

THE PERIODICAL OVERTURE IN 8 PARTS XXIII (OVERTURE TO *THE DEATH OF ABEL*) NICCOLÒ PICCINNI (PICCINI)

Published by Robert Bremner at the Harp and Hautboy, opposite Somerset-House, in the Strand
Issued: between 27 February and 9 March 1768; price 2 shillings
Source: Henry Watson Music Library – Courtesy of Manchester Libraries,
Information and Archives, Manchester City Council: BR580Po35
Instrumentation: 2 violins, viola, basso, 2 oboes, 2 horns [originally in F]
Editors: Barnaby Priest & Alyson McLamore



COMMENTARY

With *Periodical Overture No. 23*, Robert Bremner (c.1713–1789) issued the last of the four works by Niccolò Piccinni (Piccini) (1728–1800) that he included in the long-running *Periodical Overture* series. Until this issue, Bremner had never featured the same composer four times in a row. However, all four of the Piccinni overtures were published within “Opera Quarta,” Bremner’s only “all-Italian” set during the twenty years of his enterprise.

Piccinni’s first appearance within the series, *Periodical Overture No. 20*, was Bremner’s edition of the overture from *La buona figliuola*, the celebrated opera that had made Piccinni a household name across Europe. Bremner seems to have achieved a bit of a publishing “coup” by being the first to issue music from that very popular production, not just in England but also in Europe. It seems probable that his decision to continue with Piccinni for the next three releases was an effort to capitalize on the success of his first issue—especially since *La buona figliuola* was performed repeatedly in London during the six-month span that saw the four *Periodical* symphonies published.¹ We do not know where the score for *Periodical Overture No. 21* originated, but it is highly likely that it had also previously served as an opera *sinfonia*, given its structural similarities to the other Piccinni works in Bremner’s series. In the case of *Periodical Overture No. 22*, a surviving operatic manuscript allows us to verify that Bremner’s print was drawn from the overture to *Le contadine bizzarre* (1763)—although Bremner did not acknowledge that source, unlike his practice in *Periodical Overture No. 20*, which identified the operatic connection not only on the title page but in a footnote appended to each part as well.²

In the case of *Periodical Overture No. 23*, Bremner published an (unacknowledged) orchestral overture that Piccinni had employed at least three times in prior works: *L’Astrologa*, *Antigono*, and *La morte di Abele*. *L’Astrologa* was an *opera buffa* presented in Venice during the 1761–1762 Carnival season; it may have been previously staged in Naples in 1756 as “*L’Astrologo*,” although that performance has not been confirmed.³ The same orchestral music opened *Antigono*, an *opera seria* that played in Naples in November 1762.⁴ Even before



¹ <https://londonstagedatabase.uoregon.edu/sphinx-results.php?date-type=1&performance=&author=&actor%5B%5D=&role%5B%5D=&keyword=buona+figliuola&sortBy=datea>.

² Biblioteca del Conservatorio di musica S. Pietro a Majella (I-Nc): Rari Corn. 2.3-4.

³ IMSLP280500-PMLP455232-piccinni_l'astrologa_378902008.pdf; A[Ilberto] Cametti, “Saggio cronologico delle opere teatrali (1754-1794) di Niccolò Piccinni,” *Rivista musicale italiana* 8 (1901): 78.

⁴ Biblioteca del Conservatorio di musica S. Pietro a Majella (I-Nc): Rari 2.1.1-2; Cametti, “Saggio cronologico delle opere teatrali (1754-1794) di Niccolò Piccinni,” 84

AT the THEATRE-ROYAL in the HAY-MARKET, THIS DAY, the 24th instant, will be performed an Entertainment of Sacred Music, called
The DEATH of ABEL.
 An ORATORIO.
 From the ITALIAN of METASTASIO.
 Set to Music by Signor NICCOLO PICCINI, Author of the celebrated Opera, called LA BUONA FIGLIUOLA.
 With ADDITIONAL CHORUSSES.
 And the MORNING HYMN from MILTON'S PARADISE LOST.
 The First Violin, and a Solo, by Mr. BARTHELEMON.
 Concerto on the Hautboy, by Mr. SIMPSON.
 Boxes 5s. Pit 3s. First Gall. 2s. Upper Gall. 1s.
 Places for the Boxes to be taken at the Theatre: Books of the Performance to be had there only, price sixpence.
 The doors will be opened at five o'clock, and to begin at half after six. Vivant Rex & Regina.

own business decision to put multiple works by Piccinni into his series.⁷

In addition, the Haymarket production may very well have been Bremner's direct source for *Periodical Overture No. 23*. The very first newspaper reference to *No. 23* appeared in the 25–27 February 1768 issue of the *St. James's Chronicle; or, The British Evening-Post*, which announced that the symphony would be published "in a few Days." There is no surviving "This Day is Published" announcement for *Periodical Overture No. 23*, but it is likely to have been released around the first of March, since that would have aligned with Bremner's usual timing during the inaugural year of the series. We also know that the symphony was issued before 9 March 1768, since that was the date when the *Public Advertiser* informed readers that the "Number 23 of the Periodical Overtures" was "just published."⁸ Since the oratorio was also performed within that timeframe, and it employed the same overture that appeared in Bremner's print, it seems

NEW MUSIC.
This Day was published, Price 3s.
A Third Number of the Songs in the Opera
La Schiava, by Sig. Piccini.
 Printed and sold by R. Bremner, facing Somerset-House.
 In a few Days will be published, the fourth and last Number of the Songs in *La Schiava*. The favourite Songs in the Opera *Iphigenia*. Number XXIII. of the *Periodical Overtures*, by Piccini.

