

Italian 17th-18th century composers were also deeply involved in the genre of Opera. Rossi, Bernardo Pasquini (1637-1710), and Alessandro Scarlatti (1660-1725) of this evening's program all wrote several operas in addition to their instrumental compositions. Particularly prolific was Scarlatti, who founded the Neapolitan School of Opera and penned over one-hundred operas in his lifetime. Active in this sphere was Piranesi, trained in set design, which demanded a mastery of perspective and dramatic light. Along with these technical skills, his etchings also draw from the thematic elements of Venetian Opera and Theatre, namely his renowned *Prisons* series depicting impossibly vast prison interiors. The prison setting was popularized by 18th century theater, and Piranesi's Prisons are heavily influenced by the famous Galli-Bibiena family's set designs with their complex, angled perspective and compositions packed with staircases and arches.

Artists are constantly in dialogue with one another, exchanging and reshaping ideas across mediums. Whether it's the acoustics of the Basilica di San Marco giving birth to a new musical style, the Baroque movement's embrace of emotional grandeur and contrast, or the intersection of music and architectural design in the opera, Piranesi's works are inextricably linked to the music of his era.

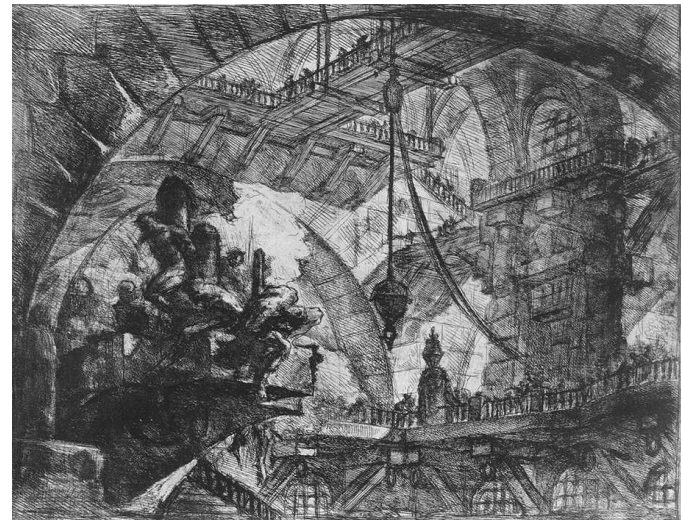
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Piranesi's Rome: Views of the Eternal City Harpsichord Concert

Thursday, April 10th, 2025

Patrick Merrill



Luther W. Brady
Art Gallery

Harpsichord Music from Piranesi's Rome

Patrick Merrill, harpsichord

Toccata Settima (from Toccate e partite d'intavolatura, Libro 1)
Girolamo Frescobaldi (1583–1643)

Toccata Settima (from Toccate e correnti d'intavolatura d'organo e cembalo)
Michelangelo Rossi (ca. 1601/1602–1656)

Toccata al secondo tono
Ricercare del secondo tono
Sonata del Primo Tono
Bernardo Pasquini (1637–1710)

Sonata da Chiesa a tre in F, Op. 3 No. 1
Arcangelo Corelli (1653–1713)
Folia (from Primo e Secondo Libro di Toccate per Cembalo)
Alessandro Scarlatti (1660–1725)

Sonata in Re Maggiore I. Andante II. Adagio III. Allegro
Niccolò Jommelli (1714–1774)

Sonata in B minor, K. 27
Sonata in D major, K. 29
Domenico Scarlatti (1685–1757)

Although Piranesi's Rome may appear distant from the world of 17th–18th century Italian harpsichord music, both are linked by a common cultural thread: Venice, Piranesi's birthplace. The musical DNA of tonight's harpsichord concert was shaped by the architecture of the city's Basilica di San Marco. Featuring a unique layout of two choir lofts facing each other, along with its massively open interior space, the resulting sound delay and difficulty coordinating two separate choirs led to the development of a new style of music: the Venetian Polychoral. Instead of only singing together, these polychoral compositions often had the two choirs alternate, embracing the basilica's stereo and echo effects helped create a tremendously dramatic contrast. The Venetian school reached its peak in the early 1600s, but the next century of Italian composers would continue to build on its foundation of drama and contrast, culminating in the Baroque era.

Girolamo Frescobaldi (1583–1643) was one of the first innovative composers to bridge the gap between the Renaissance-era Venetian School and early-Baroque. His "Toccata Settima" exemplifies this transition. The free tempo produces a newfound emotional depth, while the repeated imitations and variations on melodies are an evolution of the polychoral style. In a piece by Michelangelo Rossi (1601/1602–1656) also entitled "Toccata Settima," a striking use of dissonant chords demonstrates another technique of producing dramatic tension. Though active only towards the end of the Baroque period, Piranesi's works strongly convey Baroque principles. Where a composer might produce emotional drama through contrast in dynamics, tempo, or dissonance, Piranesi relied on visual techniques like an exaggerated scale between small figures and monumental buildings, and chiaroscuro, the high contrast between light and shadow. A listener of 17th–18th century Italian harpsichord will find his etchings to be to a visual counterpart to the music, sharing its emotional grandeur and dramatic contrast.