni as well as the exiled queen Christina of Sweden. His popularity in the eighteenth century (much of it posthumous) was immense. Printed copies of his works from that time are widely spread throughout Europe, North America, and the East Asia.

Church and Chamber Sonatas Opp.1-4

The first four of Corelli's volumes contains "trio" sonatas—sonatas for two violins and basso continuo. In the case of the "church" sonatas (*sonate da chiesa*; Opp. 1 [1681] and 3 [1689]), the works were usually accompanied by organ, which would be reinforced by a cello or a lute or both. In contrast, "chamber" sonatas (*sonate da camera*, Opp. 2 [1685] and 4 [1692]) were accompanied by harpsichord, often reinforced by cello.

According to long-held views, the difference between church and chamber sonatas inhered in their structure and content. Church sonatas typically contained four movements in the sequence slow-fast-slow-fast (e.g., Adagio-Allegro-Adagio-Allegro). Imitative writing could occur between treble and bass instruments or between the two violins. Chamber sonatas contained a variable number of movements, each of which imitated the meter of a particular dance type. Common dance-movement types were the Allemande (a fast movement in duple meter with flowing sixteenth notes), Sarabande (a slow dance in triple meter), Corrente (a "running" or moderately fast dance in triple meter), and Gigue (a fast movement in compound meter, such as 12/8).

Arguments against taking these distinctions literally have become numerous. Although the typologies were inspired by such distinctions, they drifted from these idealized norms to suit particular situations, to accommodate contemporary tastes, and to give scope to the styles of individual composers. With respect to the usage of the terms, Corelli's Op. 2 seems to have been the first to gain a large enough following to secure the practical use of the term "*sonata da camera*."

Had he never composed his two later collections of music, Corelli's music would still have left an enormous imprint on European musical culture of his time and the ensuing decades. Up to the end of the seventeenth century, Op. 1 was reprinted 11 times; Op. 2, 12 times; Op. 3, 8 times; and Op. 4, 6 times, in all cases in Italy. Counted eighteenth-century and foreign reprints, the numbers rise to totals of 39, 41, 31, and 39, amounting to a total of 148 printed editions of the sonatas. No other composer of his generation achieved this kind of recognition.

Why did Corelli's trio sonatas have such a broad appeal? For listeners, the works achieved a happy balance between articulate detail and simplicity of melodic line; between imitative interactions between instruments and simple homophony; between clarity of line and subtlety of ornamentation; and between familiar rhythmic templates and momentary deviations from them.

Editions were bought, however, by those wishing to perform the works. Here Corelli benefitted from coincidences of time and place. Corelli's works were optimally available to the rapidly growing number of amateur players than enjoyed playing bowed string instruments. The works were rewarding without being impossibly difficult. Corelli's own skill as a performer was demonstrated before some of the most astute and musical able audiences of the time. His concerts for Arcadian gatherings organized for the court-in-exile of Queen Christina of Sweden on the slopes of the Janiculum fed legends that lived on long after the composer, and the Arcadian Academy, were dead. Finally, Corelli's trio sonatas anticipated the musical values that would later become core features of what we now call "classical music."

(Solo) Violin Sonatas Op. 5

Because of their exquisite balances of features, trio sonatas offered little opportunity for virtuosity, which was also rising to prominence as the seventeenth century ended. We can be sure that accolades of Corelli's playing were not generated by his contributions to restraint so much as they were by the reputation he gained as a star performer. It is in his famous violin sonatas of Op. 5 that these gifts find their clearest expression.

Op. 5 parses cleanly. The first six works are *sonate da chiesa* of five movements. Most of the movements are fast. Not uncommonly, the first movement is marked *Vivace*, the fifth a mere *Allegro*. The second six sonatas are "da camera", with *Allemandes*, *Sarabands*, *Gavottes*, and *Gigues* predominating after an opening *Preludio*. Nos. 7-9 are composed in four movements, Nos. 10 and 11 in five. The final work is a set of vigorous variations over the *Folia* bass. Through the opus multi-stop passages marked "arpeggio" occur. In contrast to all the trio sonatas, the violin sonatas of Op. 5 are aimed at players of distinction. They offer great scope for virtuosity and individual interpretation.

