

NAXOS

Giovanni PAISIELLO

Piano Concertos Nos. 2 and 4

Francesco Nicolosi, Piano
Collegium Philarmonic Chamber Orchestra
Gennaro Cappabianca



Giovanni PAISIELLO (1741-1816)

Piano Concertos

Much of Giovanni Paisiello's music earns him the right to be known as a great composer, although this fails fully to capture his achievements, a fact which has not perhaps been acknowledged with sufficient conviction by musical scholarship. He stands head and shoulders above the other Italian composers of his generation. A pupil of the Neapolitan School, he had a supreme, even heaven-sent gift for melody, although from a certain point onwards the influence of Vienna is clearly visible: the compositional procedures, for example the highly individual development or development/variation techniques, of his later operatic works in particular, are closely related to those of the Viennese School, and, more specifically, those of Joseph Haydn. Haydn, of course, was second only to Mozart in late-eighteenth-century Italian opera composition. At this point, and in the light of Paisiello's exquisite settings of texts such as Metastasio's *Passione*, it seems apposite to ask whether the remainder of his music should not in fact earn him the title of genius.

Paisiello's skill in the composition of opera was remarkable even in his earliest works, and notably not only when it came to farce and sentimental works such as *Nina*, but also in his tragedies, especially as he grew older. Indeed as the years passed his work became more daring and innovative in all respects, be it form, harmony, drama or orchestration. One of his greatest operas is *Proserpine*, commissioned by Napoleon, then First Consul of France, for whose coronation "Sacre" Paisiello would also later provide the music. Some have said that "'o Tarantino", as he became known, after his home town of Taranto, barely mastered Italian and that for him setting French to music was an enterprise that could only end in failure. Nevertheless not only is *Proserpine* a powerful and highly sophisticated work, it also had something to teach native French composers in its adaptation of the forms peculiar to *tragédie lyrique* and in its French prosody, as confirmed by Jean

François Le Sueur, who taught Berlioz.

The eight concertos Paisiello wrote at various points throughout his life for keyboard and small orchestra clearly show that he must have been an excellent pianist and harpsichordist. They were conceived according to his very personal take on sonata form, and it would not be inappropriate to say that both the style and idiom are more advanced here than is the form itself, in terms of the kinship with Haydn which I believe to be one of the keys to understanding Paisiello's work. Unlike Mozart, Paisiello did not write concertos with the intention of performing them himself, but on commission for noble and, one hopes, generous clients. They were tailor-made compositions, but not, I repeat, for Paisiello himself. These were not works that he would have felt compelled to compose for their own sake alone, and any judgements made on historical-aesthetic grounds must bear this in mind.

It would be foolish to ask today whether these pieces should be played on the harpsichord, the hybrid fortepiano, or the modern pianoforte. The first two options must be rejected on the basis of Hans Ferdinand Redlich's condemnatory term *musealer Klangmaterialismus*, in other words, the attempt to replicate the sound of an obsolete instrument. Performed by a skilled harpsichordist the concertos sound elegantly old-fashioned to our ears; played by a less skilled musician they come across as unbearably dry and dogmatic. In the hands of a pianist who understands their musical essence and has the technique to turn it into sound, they become the ideal historically aware response. Entrusted to a bad pianist they become redolent of the 1930s, again sounding dreadful to a modern audience. On a fortepiano they simply sound as though someone has put the newsprint pages on the strings of an upright piano, not to mention the problems of intonation.

In order to understand the motivation behind this

recording, in which we have the pleasure of discovering a stylistically elegant and expert orchestra and conductor, we have to turn to Francesco Nicolosi, who has acquired a reputation as one of our greatest living pianists. His expertise extends across the repertoire, including the most virtuosic pieces ever written for the instrument, and listening to him playing the operatic paraphrases of Sigismond Thalberg, an adopted son of Naples like both Paisiello and Nicolosi, is enough to remind us that no one today can match his luminosity of sound, his ability to draw out the song-like *legato* qualities of a keyboard instrument.

The two concertos recorded here could not be more different in terms of style and ethos. In the first, which is in a somewhat stiff and starchy Classical style, Nicolosi adopts the poised arm technique, imbuing the piano with the penetrating crystalline sonority which might be said to be the essence of the harpsichord.

The *Concerto in G minor* is an extraordinary piece, comparable to Haydn's *Sturm und Drang* works, principally those dating from the early 1770s. Paisiello consciously brings to it, therefore, a formal development belonging to a very different and composite architecture. Melodrama plays its part in this masterpiece, since, transformed, it adds to the pathos developed by the soloist using every technique at his disposal with an orchestra which sometimes accompanies and at other times works in diametric opposition to the pianist. As the song-like element prevails here Nicolosi adopts a more sophisticated and complex technique, creating sustained *legato* by means of "arm weight", a technique codified in the mid-nineteenth century by Thalberg in his treatise *L'Art du*

chant appliqué au piano expressing his philosophy of the sublime *sprezzatura* (rehearsed spontaneity) of performance practice.

