



Corelli Violin Sonatas, Op. 5 — Rachel Barton Pine, John Mark Rozendaal, David Schrader, Brandon Acker

CD Review by Bertil van Boer

The violin sonatas of Arcangelo Corelli, at the time they were published in 1700, were considered almost immediately as a set that could serve as a model for the genre. As his op. 5, they were intended to complement the four sets of trio sonatas in that they mirror the styles and generic distinctions of these works, being subdivided into two groups of six sonatas, the first in the more esoteric style of the *da chiesa* and the second consisting of four-movement stylized dances akin to the Baroque suite, the so-called *da camera* format. Corelli, one of the scions of the Baroque Italian violin school, carefully chose which works to publish, in effect overseeing his own legacy, which he had cultivated over a number of decades. These works are no stranger to the discography, given that they have achieved a status as iconic violin compositions. Here, however, violinist Rachel Barton Pine has chosen to redo the final sonata, a long and rather tortuous set of variations on the “Folia” theme, on the viola d’amore. Her reasoning for this change is not entirely specious, for the instrument, a fine example of a Gagliano, is quite facile and exploits the same ranges as the viola and violin, but with a more concentrated sound. Of course, since it was originally written for violin, and the tuning of the d’amore is quite specifically in D, there were obstacles to overcome in terms of fingering and phrasing, necessitated by this instrument’s peculiarities.

Each of the first half dozen sonatas does not precisely conform to the church sonata format, in that they are each in five movements; an extra faster movement seems to have been inserted in third position, usually as a short transition. This is unusual for a Baroque sonata, but here serves to mark the division between the slow-fast portions. The slow introduction to the first sonata is slow and languid, but there intrudes a bit of scalar noodling that gives the opening a bit more virtuosity. As one might expect, the first *Allegro* is contrapuntal with scalar passagework and a nice imitative flair. The transition is a short scurry of sequencing and scalar virtuosity before an *Adagio* enters with a sort of Vivaldian pensiveness. The finale is a short fugue with lots of suspensions. It is an entirely fitting beginning. The remaining six first sonatas follow suit. As an example, in the opening *Grave* of the C-Minor Sonata (No. 3) the slow unfolding suspension of the violin part above the slow march of the bass is quite effective, and in the *Allegro* that follows the violin has not one but two of the fugal voices, a *tour de force* that certainly turned heads at the time. It is ultra-polyphonic music. In contrast to the more learned movements, this sonata concludes with a rather lively gigue, indicating that the church did not rule all in terms of style.

This stands in contrast with the finale of the F-Major Sonata (No. 4), where Corelli resorts to sequencing for his violin part, with a slight imitative opening before the entire thing devolves into a sort of gigue that is more complex and less dance-like. One cannot help but be emotionally moved by the gnarly and solemn *Adagio* of the G-Minor Sonata (No. 5), but the *Vivace* that follows uses the same two-part imitation in the violin that gives it gravitas. Here the transitional movement is slow and lilting, while the sonata concludes with a rather insistent gigue.

Once one turns to the second set of six, things get a bit more complex. For example, the Prelude to the E-Minor Sonata (No. 8) is a meandering lyrical line that moves seamlessly, but it is followed by bouncy Allemande that ranges over the middle registers of the instrument with the occasional double stop. The hymnlike Prelude for the A-Major Sonata (No. 9) is like an operatic aria, even with the repeat ornamentation that Pine adds tastefully. This is followed by a light and bouncy gigue, and at the end after a brief harmonic transition marked with deep organ continuo, the final gavotte jumps about in a folklike manner replete with registral changes. A similar style of gavotte can be found in the fourth movement of the F-Major Sonata (No. 10), while that in the penultimate sonata (No. 11) as the final movement is likewise compartmentalized in terms of phrasing, though it ends all too abruptly—a momentary flash. The real moment comes in the “Folia” Sonata, where the theme is declaimed by the plucked instrument, and then the variations start. The soft and somewhat lighter sound of the viola d’amore adds an air of simplicity with its limited overtones. The second variation with its alternating tones leads directly to the next, fluid variation that goes on until it becomes even more frenetic and virtuoso. Even the double-stop variation at the end seems to suit the instrument as the chords can be more easily performed, but the final furious variation with its deep range accompaniment is powerful and decisive.

The disc cover shows Pine evidently relishing with considerable joy her performance here, and this is only right. She brings a fervor and precision to Corelli’s compendium of sonatas, and I must confess to being completely convinced about using the viola d’amore for the last variation. Okay, this seems heretical, but she makes a brilliant case for substituting it; if one wishes the *tour de force* “Folia” on the violin, there are plenty of good performances out there, but this is unique in its quality. What I find particularly attractive is her subtle sense of ornamentation, all of which fits within the range of that available to string players of the time but is more discreet and selectively applied. This allows for Corelli’s music to emerge easily and brilliantly. In short, this is an absolutely first-rate disc and one that should be in everyone’s Baroque collection. Among the number of recordings of the op. 5 out there, this emerges near the top. **Bertil van Boer**