



## Corelli, Arcangelo (1653-1713)

by Kieron Devlin

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A portrait of Arcangelo Corelli by Jan Frans Douven.

Arcangelo Corelli, born in 1653 in Fusignano, an Italian village between Ravenna and Bologna, was one of the seventeenth century's most widely admired composers and performers. His music has lasting appeal largely due to its refined sense of poise, the balance of all the forces within each composition, and its modern tonality. Some works are regarded as models of perfection, and Corelli himself has been called "a modern Orpheus."

Corelli's music is rigidly formal and simple in design, but nevertheless original. It achieves magnificent effects with a surprising economy of means. Corelli used intriguing sequential progressions and descending bass figurations that are typical of operatic laments. He helped achieve a new independent status for chamber works such as the Trio Sonatas that were formerly regarded as merely decorative.

After Corelli, the distinction between *musica da chiesa* (church music) and *musica da camera* (chamber or dance music) was increasingly blurred. His trio sonatas and *concerti grossi* (1714) were widely imitated all over Europe. Famous not only as a composer, he was also regarded as the foremost violinist of his day. In addition, he was also admired for his skills as a music teacher.

Much of the information that exists about Corelli, especially about his early days as a student in Bologna, is unreliable. More particularly, a widely reported claim that he provoked the jealousy of French composer Jean-Baptiste Lully is almost certainly not true.

Corelli's personal life has been the subject of much speculation. Most scholars now believe him to have been discreetly homosexual. He never married and lived closely with male friends.

Corelli's rise to fame was meteoric, helped by the fact that music publishing began to proliferate in the early eighteenth century. His rise was also spurred by his influential patrons: Queen Christina of Sweden; Cardinal Pamphili, then the richest man in Rome; and the young and princely Cardinal Ottoboni, the nephew of Pope Alexander VIII. He thus enjoyed the patronage of the most influential people at a time when Rome became a flourishing center of music in Europe.

While many eighteenth-century descriptions of Corelli report on "the mildness of his temper and the modesty of his deportment," others say that his eyes sometimes bulged with anger. Corelli led a quiet, disciplined life, composing within the walls of Cardinal Pamphili's villa where he shared rooms with fellow musicians Carlo Cignani and Carlo Marat.

He continued this kind of life when after 1690 he resided at the villa of Cardinal Ottoboni, *La Cancellaria*, which had the atmosphere of an exclusive academy of talented male artists.

While residing at Pamphili's villa, Corelli became utterly devoted to another of the cardinal's employees, the second violinist Matteo Fornari, whom he met in 1682. According to one source, the composer was never far from Matteo's side for close on twenty years after that first meeting. This long standing intimacy

is alluded to in the two fine trio sonatas dedicated to Corelli and Fornari by the younger composer Guiseppe Valentini. Fornari oversaw the publication of Corelli's Opus VI concertos after Corelli's death.

Corelli moved in the same circles as George Frideric Handel, now also widely believed to have been homosexual. Although Corelli's music influenced Handel's, Corelli claimed not to understand Handel's work, which was much fuller in texture and required more dynamic force than his own works. He said that he would be unable to play it correctly.

Corelli was admitted to the Academy in Rome, along with fellow composers Bernardo Pasquini and Alessandro Scarlatti in 1706. Two years later, he retired from public life. He died in 1713, a wealthy and widely respected man. He was buried in the Pantheon, next to the painter Raphael.

Corelli's musical legacy and influence extends to the great figures of the succeeding generation of baroque composers, Handel, Bach, and Telemann, but also to Couperin and the enigmatic English composer John Ravenscroft. All of these composers have paid homage to Corelli's poised and elegant compositions.

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**Kieron Devlin** studied Art & Design at Manchester Art School, England. He holds a Master's degree from Leicester University and an M.F.A. in Creative Writing from New York City's New School. He is working on a novel and a collection of short stories.