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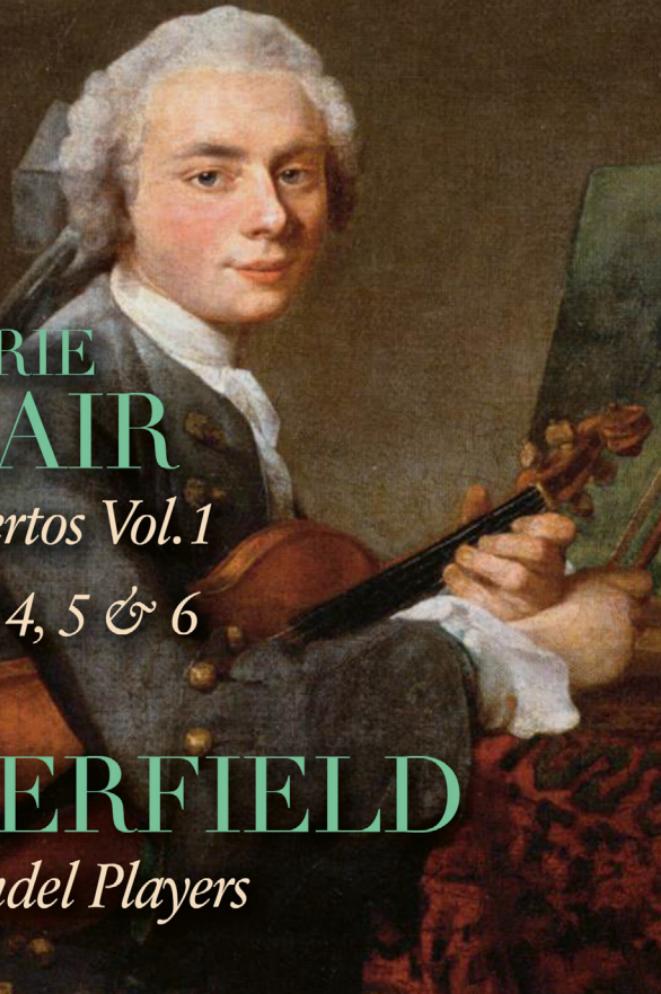
JEAN-MARIE LECLAIR

Violin Concertos Vol. 1

Op. 7 Nos. 1, 4, 5 & 6

ADRIAN BUTTERFIELD

London Handel Players



Jean-Marie Leclair was the most important French violinist–composer of the 18th century. He was born in Lyon in 1697, the eldest of eight children. His father was a lacemaker and he learned that trade as well as violin-playing and dancing. He joined the opera in Lyon as a dancer, and it was there that he met his first wife, Marie-Rose Castagnié, who was also a dancer.

In 1722 and 1726 he is known to have worked in Turin as a dancing master and composer, and this is where he received lessons from Giovanni Battista Somis, himself a student of the renowned Arcangelo Corelli. Leclair moved to Paris in 1723 and with the support of a wealthy patron in that city, Joseph Bonnier, he published his first set of 12 Sonatas (Op.1) in that same year to great acclaim. From 1728 he made his name as a soloist at the Concert Spirituel and went on to publish three further books of sonatas and two sets of concertos as well as other chamber music and one opera, *Scylla et Glaucus*.

He received royal recognition from Louis XV in 1733 when he was appointed *ordinaire de la musique du roi*, and in gratitude he dedicated his third book of 12 sonatas (Op.5, 1734) to the king. However, he left royal service in 1737 after a dispute with rival violinist Jean-Pierre Guignon. From 1738–43 he was invited to spend three months of each year at the Dutch royal court of Anne, Princess of Orange, who was the daughter of George II and who had been George Frideric Handel's favourite harpsichord student in London. He subsequently worked in The Hague and Paris.

The composer had remarried in 1730, two years after the death of his first wife. Louise Roussel, his second wife, was a printer, and she published his works from 1728 onwards. They parted company in 1758 and, rather surprisingly, he moved into a house in an unsafe Paris neighbourhood. Late one evening in 1764 he was murdered at his home. Suspicion fell on three people: the gardener who found his body, Leclair's nephew, Guillaume-François Vial, and his former wife. It seems as though the nephew was the most likely assassin, but he was never brought to trial.

