

Francesco Geminiani: Opera Omnia Volume 5. 6 Sonatas Op. 5 (versions for cello and basso continuo H. 103-108; for violin and basso continuo H. 109-114). Christopher Hogwood, editor. Ut Orpheus Edizioni, 2010 (112 pp. clothbound).

“Although Geminiani (1687-1762) was held to be the equal of Corelli in his own day—and indeed thought by some to be superior to his contemporary Handel in instrumental composition—his considerable output of music and didactic writings has only been available in piecemeal fashion, much of it never reissued since his lifetime except in facsimile, and thus largely inaccessible to modern performers. This lack of material designed for practical performance has concealed the enormous originality he showed both in writing and re-writing his own music, and that of Corelli. *Francesco Geminiani Opera Omnia* rectifies this omission with the first uniform and accurate scholarly edition of all versions of his music and writings in a form that allows pertinent comparison and reevaluation.”

So opens the general preface to this first volume (of seventeen) in Ut Orpheus’ complete Geminiani Edition, and a more felicitous introduction it would be difficult to imagine. For a composer of such importance, particularly one whose limited output stands well within the logistical and economic constraints of the music publishing industry, his neglect has been astonishing. Until the period instrument movement got going in the past several decades, this was also true of Geminiani’s representation on recordings--a fact that resulted in a particularly amusing episode from my own personal wanderings through the sometimes strange world of classical music collecting and appreciation. I trust you will agree that it’s worth sharing here.

During my college days in the early 1980s, I was the proud owner of a goodly chunk of Philips’ “Living Baroque” series of LPs, and was enjoying getting to know all of those Italian “elli,” “ani,” “oni,” and “ini” composers. For reasons we don’t need to go into, I made the acquaintance of an extremely pretentious married couple affiliated with the university in some way, and they came over to my place for a visit one evening. They were interested in my record collection (pretty excessive even then), and when I asked them what they enjoyed and if they wanted to hear something, the husband took the opportunity to say that they were particularly fond of the Italian Baroque. I ran down the list of composer I knew I had on hand: Locatelli, Corelli, Tartini, Albinoni, maybe a couple of others—and refusing to be impressed, he said: “We’re particularly fond of Geminiani.”

I didn’t have any Geminiani. I didn’t even know if there *was* any Geminiani to have. “Of course,” he pressed obnoxiously, “every serious Baroque music enthusiast loves Geminiani. You must have some, don’t you?” I should have just said, “No” and left it at that. After all, he’d already made it clear in previous conversation that he didn’t know the difference between a harpsichord and a clavichord. Nevertheless, my pride was offended, and I was so eager to impress that I just wouldn’t give him the satisfaction. “Just a second,” I said, running into the next room, where the stereo and

the LPs happened to be located. I grabbed a Locatelli disc, put in on, cranked up the volume, and said, "Isn't Geminiani just wonderful?"

"Oh yes," he enthused. As the music played, he stopped periodically to pretend to hum along and extol the virtues of "Geminiani." I managed to keep a straight face the whole time, and I got the couple out of my apartment none the wiser. It wasn't until much later that I actually heard Geminiani's music. There really isn't very much of it: three collections of sonatas (counting the present volume as one), three collections of concertos plus a handful of others, concerto transcriptions based on the music of Geminiani's teacher Corelli, and finally a couple of keyboard albums and a few individual vocal and instrumental pieces. That's it. In academic circles, Geminiani is perhaps an even more important figure for his didactic works, including most famously *The Art of Playing on the Violin* (1751), but as with Corelli, the small size of Geminiani's output does not diminish an artist of strong personality and a very high level of craftsmanship.

Furthermore, the combination of Geminiani's detailed notation, his habit of revising and transcribing both his own and Corelli's work, and the information contained in his various treatises, makes him perhaps the most important figure of his era concerning issues of early to mid 18th century instrumental performance practice. Consider the present volume. The six sonatas of Op. 5 were composed in 1746 for cello and continuo, then immediately transcribed for violin. Their composition was part of the larger process, described by Christopher Hogwood in some detail in his excellent preface, by which the cello gradually supplanted the bass viol as the lower stringed instrument of choice. Original repertoire for the cello was still comparatively rare at this time, and so Geminiani's sonatas represent an important contribution to their genre, alongside that of Italian colleagues such as Vivaldi, Bononcini, and Marcello.

In arranging these sonatas for the violin, as Hogwood points out, Geminiani did not merely transcribe them literally; he recomposed them extensively, making comparison a particularly fascinating exercise for those interested in both Baroque performance practice as well as the inner workings of the creative mind. For that reason, having both versions printed together in a single volume, as here, proves a great advantage to scholars and performers equally. There is no particular reason, for instance, why a violinist need ignore the version for cello, and the opposite obviously is just as true. Study of both invites the player to find practical interpretive solutions that are at once imaginative as well as stylistically appropriate.

