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Sammartini

The Late Symphonies Vol.2

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Accademia d'Arcadia • Alessandra Rossi Lürig



Sammartini's late symphonies: styles and sources

Giovanni Battista Sammartini was the seventh of eight children of Alexis Saint-Martin, a French oboist who emigrated to Italy, and Girolama de Federici. He was probably born in Milan, and lived there all his life. His death certificate gives his age as 74, so he was presumably born in 1700 or early in 1701. Unlike most of his musical contemporaries he spent all his life in his native Milan, taking a leading role in its musical life, and devoted himself mostly to instrumental, chamber and sacred vocal music, writing only three stage works.

Sammartini is considered by modern musicologists to be a key figure in the development of 'Classical' style. Famous during his lifetime, performed and published throughout Europe (many of his works were published in Paris and London, especially by Leclerc, Venier and Walsh), the teacher of Gluck from 1737 to 1741, he knew the leading musicians of his time (including Mozart) and was the hub of Milan's musical life.

Dubbed the 'father of the symphony' by musical textbooks, Sammartini was in fact the first composer to develop the form from origins within the concerto and the trio sonata (i.e. the chamber-music forms of Baroque music) rather than from the opera overture. He is the composer of the first symphonies whose composition date is known (1732). Even his early, experimental symphonies use an instrumental ensemble which quickly became fixed for the Classical period.

The merits and significance of Sammartini's symphonies are fully recognized today, thanks largely to the work of two American researchers, Newell Jenkins and Bathia Churgin, who published in 1976 a catalogue of the composer's works¹. As well as 74 symphonies whose authorship is uncertain, 68 symphonies were catalogued whose authorship is quite certain. These have been divided by Churgin into three periods: an early period up to 1739, a second period from 1740 to 1758 and a late period from 1759 to 1775.

The early symphonies are composed in a hybrid Baroque-Classical idiom, with Classical elements predominating. The middle symphonies are very much in the early Classical style; in the late symphonies, the orchestration becomes more complex and sophisticated; wind instruments (horns and oboes) are added, oboes have independent parts (avoiding simple violin doubling), basses and cellos have independent parts and some symphonies call for *divisi* violas.

Sammartini's symphonies have three movements, the first and third longer than the central movement. Sonata form is ubiquitous, except in the minuet section of Minuet-Trio movements. The later symphonies have longer and more varied periods and a more balanced phrase structure; in the first movements the motivic-figural style of his earlier style cedes to a highly diversified melodic and

rhythmic style, elaborate rhythms, a complex and nuanced harmony, including many secondary dominants, secondary triads, major-minor contrasts, dissonant chords, sequential progressions and suspension dissonances. There is an emphasis, unusual for the time, on instrumental dialogue, and a thoroughgoing use of canon and imitation, especially in slow movements. Sammartini avoids large-scale thematic repetitions, preferring understatement to the merest hint of redundancy. The frequent elision of themes and sections produces a continuity that is the essence of his style.

Despite his fame during his lifetime, Sammartini's music met with a curious fate due to the historical events that wracked Milan at the end of the century: not one known autograph manuscript by Sammartini survives in the Milan archives, since they ended up in Vienna or Paris during the upheavals of the first French occupation. For the next 150 years, while Sammartini's works were scattered across Europe, cataloguing them presented intractable problems that only began to be solved in 1968 with the publication of Bathia Churgin's key study, *The Symphonies of G.B. Sammartini*. The 12 late symphonies may also have been little known in the 18th century, since 10 survive in only one or two sources, the original parts for nine having been lost or destroyed in the Second World War.

The first volume in this series (Brilliant Classics 93610) presented the symphonies JC 63, 22, 31, 60 and Quintet No.5. Of the symphonies on this second volume, JC 11, 17, 28 and 40 have never been published or recorded before. Symphony JC 26 has been published by Prof. Bathia Churgin².

Symphonies JC 11, 26, 28 and 40 are kept in the *Bibliothèque Nationale de France Fonds du Conservatoire* in Paris in two sources: a series of contemporary, dated manuscript parts that make up the main source, and a group of manuscript scores made from the original parts in 1882 for the librarian of the *Conservatoire* at that time, J.B. Wekerlin. Symphony JC 17 can be found in *Bibliothèque Nationale de France* in a collection of manuscript parts bought for Otto Jahn in 1880, and in manuscript scores in Prague and Vienna Libraries.

The scores prepared for performance are the fruit of my transcription and revision of the two sources, except for symphony JC17 (for which I based myself only on the Paris manuscript) and for symphony JC26 (here performed according to Bathia Churgin's edition, emended according to the rediscovered Paris parts).

I wish to thank Prof. Bathia Churgin for all her valuable advice and precious help.
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Symphonies JC 11, 28, 17, 40, 26

Sources: *Bibliothèque Nationale de France, critical edition by Fondazione Arcadia, Alessandra Rossi Lürig, and Bathia Churgin (JC 26)*

In the second half of the 18th century, the form of the symphony was increasingly widespread thanks both to printed collections in France and London and to manuscripts, which were much more common than prints and were usually transmitted in parts rather than scores. From 1757 onwards, for example, Parisian publishers put out the first symphonies of Johann Stamitz and a few years later, the symphonies of Joseph Haydn, Johann Christian Bach and more importantly, François-Joseph Gossec, in whom a new vision of instrumental genres was taking shape. In that period, Giovanni Battista Sammartini was also pursuing his conception of a symphonic form. Whereas he can be counted among the founders, his creative pace slowed considerably. Between 1759 and 1772, he completed only about a dozen symphonies.