Everything changes in the second movement: eighteenth-century pathos disappears and the solemnity of a steplike and ornamented E flat major can only be compared to the young Beethoven. The secret of Paisiello's heavenly inspiration and skill in developing it must be a mystery to all but Gennaro, the patron saint of Naples.

Paisiello, prophet of Beethoven — who would believe it? And the sound produced by Francesco Nicolosi in this central movement is no less miraculous than the music itself, barely distinguishable from the best contralto voice, enabling the notes to be transformed from the page to reality. It is also worth noting that this recording from the Caserta Palace court theatre, where Paisiello's music was often performed during his lifetime, is absolutely without artificial embellishment, having been made without use of domes or other effects. The writer must at this point assume full responsibility for his words. The great Arturo Benedetti Michelangeli performed eighteenth-century works, Scarlatti, Galuppi, the concertos of Mozart, which, with the exception of the Mozart, were considered by most to be harpsichord music. His inspiration came principally from the same source as Nicolosi's, but perhaps lacked some of the latter's lucidity and coherence. Nicolosi is now perfecting the process begun by Michelangeli.

Paolo Isotta

Translation: Susannah Howe

Francesco Nicolosi

Francesco Nicolosi is one of the most distinguished pianists of the Italian tradition. He studied under Vincenzo Vitale and in 1980 took third prize at the Santander International Piano Competition. The same year he came second, the first prize not being awarded, at the Concours International d'Exécution Musical in Geneva, embarking on a career as one of the world's foremost pianists of his generation. He has appeared in recitals and as a soloist with distinguished orchestras in some of the most famous concert halls throughout Europe, toured in the United States, Russia, Japan and China, and is a regular guest at major international festivals. He has made a number of critically acclaimed recordings for Naxos and Marco Polo, among other labels, notably including virtuoso works by Thalberg. His recordings of Thalberg and Liszt's Bellini paraphrases received the 1994 Bellini Prize (Golden Award), and his interest in Thalberg has led to his appointment as chairman of the Sigismund Thalberg International Study Centre. In 1998 he established the Franz Liszt Piano Duo with the pianist Vittorio Bresciani with the aim of promoting Liszt's symphonic works in two piano versions. Among other honours, in 2002 he was invited to Copenhagen by the Queen of Denmark and the Prince Consort to perform in the Royal Chapel of the Castle of Fredensborg.

Collegium Philarmonicum Chamber Orchestra

The Collegium Philarmonicum Chamber Orchestra is made up from musicians of the Naples Teatro San Carlo orchestra and was founded in 1995, principally for the promotion of music of the twentieth century. The orchestra has collaborated in a number of performances promoted by the Teatro San Carlo, taken part in the Leuciana Festival and appeared with the actors Mariano Rigillo and Franco Nero and the pianists Francesco Nicolosi, Oliver Kern and Todor Petrov. The Collegium Philarmonicum has come to specialise in Neapolitan music of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century written for an ensemble of this kind.

Gennaro Cappabianca

The conductor and violinist Gennaro Cappabianca graduated under the guidance of Carlo Giuntoli, continuing his violin studies further with Farulli, Prencipe, Zanetovich and Faia. From 1985 to 1988 he played first violin in the Fiesole Youth Orchestra, performing with other well-known orchestras, before taking up a permanent position with the Teatro San Carlo in Naples. He made his debut as a conductor in 1995 with the Solisti di San Carlo, going on to collaborate with distinguished soloists in the concert hall and recording studio. He made his debut as a conductor of opera with the Laboratorio Lirico di Orvieto in *Cavalleria rusticana*, continuing with further engagements in various theatres throughout Italy. His wide repertoire as a conductor extends to the contemporary.

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Giovanni
PAISIELLO
(1741-1816)

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| 1 | Sinfonia d'Opera: Allegro vivace | 4:59 |
| | Piano Concerto No. 2 in F major | 19:04 |
| 2 | Allegro | 6:31 |
| 3 | Largo | 6:50 |
| 4 | Allegretto | 5:43 |
| | Overture in D major from the opera <i>Proserpine</i> | 5:51 |
| 5 | Allegro spiritoso | 2:58 |
| 6 | Andante | 1:45 |
| 7 | Allegro | 1:09 |
| | Piano Concerto No. 4 in G minor | 24:41 |
| 8 | Allegro | 10:08 |
| 9 | Largo | 6:49 |
| 10 | (Rondò): Allegretto | 7:44 |

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