In order to see more clearly the kind of adjustments that Geminiani made in transcribing his sonatas from their cello originals to the violin (as well as the obvious superiority of the Ut Orpheus edition in terms of clarity and legibility), it is worth considering a few examples. Geminiani's autograph manuscripts for these works no longer exist; all of the sources for the present volume consist of early

printed editions. Here, then, is the entire opening movement (an introduction, really) to the Fourth Cello Sonata as it appeared in its French first edition:

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SONATA VI

Andante

Adagio

Allegro Moderato

(Facsimile of Op. 5, No. 4 [Andante]: Éditions Fuzeau Classique)

Forget about the Roman numeral “VI” in the above example. It’s a printing mistake, and should read “IV.” There’s another “Sonata VI” in its correct position after “Sonata V,” and so this truly is the opening of Sonata IV. Here is the same music as it appears in the new, far less crowded Ut Orpheus edition:

Andante

H. 106

Adagio

(Cello Sonata Op. 5, No. 4 [Andante] Ut Orpheus Edition, p. 27)

As you can see plainly, the new edition is notably easier to read, and the practical performance material that will be published in association with each volume of this series should encourage modern performers, whether Baroque specialists or not, to explore this repertoire in greater depth. It’s worth mentioning in this respect that 18th century editions of solo sonatas were printed in full score, and not issued as individual parts—the common practice today.

Here is the violin version of this brief movement:

Andante

H. 112

6 3 6 7 6 3

(Violin Sonata Op. 5, No. 4 [Andante] Ut Orpheus Edition, p. 71)

Even in this tiny movement containing a mere four bars, the changes are numerous. One in particular deserves special comment since it sheds some light on perhaps the single methodological weakness of Hogwood's work, one pretty much endemic to the school of early music performance to which he belongs. The wavy lines in the last bar are Geminiani's notational sign for left-hand pitch vibrato. Other editors have no issue acknowledging them as such. For example, Nicolas Fromageot in his prefaces to the facsimile reproductions of other Geminiani sonatas for Editions Fuzeau identifies this symbol as a "vibrato of variable speed," which is exactly how Geminiani describes it in *The Art of Playing on the Violin*, save that terminologically he calls it either a "close shake" or "tremolo."

Indeed, in the table of ornaments included in the present volume, Hogwood also unambiguously identifies this symbol as "vibrato." And yet, in discussing performance issues, he suggests that the wavy line means that the musician should play the passage as a series of improvised arpeggios, not even mentioning as a distinct possibility Geminiani's own clearly defined notational practice. This is unquestionably a serious omission, although it just so happens that Hogwood's recommendation (for reasons explained below) also is entirely consistent with Geminiani's instructions in *The Art of Playing on the Violin*. Nonetheless, it is not what the wavy line symbol most probably means in this context. So what is going on?

Hogwood's handling of this issue represents a confluence of two analytical flaws. First, it represents a classic case of the modern "authentic" performer colliding with the scholar, and unsurprisingly the player wins. The refusal to consider seriously

the idea that the 18th century's use of vibrato was not all that audibly different from today's is a wholly modern conceit, one inherent in the early music movement's insistence that whatever approach sounds the most different from traditional norms must necessarily be the most correct. Second, many modern scholars seem curiously unwilling to accept the fact that performers can do more than one thing at the same time—for instance, that they can play arpeggios *and* use vibrato—even though in real life they do it all the time, composers expect it, and their notation often quite plainly reflects this fact.

Hogwood is too honest a scholar to permit his bias to interfere with his work on the actual musical text. Only his interpretation of its possible meanings lacks completeness, but the result is curious all the same, as well as unnecessarily confusing. Geminiani does not offer any special notational symbol to indicate that a passage should be played “arpeggio,” nor does he need to. In *The Art of Playing on the Violin*, he includes an extensive example (No. XXI) in which “are shewn the different Way[s] of playing Arpeggios on Chords composed of 3 or 4 Sounds. Here are composed 18 Variations on the Chords contained in No. 1 [see below], by which the Learner will see in what the Art of executing the Arpeggio consists.”



