



GIULIO CACCINI
(C.1545–1618)

Ave Maria

The very designation ‘Caccini’s *Ave Maria*’ is one that provokes debate. Who is Caccini? And was the piece actually anything to do with him? The answer to the first question is easy: Caccini was a sixteenth-century composer, based in Florence, and a gifted singer in his own right. To answer the second question, though, is to approach something of a minefield.

No one really knows who wrote this *Ave Maria* – mainly because the setting didn’t come to light until the twentieth century. Although its presence on any classical crossover singer’s album is now almost guaranteed, the piece was unknown before the 1970s. One plausible reason as to why this might be is that this *Ave Maria* arguably wasn’t composed until then. Many argue that its creator was, in fact, one Vladimir Vavilov, a relatively unknown Russian guitarist and composer, who recorded it in 1972 and declared it to be an anonymous song. The attribution to Caccini was then supposedly made at a later date by a musician who performed with Vavilov.

Whatever the truth, it’s certain that this

simple melody is beloved by many. The Lithuanian soprano Inessa Galante was the singer who captivated our hearts with her performance of it in the 1990s, and it remains a firm favourite today.

RECOMMENDED RECORDING

Inessa Galante (soprano); London Musici; Mark Stephenson (conductor).
Campion: RRCD 1345.

CHART POSITION 282

MARIE JOSEPH CANTELOUBE
DE MALARET (1879–1957)

Songs of the Auvergne



Canteloube is a composer whose reputation today is based on a tiny number of works. Just as, in England, Butterworth was good friends with the more prominent Vaughan Williams, with whom he shared a passion for his country’s folk songs, Canteloube had fellow composer and teacher D’Indy to nourish his passion for native French songs. Even when he was living in

Paris, Canteloube founded his own offshoot of the Paris Auvergne Society which he called the *Bourée* – a group of like-minded artists keen to keep the music and arts of the Auvergne region alive. For Canteloube, however, there was the peasant’s way of enjoying folk songs and then there was the artist’s way. He felt that his *Songs of the Auvergne* fell very much into this latter category, with their rich orchestrations and sumptuous harmonies. They were in fact a million miles away from some of the simple ‘melody and musette’ settings he transcribed and published.

RECOMMENDED RECORDING

Veronique Gens (soprano); Orchestre National de Lille; Jean-Claude Casadeseus (conductor). Naxos 8557491.

CHART POSITION 173

FRÉDÉRIC CHOPIN
(1810–1849)

Piano Concerto No. 1 in E minor

The title of this glorious concerto is another example of musical cataloguing triumphing over historical fact. Far from being Chopin’s first piano concerto, this is actually his second. It was published before the real No. 1, though, and therefore became forever known as the composer’s *Piano Concerto No. 1*.

The issue is largely academic because Chopin’s two piano concertos were composed within a year of each other. As you listen to this deeply expansive and expressive work, it has the mark of a composer who has reached full emotional and musical maturity, so it’s astonishing to think that Chopin wrote it while in his late teens. At its premiere in 1830, he played the piano part himself, and the concert

marked his final public appearance in Poland. Within weeks, Chopin had left for Vienna and then Paris, where he remained for the rest of his life.

Although best known for its lyrical middle movement, this concerto also contains melodic gems throughout the two outer movements. It’s unashamedly heart-on-your-sleeve stuff, with Chopin allowing the rich sounds of the piano to be cushioned by some gloriously rich string accompaniment. The majority of Chopin’s output was for solo piano. But, as his two concertos for the instrument prove, he was adept at writing for piano and orchestra too.

RECOMMENDED RECORDING

Janina Fialkowska (piano); Vancouver Symphony Orchestra; Bramwell Tovey (conductor). ATMA: ACD 22643.

CHART POSITION 57



Piano Concerto No. 2 in F minor

Many great composers go through periods of significant self-doubt and introspection – particularly when embarking on a major new work. For Chopin, though, there was a sense of abandonment – naïvety, even – in much of his writing. Here was a composer who was barely out of his teens, still within education – still growing up, essentially. And yet, at the same time, he was able to tackle the form of the piano concerto for the first time and come up trumps in a quite astounding way.

Just consider the number of famous composers who had already triumphed in the

which is now a household favourite, easy on the ear and jauntily life-affirming. Exactly the sort of music you would like to waft you down the River Thames if you were a king with the weight of government on your shoulders. There are three suites in all: the first in F, the second in D and the third in G. It's *Suite No. 1* that is the most popular. In eleven sections, it begins with a beautiful 'French-style' *Overture* and ends up with the *Alla Hornpipe*.

RECOMMENDED RECORDING

Zefiro; Alfredo Bernadini (conductor). Ambrosie: AM192.

CHART POSITION 117



Music for the Royal Fireworks

Famous wars are usually followed by less famous 'peaces'. Occasionally, though, a particularly important treaty will give rise to a famous peace and it was one such for which Handel wrote his *Music for the Royal Fireworks*. The Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle was signed to mark the ending of the War of the Austrian Succession and Handel was commanded to provide the music for the state celebrations that were duly organised. The music was a roaring success, but the fireworks were something of a disaster, after they managed to set fire to the wooden staging built to house them, wreaking havoc. The popularity of the new work was plain for all to see when the stampede to get tickets to watch its dress rehearsal almost brought central London to a

standstill. Against the king's express orders, the music was written to incorporate strings as well as woodwind for its premiere. Shortly afterwards, Handel rewrote the score for a full orchestra. The *Music for the Royal Fireworks* is often paired with Handel's *Water Music* on CD recordings.