For this reason, at least fifteen manuscripts survive to document how greatly individual realizations varied and how elaborate performance practice became in the eighteenth century. Corelli dedicated the volume on January 1, 1700, and enthusiasts maintain that he wished consciously to address his works to the new century.

The Concerti grossi Op. 6

The concerto grosso was a logical outgrowth of the trio sonata. The evolution came about in stages. The differentiation of a concertino (group of soloists) from a ripieno had been found abundantly in the early years of the seventeenth century. The difference would be expressed in written notation by clustering like-timbred instruments (as in modern scores). This clarified the on-again, off-again nature of collaboration between the groups.

The concerto grosso was both more economical and more articulate. It was economical in extracting all the concertino parts from the ripieno parts. There was no musical independence between the groups. In performance, however, the ripieno sounded fuller not only when it involved more instruments but also when a part for viola(s) was added to the two violins and string bass (or cello). Alternation between soli and tutti became more purposely, ripieno refrains (“ritornelli”) became the norm, and the overall structure of the work was architecturally clear rather than, as in earlier decades, somewhat meandering.

The viola parts in Corelli’s Op. 6 are particularly of interest. They do not occur in any of his other public works, but they show him to be devoted to enabling the instrument to be a full musical participant. (Viola parts in other and later times could be entirely perfunctory and extremely rudimentary.)

Beyond the considerations of resulting sonority, Corelli provides some highly elaborated movements in both sections of Op. 6. The first eight works are modeled on the *sonata da chiesa*. They have numerous changes of tempo but few extensive slow movements. Adagio and Largo passages are inclined to be short and transitional. The last four works are modeled on the *sonata da camera*. Most employ allemandes, sarabandes, correntes, and giges. They do not employ the fussy tempo contrasts of the first eight works.

The long-time favorite of Op. 6 has been the Christmas Concerto (No. 8, “fatto per la notte di Natale”, made for Christmas night.) The 6/8 meter and the drone bass were widely associated with the simple music of shepherds, who carried a species of bagpipe (the *zampogna*) that played in parallel thirds over a drone.

Accompaniment styles in Corelli’s works

Very little about Corelli’s music is controversial, but discussions about how exactly it should be accompanied continue. Note the differences in designating bass and basso continuo in the printed collections in the following table (instrument names in parentheses indicate the lack of an independent part).

Opus/Title	Bass instrument	Basso continuo	Partbooks	Dedicatee
1: Sonate a tre	Violone or arcileuto	Basso per l’organo	V1, V2, Vne (Arcileuto), Organo	Christina Alexandra, Queen of Sweden
2: Sonate da camera a tre	(Violone o cimbalo)	Violone o cimbalo	V1, V2, Vne (Cembalo)	Innocenzio Pamfili, cardinal
3: Sonate a tre	Violone o arcileuto	Basso per l’organo	V1, V2, Violone o Arcileuto, Organo	Francesco II d’Este, duke of Modena
4: Suonate da camera	(Violoncello e cembalo)	Violoncello e cembalo		Academy of Pietro Ottoboni, cardinal
5: Sonate a violino	(Violone o cembalo)	Violone o cembalo	Score: V1 and B.C.	Sophie Charlotte, electress of Brandenburg
6: Concerti grossi	<i>Violoncello di concertino; basso di concerto grosso ad arbitrio (che si possono raddopiare)</i>	?		Johann Wilhelm, Prince Palatine, Duke of Bavaria

Although substantial liberty was accorded performers in matters of accompaniment, Corelli's published music shows a clear distinction between two continuo practices: (1) organo with *violone* (double bass or other bowed string instrument in bass range) or theorbo (archlute), or (2) the choice of violone or harpsichord. This divergence separates the "church" and "chamber" collections substantially.

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