(Geminiani: *The Art of Playing on the Violin* [Performer's Facsimiles] p. 28)

First, it should be clear that Geminiani requires no additional sign to indicate the possibility of arpeggiating the above passage. For him, as for any player in his day, the correct procedure is inherent in the notation. In the just-cited example from Op. 5, the presence of triple and quadruple stops in long notes at an adagio tempo tells the player all he needs to know about correct execution. The wavy line, then, simply indicates that even if Geminiani wants arpeggios, the player also should continue to use vibrato, and this in turn suggests the kind of arpeggio pattern best employed. I say “continue to use vibrato” because Geminiani has already said of the “close shake” that “it should be made use of as often as possible,” if only because it improves the tone quality even of short notes.

In the arpeggio example above, you will note that the rhythmic pattern of the very first variation (marked “2a”) provides an opportunity for the player to add vibrato to the long (dotted) note in each four-note grouping. Geminiani offers several such patterns. Thus we find in the twelfth variation:



(Geminiani: *The Art of Playing on the Violin* [Performer's Facsimiles] p. 29)

Because Geminiani by his own prescription expected string players to use vibrato pretty regularly, it follows that he would only need to notate it in exceptional circumstances: passages requiring an unusual degree of virtuosity, or in places where musicians might tend not to use it because they are too busy doing something else, like executing rapid arpeggios. This explains his use of the wavy line in the above example rather more logically than does Hogwood's theory. It will be very interesting to see how he deals with Geminiani's didactic works; if he accepts that they really mean what the say, or tries to interpret their words to suit the wholly modern and (ironically) not always stylistically congruent needs of the Early Music movement.

Incidentally, the sometimes audibly unfortunate consequences of the current school's approach to period performance practice can be heard on Hogwood's recording of the Op. 5 Cello Sonatas for L'oiseau-lyre. There, his robust and characterful treatment of the keyboard continuo roundly overshadows the hoarse, raspy, and otherwise timbrally challenged cello playing of Anthony Pleeth. If you're interested in hearing this music on period instruments, consider cellist Jaap ter Linden with harpsichordist Lars Ulrik Mortensen on Brilliant Classics, a more economical yet far more satisfying option. At the end of the day, and whatever one's personal choice on the vibrato question, there's no substitute for a cellist with an ingratiating basic tone, and there's simply no excuse for the lamentable modern tendency to equate ugliness with authenticity.

Geminiani dedicated his Op. 5 sonatas to Giacomo Francesco Milano Franco d'Aragona, Prince of Ardore, ambassador to France from the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies. The works were immediately published both in France and in Holland, and sometime later in England. As Hogwood notes: "Geminiani was unusually conscious of the legal rights available to composers for the protection of their works in a society where international copyright did not exist and where publishing piracy was rife; he appears to have been the first composer to initiate legal proceedings to protect his works (Op. 2 about 1731) and by 1746 was the most legally-protected composer of the century."

Because the autograph manuscripts of Op. 5 no longer exist, modern scholars must rely on contemporary printed sources. Geminiani's personal involvement with the publication of his music has ensured that these are both clean as well as relatively consistent with each other. Nevertheless, errors always creep in (as most trivially in the mistaken identification above of Sonata IV as Sonata VI), and Hogwood has corrected these and listed them--along with other inconsistencies--appropriately in the critical commentary that follows the musical text. He notes that one of the motivating factors for the Dutch reprint may have been the need to replace the French trill sign (+) with the more familiar (*tr*), which was in more general use. Hogwood's own edition naturally adopts the latter, which also conforms to modern custom.

Otherwise, Hogwood reproduces Geminiani's (or his publisher's) original notation, and particularly his ornamentation, with admirable fidelity. It's interesting to observe that the violin versions tend to be more elaborate in this last respect, and cellists certainly should study them carefully. Consider for example the Adagio third movement of Sonata II, which is strikingly bare in the original, but far more fully fleshed-out in the violin transcription. There, Geminiani adds a variety of embellishments to what starts out as a simple melody comprised largely of half-notes in 3/2 time--including portato bowing, turns of various kinds, mordents (called "beat" by Geminiani and indicated by two slashes [/ /] above the note), and his own, wedge-shaped crescendo sign. The table of ornaments preceding the musical text spells out all of the necessary embellishments precisely.

Not the least of the present volume's attractions is the reproduction (and helpful translation) of the various copyright "privileges" Geminiani received from the governments of France, Holland, and England. Anyone familiar with modern contract law in the English-speaking world surely will recognize the words contained in the recital clause of his English privilege: "To all to whom these Presents shall come Greeting:" this same formula is still in use. It is ironic that a composer who took such pains over the publication, dissemination, and protection of his music should have had to wait until now for a complete, modern critical edition. Appearing in good time for the 250th anniversary of Geminiani's death in 2012, this Ut Orpheus project represents a major effort toward correcting a longstanding injustice.

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August 2010