

Editorial Notes

Introduction

The reputation of Benedetto **Marcello** (1686–1739) needs no introduction: Venetian composer with exquisite taste and excellent style, dedicatee of the *Conservatory of Venice*, Italy, curse and delight of every Italian cellist who has followed the path of the old system, an eclectic personality. Of noble, albeit decadent extraction, in his life he covered the role of composer, poet, writer, lawyer, magistrate, teacher, even for a time serving in the powerful position of the Vatican’s chamberlain. Although he is best known now for his six secular Sonata collections for cello and for flute, a large part of his production was sacred music, as noted in the catalogue of his works compiled by Eleanor **Selfridge-Field**.¹

This edition looks at the only other major work Marcello dedicated to the cello, a work far less known than the previous one: the *Six Sonatas a Tre for Two Cellos (or Two Viola da Gamba) and Basso Continuo (or Violoncello)*. The oldest surviving source was printed by *G. F. Witvogel* in Amsterdam around 1736, according to its impression number (33). The editor states, “Opera Seconda” (literally: Opus 2) on the front page, but this is unlikely to be of any reference in the composer’s production. Marcello, in fact, never labelled his creations with opus numbers, so we rely on autographs and first editions’ dates to place them in temporal order. Another option would be to consider this part of the editor’s line for cello music by this author, since also the *Six Sonatas for Cello and Basso Continuo* were published by Witvogel, and labelled “Opera Prima” (Opus 1).

Still in the XIX century, when Alfredo **Piatti** (1822–1901) arranged the Continuo line of the Six Sonatas for piano, he assumed them to be Op. 1. In Marcello’s production, Op. 2 is currently assigned to the *XII Suonate a Flauto Solo Con il suo Basso Continuo per Violoncello o Cembalo*, marked “Opera Seconda” as well, by publisher *Estienne Roger Marchand*, again in Amsterdam.

This is likely a mystery we will never solve, but it is one that, luckily, has little effect on the unquestionable quality of these pieces.

The Six Sonatas for Two Cellos and Basso

The cover of the Witvogel source is clear regarding the nature of the piece:

VI Sonata / A TRE / Due Violoncello / o / Due Viole di Gamba / e / Violoncello o Basso Continuo / del Signor / BENEDETTO MARCELLO / Nobile Veneto / Opera Seconda

This is a “Sonata a 3”, that is, an instrumental piece for three players, a genre that was very popular in all the Baroque period. It is interesting to notice the recommendation to use the Viola da Gamba as an alternative to the Cello, something that the other sonatas do not propose. The third part will be played either by a cello, or by another melodic instrument of bass register (e.g., a bassoon), and optionally enriched by a harmonic instrument, such as the lute, the harpsichord, or the organ.

The source contains only three parts, though, and no score, as the habit of creating and publishing full reference scores didn’t become something usual until the end of the XIX century. Of course, composers’ autographs were usually in full score format, but the published version realised by the copyists consisted only of parts.

The two main parts in the source are cello parts, that is, they use Bass and Tenor clefs throughout: for Gamba players, this could prove uncomfortable, since they would be more used to Bass and Alto clefs. A professional player will have no issue whatsoever, and therefore we can assume that the reason the Gamba is mentioned in the title may be a purely commercial one. In the XVIII century when these pieces were created, the cello was already gaining prominence over the Gamba, which was slowly phasing out. The third part is written on a single cello stave, and bears continuo markings above the notes, correctly assuming that any continuo player would have been able to realise a fitting harmony at sight.

Form

These Sonatas follow the “Sonata da Chiesa” format, which, unlike the “Sonata da Camera” one, consists of four movements, ordered as two slow-fast couplets. Most movements are in simple binary form, which

¹ Eleanor Selfridge-Field, *The music of Benedetto and Alessandro Marcello: a thematic catalog with commentary on the composers, repertoire, and sources*, Oxford University Press, 1999.

consists of two parts, both repeated twice (AA-BB). In this collection, the first slow movement is, generally, quite broad, while the second is very short, and often in a single, non-repeated, part. Of the fast movements, the second of the first sonata is the only one with a peculiar form, comprising three repeated parts (thus an AA-BB-CC form).