Leclair was a Frenchman who wanted to establish his credentials as a solo violinist in his own country. However, this was a major challenge for him because, for the French upper classes, the viol was the chosen instrument for the intimacy of their private spaces, and the violin family of instruments, which had been invented in Italy around 1500, was rather looked down upon and seen as fit merely for country fiddling and orchestral duties. It was acknowledged that when Corelli's iconic set of Op.5 Sonatas was published in 1700, no French violinist was equipped with the technique to perform them.

The solo concerto had emerged in Italy in the early 18th century, initially as a one-part chamber form, through composers such as Torelli, Albinoni and, above all, Vivaldi. The latter's hugely popular set of 12 concertos *L'estro armonico*, Op.3, published in Amsterdam in 1711, was a landmark moment crucial to the establishment of the genre across Europe. J.S. Bach obtained a copy for his personal study and transcribed all of them for keyboard as his favoured way of learning from the Venetian pioneer. Leclair must have known these works too and after publishing three sets of solo sonatas felt ready to bring out his first set of concertos to show his mastery of this newer form. It is interesting to note that he seemed to be preparing himself for concerto writing a couple of years prior to bringing out his first set in the genre, his Opus 7. Three years before those concertos were published in 1737, the Eighth Sonata in his Third Book (Op.5) featured opening and closing Allegros that are through-composed instead of employing a conventional binary sonata structure with repeats. They have unison opening statements which return at the end of each movement, very much like the opening and closing tutti of many Vivaldian concertos.

Leclair's approach bears some resemblance to Bach's. The French composer, too, largely adheres to the three-movement form, with the sole exception of Op.7 No.2, in which he prefaces the first Allegro with an introductory Adagio. Leclair also incorporates a greater degree of contrapuntal dialogue than Vivaldi, especially in the tutti, and, as in Bach, this leads to a more varied employment of key centres and greater prominence of the tutti sections. One of Leclair's favourite harmonic devices in his sonata movements is to switch

from the minor to the tonic major and then back again, or vice versa, and we see this regularly in the concertos as well. Ultimately, he shares with the mentor that he never met, Arcangelo Corelli, an understanding of, and a joy in, the use of strong harmonies and warm melodies that are both deeply exciting and gloriously moving for the listener, in music possessing the underlying beauty and elegance so characteristic of the French temperament.

In terms of violin technique he emulated Vivaldi, Locatelli and many other 18th-century Italian virtuosos in his inclusion of such violinistic devices as double stopping in thirds and sixths, chordal sequences and *bariolage* effects, double trills, and up- and down-bow staccatos. Happily, these are rarely employed solely for virtuosic effect: for example, the writing of prolonged double stopping in some of the slow movements adds to the lyricism of the beautiful dance songs – not merely to the challenges for the soloist.

Whilst the *concerto grosso* form always involved multiple players for each *ripieno* part, to provide suitable contrast to the *concertino* team of two violins and cello, solo concertos were initially performed by one instrumentalist per part, since the genre began as a chamber form rather than an orchestral one. Much has been written about the turning point when larger forces were introduced and when the *forte / piano* or *tutti / solo* markings in the non-solo parts ceased to be mere indications of a change of role and instead became suggestions for tutti players to start and stop playing. In violin concertos, the soloist was expected to play in the tutti sections, so with one-per-part forces the second violin part in particular can suffer in the balance. We decided, therefore, to add an extra second violinist to the tutti. It's interesting to note that there is a *solo* marking in the second violin part in the finale of Leclair's Op.7 No.2 which is cancelled by a *tutti piano* indication, which seems to imply that at least two second violins were expected.

Leclair designates the continuo part as *violoncello é organo* at the top of each page of his printed parts. Occasionally, the cello and keyboard parts diverge, and at these moments the

stave is split in two and the parts are always labelled *violoncello* and *organo*, the keyboard part often holding a long pedal note whilst the cello has a solo line. It is true that it was a common understanding for Italian concerto composers to write *organo* and yet intend the part for a harpsichordist. We have experimented with both instruments in concert and have come to the conclusion that having an organ and theorbo gives an ideal variety to the continuo section in these works. It is notable that an organ was available to the performers in the Tuileries Palace – where the Concert Spirituel took place and where Leclair made his name as a soloist – because sacred choral works were an important feature of the programming. In 17th-century France, *basses de violon* at 8' pitch were used without a 16' instrument doubling them, but this began to change from approximately 1715, so it seems highly likely that a 16' instrument would have been expected by Leclair.