RECOMMENDED RECORDING

English Concert; Trevor Pinnock (conductor). Deutsche Grammophon Archiv: E4472792.

CHART POSITION 163

Xerxes

A short sortie into the plot of *Xerxes* brings home how little entertainment has changed over the centuries. Today, we can't get enough of our costume dramas replete with steamy characters, set against backdrops of ancient intrigues. It's true that these are historical in nature, but, essentially they are just soap opera plots that have been re-set in the past.

Well, *Xerxes* follows pretty much the same formula. It focuses on a particular supposedly accurate point in the life of the Persian King Xerxes I (who lived from 485 BC to 465 BC). Indeed, it contains one or two other moments that are said to be true. But, beyond them, Handel allows his librettist to suspend time, and to engage in a largely invented gossipy plot. The music, though, is simply divine, especially if one is hearing a version using the original idea of Xerxes as a counter-tenor, rather than the female voice so often used today. In one of the stranger beginnings to an opera, Xerxes sings the famous opening aria '*Ombra mai fù*'

right George Frideric Handel: *Music for the Royal Fireworks*



FELIX MENDELSSOHN
(1809–1847)

Violin Concerto in E minor



Anyone aspiring to be a concert violinist simply has to have this one in his or her repertoire. Nearly 150 years after its composition, Mendelssohn's *Violin Concerto* remains one of

the most regularly performed and most loved of all instrumental concertos. And ever since its birth, the work has had a rather strange affinity with very young soloists.

When Mendelssohn was a teenager, he forged a strong friendship with fellow composer Ferdinand David. As well as being a fine writer of music in his own right, David was one of the most accomplished violinists of his day, so Mendelssohn composed this concerto for him. It took Mendelssohn five years, during which time he would regularly seek David's advice on revisions, themes and structure.

Its premiere in 1844 featured David at the fiddle and another composer, the Dane Neils Gade, conducting. The second performance saw another teen star take to the stage: the 14-year-old Joseph Joachim, who would go on to become Europe's finest violinist of his time.

More recently, the work was one of the first to be recorded by the young Scottish violin star, Nicola Benedetti. The teenage Mendelssohn, who was inspired to compose this piece, would surely have been proud that, centuries on, it is still the first choice for budding young soloists.

RECOMMENDED RECORDING

James Ehnes (violin); Philharmonia Orchestra; Vladimir Ashkenazy (conductor). Onyx: 4060.

CHART POSITION 30

Hebrides Overture Fingal's Cave

How do you conjure up the sounds and sights of Scotland in a single piece of music? That was the challenge facing Mendelssohn when, in 1829, he travelled home from a memorable trip to the Scottish island of Staffa and its famous Fingal's Cave. The journey had evidently made an immediate impression on the composer: just hours later, he had written the first few bars of this piece and sent them off to his sister, Fanny, along with a note that described 'how extraordinarily the Hebrides affected me'.

His travels to Scotland were part of a wider tour of Europe for Mendelssohn during his early twenties, and it's not hard to see why he was particularly captivated by what he encountered on Staffa. Fingal's Cave is over sixty metres deep and in stormy tides the cacophonous sounds of the waves inside it rumble out for miles. The intense and rolling melodies within the music perfectly capture this sense of both drama and awe; calmer passages, meanwhile, convey stiller waters and more tranquil surroundings. But it's never long before the return of that stormy scene.

On completing the score, Mendelssohn triumphantly wrote 'Fingal's Cave' on the front page, leaving no room for doubt that his *Hebrides Overture* was wholly inspired by this awesome Scottish landscape.

RECOMMENDED RECORDING

Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra; Christian Thielemann (conductor). Deutsche Grammophon: 4745022.

CHART POSITION 53



Felix Mendelssohn 1809–1847

*'A romantic who felt as ease
within the mould of classicism.'*

PABLO CASALS



This German-born composer was a frighteningly clever child, excelling as a painter, poet, athlete, linguist and musician. He made his public debut as a pianist at the age of nine and by the time he was sixteen he had composed his *Octet for Strings*.

Mendelssohn wasn't one of those composers who had to struggle with poverty all his life, scratching a living performing and writing music wherever he could, at the mercy of avaricious publishers or tempestuous patrons. Instead, he was born into a wealthy family who were friendly with many of Berlin's leading artists and musicians. His stable family background quite probably contributed to his own very happy marriage, which gave him five children.

As well as composing, Mendelssohn was a highly proficient conductor, being given the plum job of music director of the

**DID YOU
KNOW?**
Mendelssohn came from a very talented family. His grandfather, Moses, was one of the most respected scholars of his day on everything from theology to metaphysics.

Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra in 1835, when he was just twenty-six. He retained the role until his tragically young death only a dozen years later.

Mendelssohn was a great lover of Britain – and the people of Britain loved

him and his music back in equal measure. He travelled widely around the country, with trips to Scotland sparking two of his best-loved works: his *Scottish Symphony* and his *Hebrides Overture*. His oratorio *Elijah* was given its premiere in Birmingham in 1846. Queen Victoria and Prince Albert were both fans of Mendelssohn's music and he performed for them both in public concerts and in private.

Mendelssohn was commissioned by the Liverpool Philharmonic Society to compose the opening work for their new concert hall. It was to be a cantata, setting to music the words to Milton's *Comus*. However, Mendelssohn died suddenly before the hall was built. Any plans that he had for *Comus* died with him, without a note being written down.