NEW MUSICK.
This Day is published, Price 2s. 6d.
THE favourite Songs in the new
Opera IFIGENIA.
 Printed and sold, by R. Bremner, facing Somerset-House, in the Strand.
 Of whom may be had, just published, The fourth and last Number of the Songs in *La Schiava*, the favourite Songs in *Tigrane*. Number 23. of the *Periodical Overtures*, by Sig. Piccini. Number 6. of the *Harmonist's Magazine*.

very possible that he obtained the music from the theater managers. Certainly, it seems evident that he was capitalizing on concurrent performances of yet another Piccinni work in order to drum up more interest in his series.

have been able to bring approximately 130 works to the stage.⁹ Reusing a *sinfonia* for multiple operas was not unique to Piccinni, however; the practice was fairly common, and Giachino Rossini (1792–1868) was still doing the same thing in the nineteenth century.

The fact that there were at least three known antecedents for *Periodical Overture No. 23*—that the same orchestral introduction was repurposed for three works of very different genres—helps us to understand how Piccinni may

Like many aspiring opera composers, Piccinni went to Naples for training, leaving his hometown of Bari. His reputation was initially built on *buffa* operas, but the hit production of *Zenobia*, in 1756, proved his

⁵ *The Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser*, 24 February 1768, p. 1.

⁶ *The Public Advertiser*, 26 February 1768, p. 1.

⁷ David Wyn Jones, "Robert Bremner and *The Periodical Overture*," *Soundings* 7 (1978): 66–67.

⁸ *St. James's Chronicle; or, The British Evening-Post*, 25 February—27 February 1768, p. 3; *The Public Advertiser*, 9 March 1768, p. 1.

⁹ Dennis Libby, Julian Rushton, and Mary Hunter, "(Vito) Niccolò [Nicola] (Marcello Antonio Giacomo) Piccinni [Piccini]," in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 2nd ed., ed. Stanley Sadie (London: Macmillan, 2001), Vol. 19: 708.

skill with *seria* topics as well. His reputation soon spread, and commissions began arriving from Rome. *La buona figliuola* was his second production for that city, and one commentator reported that it took Piccinni only eighteen days to compose.¹⁰ It sparked a storm of enthusiasm, and the run in Rome lasted two years. Piccinni's name began to be known internationally, since productions were soon staged in all of Europe's leading capitals. In fact, *La buona figliuola* became the most popular *opera buffa* of the eighteenth century.¹¹

Piccinni's operatic career had continued to thrive in Italy after *La buona figliuola*'s Roman premiere. He sent works to Rome for Carnival season almost every year until 1773, even as he wrote thirty other operas for Naples and various European cities. He was lured to Paris in 1776 by a promised pension, in addition to the income from his operas and aristocratic support. His arrival in France then sparked the famous "war" between the "Gluckists" (supporters of Christoph Willibald Gluck) and the "Piccinnists." The French Revolution brought Piccinni's annual French pension to an end, so he returned to Naples—but although he initially received a warm welcome, the subsequent marriage of one of his daughters to a Frenchman meant that Piccinni found himself under house arrest in 1794. He was allowed to return to France in 1798, but his pension was no longer paid in full, and by the time Bonaparte awarded him a new post at the Conservatoire, Piccinni's health had failed; he died in 1800.¹²

Of the four Piccinni overtures that Bremner made available in his series, the first—*No. 20*—was certainly the most popular. Still, the other issues stayed in the repertory as well. *Periodical Overture No. 23* was performed over the next two decades, as evidenced by concert data for 3 April 1778 and 8 July 1785 in the annals of the Edinburgh Musical Society.¹³ The fact that Piccinni himself used it as the *sinfonia* for at least two of his operas and an oratorio is another testament to its appeal.

Periodical Overture No. 23 shares many basic characteristics with the other three symphonies by Piccinni that Bremner published. All of them conform to an (unmodified) three-movement, fast-slow-fast structure, and they all employ solely the advertised eight-part ensemble of two violins, viola, basso, two oboes, and two horns. In addition, Piccinni uses the same tempo indication—"Allegro spiritoso"—for the first movements in all four symphonies. Nevertheless, the opening movement of *Periodical Overture No. 23* offers some uncommon features as well. It is set in $\frac{3}{4}$ meter, a time signature found in only eight of *The Periodical Overtures*' first movements. Curiously, some manuscript copies of the oratorio version—*La morte di Abele*—employed $\frac{6}{8}$ meter instead, presenting the same melodies but grouping their eighth notes differently.¹⁴

The form of the first movement was much more typical of the overall *Periodical Overtures*. It is a straightforward sonata form (without repeats), comprised of two distinct melodies. The first of its themes employs six-bar phrases that gradually ascend through arpeggiations of the tonic F major harmony for four bars before cascading downward rapidly for two measures. The lower strings provide a steady "drum 8ths" support throughout. Alternating bars of measured tremolos in the violins coincide with the long transition (m. 15) to the dominant. The second theme (m. 30) moves primarily downward, and it showcases rapid on-the-beat turns that create a "Scotch snap" effect.