Concerto No.5 in A minor

The first movement is full of drama, the second violins immediately jumping in on the firsts on the third beat of the first, third and fifth bars. A few bars later the seconds respond just one beat after the firsts. The first solo is a variant on the opening theme, a device that the composer also employs in the finale of this concerto, as well as elsewhere.

The Largo second movement is an exquisite *siciliano* that has an atmosphere of gentle warmth and tenderness in its lilting rhythms, with the soloist accompanied very simply by the continuo. Instead of using C major, the relative major of the first movement's A minor tonic key, the composer opts for the pastoral key of F major and then at the close adds a *sostenuto*-style five-bar Adagio that finishes on the dominant of A minor in preparation for the finale.

The Allegro assai third movement has a *rigaudon*-like feel and shares some of the dramatic mood of the first movement, though there are also several contrasting periods of light-heartedness. Halfway through the movement we suddenly find ourselves in the tonic

major in music that has a charming rustic mood. A short transition returns us to the minor key, and the concerto concludes with a repeat of the final bars of the opening tutti.

Concerto No.4 in F major

The mood of the opening Allegro moderato of this concerto is warm and lyrical, and this is reflected in the fact that the second violins' response to the firsts appears in the sixth bar rather than the first, the bass line responding a further five bars later. There is much filigree solo writing, sometimes accompanied by the main theme in the tutti parts, and a lengthy chain of arpeggiated chords in the central section built on one of Leclair's favourite harmonic devices, the cycle of fifths.

The slow movement, in the relative minor, is sombre and brooding and has an almost continuous tick-tock accompaniment. A beautiful cycle of fifths in the opening tutti is made even more expressive by a viola line that emphasises the seventh chords. Leclair is at his most Vivaldian here in the way he invites the soloist to weave a beautiful line accompanied only by unison violins.

The finale is happy and genial, the lightness of the opening emphasised by the composer delaying the first entry of the bass line for more than 20 bars. The virtuoso double stopping, the extended chordal sequence over a long pedal point and further filigree writing for the soloist bring the concerto to a joyful close.

Concerto No.1 in D minor

The opening Allegro of this D minor Concerto shows Leclair at his most contrapuntal, and this brings a serious *affekt* to the whole movement. He starts with imitative entries for the four parts using a four-note descending motive, and the first tutti concludes with a Vivaldian unison rising scale figure, with both of these ideas reappearing regularly throughout the movement both in the tutti and solos. Interspersed in addition is a descending scale figure. The initial motive even appears once in inverted form.

The slow movement, also in D minor, is a mournful sarabande-like song. The dancer in Leclair ensures that the music is structured very clearly in 8- and 16-bar phrases. The soloist sings the first verse and the complete ensemble repeats it before the soloist moves on to the next. The same pattern is repeated in the tonic major, and the movement is rounded off with a return to a telescoped version of the opening verse.

Imitative writing is also an essential ingredient in the finale, and the repeated syncopations bring a jaunty energy, the chains of seventh chords providing a lovely contrast. During the first solo the tutti violins are marked *un poco forte* to indicate that they are more than just accompaniment, and the whole movement rides on this almost incessant dynamism before the composer rounds off this work with four bars of energetic unison quavers.

Concerto No.6 in A major

The A major Concerto is the most substantial of all of Leclair's concertos, and this becomes clear as soon as one takes a look at the original printed solo part which is absolutely crammed full of notes. It is a bright and joyful work and the solo part covers the whole gamut of violinistic devices, from double stopping and series of trill passages to *bariolage* and arpeggiated chords. The slow movement has strong parallels with the dance-song structure of the D minor Concerto's Aria. However, it has a minuet-like mood of gentle simplicity which hints at something folk-like in character, and this comes more clearly to the fore in the *minore* section which is a little darker and set over a drone bass.

The Giga finale brings a fast and joyful dance energy, with further busy violinistic effects. Leclair once again switches from major to minor mode in the final section before a joyful return and conclusion in the major.