Sonatas I-IV start with a *Largo*, while Sonatas V-VI start with an *Adagio*. The second movement is a *Presto* for Sonatas I-II, and an *Allegro* for the others. The third movement is a *Largo* in all but the second Sonata, while the last movement has a *Presto* for Sonatas I-III & V, and an *Allegro* for Sonatas IV & VI.

Key signatures

The keys chosen by Marcello for these Sonatas are:

- ☉ **No. 1 & 6:** G major. Both have the 3rd movement in E minor.
- ☉ **No. 2:** C minor, with the 3rd movement starting in E-flat major and ending on a suspended cadence on the Dominant of C minor.
- ☉ **No. 3 & 5:** B-flat major. N° 5 has the 3rd movement in G minor.
- ☉ **No. 4:** A major, with the 3rd movement in F-sharp minor.

The only Sonata of the collection in a minor key could not disappoint and is indeed the most complex one. Its key signature only bears two flats, instead of the three that would mark the C minor key in modern notation. This was common in the Baroque era, when the Dorian mode was more often used compared to the Aeolian (that we call “Natural Minor” today). The lack of the 3rd flat (on the note A), caused several issues during the copying phase, since so many accidentals were either plainly forgotten or omitted because deemed obvious. Everywhere this happened, we added them back in square brackets.

Time Signatures

Out of the 24 movements of these Sonatas, half of them (12) are in *simple ternary* metre, either in $\frac{3}{4}$ or $\frac{3}{8}$ time. One quarter (6) of them uses *simple quaternary* or *Common time* (c). One sixth (4) of them employs *simple binary*, with three using $\frac{2}{4}$ and one c time, while only two use a compound meter, both choosing $\frac{12}{8}$.

All first movements but the 5th Sonata’s one are in $\frac{3}{4}$

time, the only other being in *Common time*. The second movements are more varied, in the end showcasing two examples each for *binary*, *ternary*, and *quaternary* meters. The third movements, slow again, are instead more evenly distributed, with three examples each between *simple ternary* and *Common time*. The closing movements contain the only examples of compound time ($\frac{12}{8}$), in the 3rd and 5th Sonatas. The other form a double couple in $\frac{2}{4}$ and $\frac{3}{8}$.

The Six Sonatas in details

Each of these sonatas uses different harmonic and melodic approaches, resulting in a mesmerising collection of pieces, excellent for both the classroom and the concert hall. Let’s look at each one of them in greater detail.

Sonata I in G major. The initial *Largo* is in the form of a dialogue, with the non-thematic part supporting the melody in a tactful way. The following *Presto*, instead, is all about strict counterpoint, one voice following the other in imitation. The only moments when the two lines proceed together are when a cadenza section is approaching. The 3rd movement—*Largo*—, in E minor, is very short and simple, with small imitative structures bringing straight to the suspended cadence. The final *Presto*, instead, is an irregular movement in three repeated parts. Its choral nature is interrupted only by brief explosions of fast notes in one of the solo lines. Everything is supported, almost aristocratically, by the regular and relentless line of the continuo.

Sonata II in C minor. The first movement—*Largo*—focusses on the dotted eight plus sixteenth rhythm and is rich in ornaments (trills), beside being very long if one includes the prescribed repeats. The *Presto* that follows is basically a fugue at the unison disguised as a simple binary dance. It is also the only movement in *Cut Common time*. The Sonata continues with a short *Grave* where we find again the dotted rhythm element from the 1st movement, this time in dotted 16th plus 32nd notes. The concluding *Presto* is the only movement in the collection with no continuo accompaniment. This is due to the very strict counterpoint dominating the two lines, almost interlocked like two fishes dancing within the currents.

Sonata III in B-flat major. As in the 1st Sonata, the opening *Largo* allows each voice to express freely before adding the other to the mix. Octave leaps and long

melodic lines alternate throughout the movement, in a rich texture that helps the middle-register of the cello truly shine. The *Allegro* is based on an acciaccatura-like rhythm that gets bounced between the two instruments like a table-tennis ball, before one of the two takes the lead for the closing of the phrase. The *Largo* employs a very similar rhythm to the 3rd movement of the previous sonata, but is more contrapuntal in nature, all-the-while remaining fairly short. The closing *Presto*, in $\frac{12}{8}$, is a brilliant gigue-like dance, reminiscent of instrumental suites.

