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GIOVANNI STEFANO CARBONELLI (c1699/1700–1773), ED. MICHAEL TALBOT
TWELVE SONATE DA CAMERA, VOLUME 1: SONATAS 1–6

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Michael Talbot begins his Introduction to the first volume of Carbonelli's *Twelve Sonate da camera* with a brief overview of Charles Burney's and John Hawkins's accounts of the composer's life, their inaccuracies and the prominent role they played in shaping the composer's biography. That biography he then immediately begins to correct and rewrite (v). With no entry dedicated to the composer in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, outlining the biography of Giovanni Stefano Carbonelli (1699/1700–1773) is an important task, for his importance as one of London's leading violinists, if not for the good story of a Roman musician who became 'one of the purveyors of wine to the king' (Sir John Hawkins, *A General History of the Science and Practice of Music* (London: T. Payne, 1776), volume 5, 360–1). Telling fact from fiction in Carbonelli's biography is a serious challenge, if we consider that early eighteenth-century London was a place where tying one's name to Corelli's was the right thing to do whether one really was his student or had just met him once by chance. Talbot gives a rich biographical sketch – rich enough, indeed, to have made me wonder what his 'full-length article' in preparation (to which he refers in a footnote) will look like.

For many years early music enthusiasts were reluctant to reveal some of the Baroque's minor figures out of the fear of perpetuating and even contributing to the public view that Viennese classicism and romanticism reflect compositional superiority. But hiding these minor figures and constantly waving the genius of Rameau or Zelenka convinced no one that the repertoire analysed in harmony courses must be reconsidered and broadened. However, it seems that the recent interest in virtuoso music of the eighteenth century (as one may gather from browsing the publisher's website, <www.editionhh.co.uk>) reflects a more mature phase of historically informed performance and scholarship: one does not need to prove any more that each and every composer under discussion was a prophetic master of counterpoint or form as long as the music in question is either fun to play or teaches us something, anything, about its era and culture. Carbonelli's Sonatas, originally published in 1729, meet both criteria. But whereas the aspect of fun is difficult to review (at least under the present word-count restrictions), one may easily learn from them about London and about violin playing.

With all due suspicion towards Hawkins the historian, let us begin with an interesting story from his first paragraph on the composer: 'Carbonelli . . . soon became so celebrated for his excellent hand' that he was given a cameo role playing himself on the stage as a renowned virtuoso in Steele's comedy *The Conscious Lovers* (Hawkins, *A General History*, volume 5, 360). Such sentences are difficult to translate into usable historical evidence. However, they strengthen the point that Carbonelli's legacy consists primarily of his violin playing, even if his sonatas contain 'rich (but not necessarily chromatic) harmony and rigorous counterpoint' (vii). When all we have at our disposal for the purposes of study are Carbonelli's Sonatas, how can we examine his 'excellent hand'?

Reading through the score of this edition, I occasionally found movements of contrapuntal interest (though for me Carbonelli's compositional strength is his motivic economy – evident, for example, in the opening movement of Sonata 1). But the more interesting experience was that of reading the separate violin part, in which I think I found traces of Carbonelli's 'excellent hand'. As an ex-violin and viola player, I could not avoid feeling (almost physically) the inconvenience of quite a few demanding passages along the way. At a certain point, I opened the score of Corelli's Op. 5 and tried to compare his and Carbonelli's 'violin styles'.

A good place to start was the 'double-stopped' fugues, in relation to which Talbot makes a similar comparison and concludes that Carbonelli's fugues are influenced by Corelli's but show greater consistency in '[pursuing] the fugal ideal right to the end of the movement (whereas Corelli himself and most of his



Italian successors tend to relax it in the movement's later stages)' (vii). The fugues of the first sonatas in both composers' sets (both in D major) include comparable three-part arpeggio progressions which have several chord layouts in common, as well as an ascent to a higher register and a climactic use of four-part arpeggiation (Talbot deals with the technicalities of arpeggiation on page viii). Even the lengths and locations of the passages (in the contexts of the respective fugal movements) are almost identical: eight bars (bars 31–38) of sixty-one in Corelli; seven bars (bars 36–42) of sixty-two in Carbonelli.

But the greater difference between the violin parts of the two composers' fugues is in their idiosyncratic two-part styles. Here Talbot defines the problem accurately: 'In the polyphonic writing for the violin, notes of different duration often sound together. By means of slurs, Carbonelli often seeks to synchronize the bow changes in the two or more parts, but where he does not, the violinist must choose between playing the longer note shorter than its ostensible duration . . . and adding a slur in the other part' (vii–viii). But in fact, in many cases Carbonelli makes the decision of shortening a note for the violinist, as he asks for two notes which cannot be played on two adjacent strings. In other words, he asks for combinations that are impossible to play (examples taken from the D major fugue: $e^1 - a^2$ (bar 6); $a - d^2$ (bar 10); $b - e^2$ (bar 11)) or progressions that require changes of hand position that are not instinctive for the violinist and require pre-planning ($a^1 - b^1$ slurred to $a^1 - e^1$ (bar 10)). Carbonelli represents an idealistic two-part thinking which is much more demanding than his predecessor's. The ongoing judgment required of the performer – whether a passage is unplayable or calls for a sophisticated manipulation of the hand – makes Carbonelli's 'excellent hand' come to life and transforms it from a useless piece of trivia to a historical object worthy of study and contemplation.

The technical demands of Sonata 3 start with its key, E major. Corelli's sonata in the same key (Op. 5 No. 11) does not ask for any double stops, but Carbonelli's employs the whole range of chordal techniques, be they convenient or inconvenient: already the opening chord of the piece, in close position ($e^1 - g^{\sharp 1} - b^1 - e^2$), requires either an unnatural stretch of the left hand, splitting the chord into two successive positions of the hand, or an improvised melodic arpeggiation of the chord. Carbonelli goes on to demand the same two-part ideal in a manner sufficiently uncompromising to make one consider the use of *scordatura* (perhaps $b - e^1 - a^1 - e^2$, an option refuted, ironically, by the final chord of the last movement).

In the study of performance practice there is still a disturbing disproportion between the large amounts of knowledge harvested from early treatises and the modest scope of research into the music. But that kind of research, though it may yield many fascinating monographs, should not be centred on the library, should perhaps not even be led by musicologists, but rather by performers. This certainly justifies Talbot's policy of making this forgotten material accessible to a wide audience of violinists, and also justifies decisions like adding a continuo realization.

I would change almost nothing in this excellent edition, save perhaps the font size of the movement numbers, which should be smaller than that of the sonata numbers. The remarks on each sonata are the most helpful parts of the Introduction. Talbot draws performers' attention to small details that can inspire, hinting at possible interpretation (the opera-like mannerisms of the first movement of Sonata 1), highlighting interesting parallels with Corelli (the organ point in the fugue of Sonata 3) and analysing the overall structure of the piece in order to explain its climactic function in relation to the set (Sonata 6 and its Aria and variations).

Carbonelli's sonatas certainly merit their republication; they will be found useful both by curious performers and by researchers into violin technique. As Talbot's Preface makes clear, much of their historical interest derives from their obvious points of contact with Corelli's Op. 5, the benchmark against which all solo sonatas were measured in early eighteenth-century London. For those of us whose main interest lies in counterpoint and structure, a less obvious comparison – with Handel's Op. 1, published about a year after Carbonelli's set – reminds us that Corelli's works boasted more than simply virtuosic brilliance: his true successors in terms of compositional wit were not necessarily those (Carbonelli included) whose Corellian mannerisms jump off the page.