Described as “a marvel” by *Gramophone* for his recordings of Leclair’s first three books of violin sonatas, **Adrian Butterfield** has appeared on numerous stages across the world as a violinist, director and conductor who specialises in performing a wide range of music on period instruments. He is Musical Director of the Tilford Bach Festival and for 25 years was Associate Director of the London Handel Festival. He regularly conducts and directs the ensemble he co-founded, the London Handel Players, and he has led the gut-string quartet, The Revolutionary Drawing Room, for over 25 years. He has also worked as a guest director across Europe and North America. He is Professor of Baroque Violin at the Royal College of Music in London.

He has worked annually with the Southbank Sinfonia, gives masterclasses internationally, and has taught at Dartington Summer School, at the Belgrade Baroque Academy, Pro Corda Baroque and the Aestas Musica Baroque Course in Croatia.

He has conducted all the major choral works of Bach and over a hundred of his cantatas, as well as numerous works by Handel and his contemporaries, and has directed ensembles such as the Croatian Baroque Ensemble in Zagreb, the Malta Philharmonic Orchestra, the London Mozart Players, the European Union Chamber Orchestra and the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra.

adrianbutterfield.com

Praised by the *New York Times* for their “soulful depth” and their “consummate skill and musicianship”, the **London Handel Players** have thrilled audiences across the world with their performances and recordings for over a quarter of a century. Established in 2000, the Players appear regularly at leading venues and festivals in the UK, Europe and North America, performing Baroque chamber music and concertos and collaborating with the world’s leading singers.

The ensemble has performed across North America, making their New York debut at the Frick Museum in 2012 and returning to perform at Carnegie Hall in 2014, as well as making numerous appearances in Canada. They feature regularly at Wigmore Hall, and their touring schedule has included performances at the International Handel Festivals in both Göttingen and Halle in Germany as well as in France, Spain, Ireland, Italy, Madeira, Cyprus, Turkey, Serbia and Croatia. Committed educators at every level, serving in Historical Performance professorships at London’s conservatoires, the London Handel Players give numerous masterclasses and workshops.

Their critically acclaimed discography includes numerous albums for SOMM Recordings. Among them are four discs of Handel chamber music: his *Trio Sonatas* Opp. 2 (SOMMCD 084) and 5 (SOMMCD 044), his *Complete Sonatas and Works for Violin & Continuo* (SOMMCD 068) and a disc titled *Handel at Home* (SOMMCD 055). They have also recorded two-disc sets of Geminiani’s *Complete Sonatas* Op.1 (SOMMCD 248-2) and J.S. Bach’s *Sonatas for Violin and Harpsichord* (SOMMCD 0664-2), as well as *Flute Sonatas and Arias* by Bach for Uppernote Recordings. Their second disc of Handel aria arrangements, titled *Total Eclipse (Handel at Home Vol. 2)* (SOMMCD 0676), was released in 2023 and received widespread praise. In 2025 SOMM issued the Players’ first of two volumes of Telemann’s *Paris Quartets* (SOMMCD 0698).







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JEAN-MARIE LECLAIR (1697-1764)

Violin Concertos Volume 1: Op. 7 Nos. 1, 4, 5 & 6

ADRIAN BUTTERFIELD *solo violin*

London Handel Players

Oliver Webber *violin I* · Naomi Burrell, Maxim del Mar *violin II*
 Rachel Byrt *viola* · Sarah McMahon *cello* · Carina Cosgrave *double bass*
 Silas Wollston *organ* · Eligio Quinteiro *theorbo*

Violin Concertos, Op.7

No.5 in A minor	[14:40]	No.1 in D minor	[12:42]
1. Vivace	5:29	7. I. Allegro	4:07
2. Largo	3:55	8. II. Aria: Grazioso	4:24
3. Allegro assai	5:15	9. III. Vivace	4:10
No.4 in F major	[14:11]	No.6 in A major	[22:02]
4. I. Allegro moderato	5:11	10. I. Allegro ma non presto	10:01
5. II. Adagio	5:00	11. II. Aria: Grazioso non troppo adagio	6:13
6. III. Allegro	3:59	12. III. Giga: Allegro	5:48

Total duration: **63:37**

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