Five of these (JC 11, 28, 17, 40, 26) best synthesize and reinforce the earlier remarks concerning Sammartini's development of the genre, and as a composer. The Symphony in D major JC11 has come down to us through a late-19th-century copy prepared by Weckerlin, who was then librarian of the Paris conservatory, and through a series of contemporary manuscript parts that comprise the main source. The date is established as February 1770, an especially fruitful year that was full of satisfaction for Sammartini, who was in his seventies by that time, and busy with work for the church of San Fedele and the newer Milanese churches. Sammartini was greatly admired by the English music lover Charles Burney and by Mozart during their meetings in July and December. The piece is prodigal in invention and rich in the use of the instrumental, body, composed of oboes, horns and strings, with independent parts for cellos and basses.

The initial *Allegro maestoso* presents a compact and imposing homophony, but soon the themes scatter and develop among winds and strings, with a play of contrasts, imaginative superimpositions and sudden progressions. In the central *Andante*, there are no winds, and the strings are used at times in pairs (first and second violins, violas and basses) and at others together. In these moments, located at the beginning and at the end near the repeat, the cellos become autonomous from the basses to thicken the harmonic texture. The thematic ideas are highly effective and manage to create a true lyrical oasis before the sweeping, saucy final *Presto*, an uninterrupted vortex of inventions and agility that definitively takes the place – as in JC 28 and 40 – of the traditional, graceful *Minuetto*.

The Symphony JC28 in E flat major with oboes, horns and strings probably dates from April 1770. The three movements continually make use of separate cello and bass parts and a clear differentiation of the first and second violins. The initial *Allegro assai* not only fully exploits the sonority and the individual timbres of the orchestra, it presents a very rich tripartite form with varied themes in which the moment of the reprise synthesizes all of the founding elements, including the so-called element of development which is presented as a new thematic idea, not as a re-elaboration. The customary central *Andante* is as freshly conceived as the *allegretto* adjective would seem to indicate. The C minor key-signature and economical orchestration – oboes and strings – complement the dense writing, with its motivic exchanges and rhythmic intricacies. The final *Allegro* uses a simple thematic motto to open up several imaginative discoveries within the apparently conventional tripartite scheme.

The Symphony in D major JC17 is a most characterful work, probably composed in 1759. Oboes and horns enrich the role of the strings. The opening *Spiritoso assai* is compact and intricate, with large sections for divided oboes; the alternation of the solos and collective episodes is expertly done in the sonata form *Andantino*; the final *Presto* is a sweeping whirl.

Richness and variety in the melodic and rhythmic figurations shape the first movement – *Presto* – of the Symphony in G major JC40, whose manuscript parts bear the date of July 1769. The winds (oboes and horns) are employed with continuity both with the purpose of making the sonority of certain themes fuller (for example at the beginning) as well as to create a timbral diversion in the exposition of the motifs. In order to achieve the first objective, the low-pitched strings (cellos and basses) are also at times divided. The structure leaves to the reprise, as usual, the task of synthesizing all of the fundamental ideas and rhythmic figurations employed. The traditional *Andante* is substituted with an affected *Allegretto* in the guise of a *Scherzo* for strings only and the final *Presto* is surprising because of its fortunate rhythmical composition and the uninterrupted, ingenious flow of melodic designs.

The initial *Allegro assai* of the Symphony in E flat major JC26 declaims a strong-willed, rhythmic theme, and the full orchestra states it. The second motif, which is almost grafted onto the preceding one without any solution, is characterised by writing that breaks the initial incisiveness by putting forward again that passage of constant capricious variety that is so constant in Sammartini's first stylistic phase, propitiously dubbed 'rhythmic impressionism or instantaneous lyricism' by Fausto Torrefranca. The following *Allegretto*, in the relative minor, leads into a melancholy atmosphere accentuated by the recurrent request for suffused sonority, and recalls

Jean-Jacques Rousseau's poetic appreciation of Sammartini's slow movements as 'worthy of Anacreon' The final *Allegro* has an inexhaustible rhythmic vitality and uninterrupted thematic and creative genius enlivened by the composer's skilful play with instrumental timbres.

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¹ N. JENKINS, B. CHURGIN, *Thematic Catalogue of the works of G. B. Sammartini*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1976.

² G.B. Sammartini: *Ten Symphonies*, ed. Churgin, in *The Symphony 1720-1840*, ser. A, ii (New York, 1984) [JC4, 7, 26, 38-9, 44, 46, 52, 57, 62a]

Accademia d'Arcadia

The group grew out of the Fondazione Arcadia, and has the purpose of performing little-known repertoire which the Foundation publishes. In 2008, the group took on its definitive form in a permanent group that includes musicians who are especially interested in the rediscovery of the unpublished Italian repertory, and they meet regularly to carry forward a common project with dedication and passion.

The Accademia d'Arcadia plays original instruments and can boast of a technical and interpretative approach that respects 18th-century practices, but that is informed by the most recent musicological developments in terms of style and performance. The group constitutes the musical arm of the Fondazione Arcadia, and is thus linked to musicological research guided by a scientific committee of international fame that sees to the publication of the critical editions of the foundation. Their preferred repertoire is the 18th century, with special regard for Italian works. The Accademia d'Arcadia is a regular guest at important concert seasons and festivals. Alessandra Rossi Lürig is the founder and chief director.

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