Sonata IV in A major. This Sonata opens with a *Largo* alternating long solo lines, before attempting some dialogue with stuttering syncopes. The second part mixes the two musical ingredients together, showing off an impressive compositional technique. These syncopes are the building blocks of the upcoming *Allegro*, this time opening as a choral duet. Short dialogue moments serve only to prepare the next “Tutti” episode. The short *Largo* that follows, only 5 bars in length, is in F-sharp minor, and alternates dotted rhythms with quick runs of fast notes, ending once more in a suspended cadence. From the way the final *Allegro* starts, we almost have the impression of listening again to the second movement of the previous Sonata, as the rhythmical incipit is the same, but we are quickly taken away by the biting rhythm of the second voice.

Sonata V in B-flat major. The initial *Adagio* is all based on dotted rhythms and has a choral character in its entirety. An *Allegro* follows, based on the interval of the octave, whose repetition then becomes an appoggiatura that drives the discourse forward. The accompaniment of these octaves is definitely the most interesting part of this movement. The *Largo* elaborates on the appoggiatura idea, inserting also some dotted rhythms, an evolution of the initial *Adagio*. The 4th movement, *Presto*, is short and, once more, in a $\frac{12}{8}$ gigue-like form. The beginning is fascinating because it repeats the same notes in the two voices like an echo, possibly to create a sort of halo in the sound.

Sonata VI in G major. The last Sonata of the collection starts in a much more pompous and almost predictable way, sounding like something one has already heard somewhere else. There’s almost a pinch of Vivaldi in the opening *Adagio*. In the *Allegro*, the first voice gets two bars to have fun, before the second comes in to join the playground, the focus of this movement being

to build up tension until the cadence at the end of each period. The *Largo* that follows is a solemn “marcia funebre” where it is crucial to achieve a timbre similar to that of a church organ. The *Allegro* that concludes this collection opens with a long melody repeated by the two voices alone. A short virtuoso dialogue closes the first part, and the second part opens with the two initial lines cut in half to give a sense of urgency. A series of trills announces the final period, with a hemiola to give the sense of a sudden rallentando before the end cadence.

About this edition

This edition is based on the *Witvogel* source and comes in a score and parts bundle. Initially, only the cello version of the two main parts will be available. If this draws enough interest, a gamba version will be created and offered alongside the cello one. The continuo part is unrealised as in the source, and will most likely remain so, given the amount of options a continuo player may have (harpsichord, organ, lute, ...). Historic performance players will comfortably read the figured bass digits and choose their preferred realisation. A piano part may be added in the future if deemed pedagogically useful.

The figured bass digits have been realised in a font that was specifically designed to support its complex and peculiar needs. My deepest thanks go to Bernie **Cossentino** for his outstanding work on this font, and for his clearly endless patience in listening to my critiques and requests, and—most of all—for brilliantly delivering on every one of them.

This edition, while based on the oldest surviving source, cannot be classified as an *Urtext* because—hopefully—all mistakes found in the source have been corrected. This, instead, qualifies as a *Critical Performance Edition*. Several suggestions about clearly missing notational elements have also been added, albeit in square brackets to help distinguish them from the original text. The Second Sonata, in C minor, was a particularly problematic one because of the impressive amount of wrong notes found in there. Where trills and other ornaments required an accidental according to modern practices, these have been added without further notice. Clef changes have also been improved in numerous places. It will quickly become obvious to the players why these edits have been applied, and why the musical value of this edition is much greater in this status.

One more thing

This edition bears catalogue number ASE 0023, and work on it started almost two years ago. With my focus all taken away by the *Dotzauer Project* and the *Piatti Opera Omnia* initiatives, it was clear that I would have never been able to complete this project alone, since, right now, we are well past ASE 0040.

Here is where my partner—Vanja **Bajazit**—comes into play. She has been helping me with small notational tasks since early 2022, but this project was ideal to hone her skills to perfection. That is to say that all the music you are now holding in your hands and that you will be playing from has been fully engraved by her. Granted, I have proofread everything, marked up the PDFs, told her what to do and taught her how to achieve that, but I have not touched a single item of the engraving files. What she accomplished in this last year is simply unbelievable, and I am deeply grateful for all she has done. She has been an incredibly gifted, and patient, apprentice, and I can't wait to see what we will be able to achieve as a team.

The Editor

Michele Galvagno

Saluzzo, April 30th, 2023