

## **Joseph Gibbs: The Celebrity Musician from 18th Century Suffolk.**

Solo Violin Sonatas in England before the 18th Century were very much a rarity. Purcell and his contemporaries used the Violin in chamber music but predominately in Sonatas for two violins or instrumental suites for four part strings. The vogue for sonatas for violin and continuo began to flourish in England around 1700 when Corelli's Op.5 Sonatas were first published by John Walsh in London. Roger North, the biographer and musician described how Corelli's works became so fundamental in performance at this time that they 'are to the musicians like the bread of life.' Later in the 18th Century Sir John Hawkins remarked 'Men remembered, and would refer to passages (of Corelli) in it as to a classical author.'

The authority of Corelli's music led to many imitations and adaptations of his works and this was made easier by the development of cheaper and simpler printing methods and high demand for Italianate music in Britain. The growth of the publishing industry made the sonatas of the best foreign composers available to more British musicians and composers than ever before, and it also enabled the sonatas of native composers to enter more households.

It is therefore no surprise that Corelli's music rapidly spread across the length and breadth of Britain particularly in many amateur musical subscription clubs which were based in cities and towns like Edinburgh, Bath, Manchester and Norwich. One particular provincial club was found in Ipswich where the composer Joseph Gibbs was an active member. The painter, Thomas Gainsborough, a close friend of Gibbs and also an active member depicted the club and also the only surviving portrait of Joseph Gibbs. The picture shows two books on the shelves behind Gibbs with the names Corelli and Geminiani printed on their spines, indicating these composers' probable influence on Gibbs' musical life.

Ipswich was a thriving port and one of the leading market towns of East Anglia, which was undoubtedly one of the richest parts of England at the time due to the successful wool trade and agriculture. Gibbs was based in East Anglia for the entirety of his career. Little is known of his early life and education other than being born in Colchester on 12th December 1698. It is possible he went to London to study with Thomas Roseingrave before returning to the

East of England where he primarily worked as an organist. He took up organist posts at Harwich in 1734, Dedham in 1744 and at St Mary Le Tower, Ipswich in 1748 where he remained for the rest of his life. Gibbs played a prominent part in the musical life of the whole region and there are numerous accounts of him giving organ recitals such as at the installation of the new organ at Hadleigh in 1773. On Gibbs' death, *The Gentleman's Magazine* noted that 'in his profession Gibbs was eminently distinguished, both as a composer and a performer ... universally beloved and respected.' He was given a full civic funeral with music played by the bands of the Scots Greys and the East Suffolk Militia and was buried by the organ at St Mary Le Tower however his grave has since been lost.

Gibbs' compositional output is slender. Besides the 8 Violin Sonatas, his surviving works total 5 unpublished organ voluntaries and a set of six quartettos for four part strings with continuo (Op.2,1777) which were among the first printed quartets composed by an Englishman. It is highly likely Gibbs composed choral music of which none survives.

He received great support for the publication of his Violin sonatas in 1748 with no fewer than 161 subscribers. They ranged from fellow composers William Boyce and Maurice Greene, the music societies at Dedham and Ipswich and organists and clergy from across the East of England including a number in Cambridge. 12 copies were sold by the London based music publisher, Peter Thompson and shows Gibbs's music was not just confined to the provinces.

These Sonatas are undoubtedly inspired by Corelli and Charles Burney described Corelli's sonatas as 'models of simplicity, grace, and elegance.' Gibbs has used Corellian stylistic features throughout but added his own unique style to create music of great virtuosity. He is not afraid to experiment with eccentric decorations, added chromaticism and striking rhythmic variety. There are a mosaic of different styles from highly florid dance titled movements, sensuous *affettuoso* and variations to simple, pastoral melodies harking back to folk song. He brings great melodic invention throughout the Sonatas and challenging virtuosity for the player with double, triple and quadruple stopping all found. He is detailed in his dynamic and articulation markings and ornamentation is often already notated, moving away from the tradition of improvised embellishments.

The uniqueness of the Sonatas by Joseph Gibbs makes them exciting music to be heard today and highlights the quality of composers who were more provincially based. He was not afraid to experiment developing a strong individual style with rich harmonies and rhythmic and melodic vitality. His music is forward thinking and should be considered as some of the finest examples of the genre in the 18th Century.

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