Four emphatic chords—followed by a beat of silence for the full ensemble (m. 44–45)—signal the arrival at the development, which introduces several striking contrasts. It drops instantly to a *piano* dynamic level and it also omits the wind instruments for its entire duration of twenty-two measures. It also begins in the dominant's parallel minor, creating quite a bit of drama on multiple fronts. The recapitulation (m. 68) shakes off all those features and returns to F major and the first theme in a robust *forte* for the full ensemble. A tonic version of the second theme is ushered in at measure 89, although the first theme will seize the spotlight a final time at measure 100. Piccinni then blends motifs from both of the themes in alternation as he approaches the cadence and the concluding set of four strong chords.

The central "Andantino" creates a very different atmosphere. Like the first movement's development passage, the winds are tacet. The rondo structure alternates between two tonal centers—B-flat major (the first

¹⁰ Libby, Rushton, and Hunter, "(Vito) Niccolò [Nicola] (Marcello Antonio Giacomo) Piccinni [Piccini]," 708.

¹¹ MGG Online, s.v. "Niccolò Piccinni," by Elisabeth Schmierer, accessed 27 October 2024; William C. Holmes, "Pamela Transformed," *The Musical Quarterly* 38, no. 4 (October 1952), 587.

¹² Libby, Rushton, and Hunter, "(Vito) Niccolò [Nicola] (Marcello Antonio Giacomo) Piccinni [Piccini]," 708–709; MGG Online, s.v. "Niccolò Piccinni," by Elisabeth Schmierer.

¹³ Jenny Burchell, *Polite or Commercial Concerts?: Concert Management and Orchestral Repertoire in Edinburgh, Bath, Oxford, Manchester, and Newcastle, 1730–1799*, Outstanding Dissertations in Music from British Universities, ed. by John Caldwell (New York: Garland Publishing, 1996), 324, 344.

¹⁴ <https://rism.online/sources/400012152>.

movement's subdominant) and its own dominant (F major). The **A** refrain is filled with thirty-second notes and Scotch snaps with numerous short silences; its dynamic changes between *piano* and *forte* are abrupt and frequent. The first episode (m. 11) initially resembles the refrain, but **B** then moves on to some brief scales. The refrain reappears, largely unaltered, at m. 16, again in B-flat major. The **C** episode modulates back to F major once more (m. 22). Although **C** is also rhythmically dense with frequent rests, it is much more disjunct in character, and it remains at *piano* for a much longer stretch. Measure 27 then pulls us back to where we began, reestablishing B-flat major and reiterating the **A** refrain once again.

The closing “Allegro” movement's form is a pattern that James Hepokoski and Warren Darcy label a “Type 1 Sonata.”¹⁵ This pattern is sometimes called a sonatina; it is, essentially, a sonata form without development. It has much in common with the finales of the other Piccini works in Bremner's series: it is full of bouncy energy in $\frac{3}{8}$ meter that evokes a gigue. (*Periodical Overture No. 22* employed $\frac{6}{8}$ instead, but to similar effect.) The modulation from the tonic F major to the dominant C major is straightforward, but Piccinni keeps us guessing in many places with his use of irregular phrase lengths. Although the first theme (m. 1) and the second theme (m. 17) have much in common rhythmically, many of their phrases move in opposite directions. The recapitulation reestablishes F major at measure 39, and it reconciles the second theme to that harmony at measure 56. Heads are likely to nod along during the rollicking ending, and the appealing qualities of this *sinfonia* make it understandable why Piccinni chose to deploy it multiple times.

EDITORIAL METHODS

Transposing instruments: Transposing instruments are written in conventional modern format indicating original key—parts in original keys are available [e.g., Horn I in F (orig. in D)].

Slurs and ties: Editorial slurs are indicated using dotted lines; editorial ties are indicated by brackets.

Triplet/rhythmic grouping indications: In general, modern practice is followed. Occasionally (especially in slow movements), original subdivisions are used. Where groupings are inconsistently realized in the original source material, modern groupings are adopted.

Grace notes and appoggiaturas: These are generally treated as appoggiaturas and are given a value of half the note they precede; in cases where it seems clear that grace notes are intended in the original, a slash is added.

Alternate notes/ossia passages, etc.: When a written note is unplayable, an alternative octave substitution is indicated in smaller font and within brackets.

Accents/articulations/fermatas: There is considerable inconsistency in articulation throughout the set of periodical overtures. Following the Bremner edition, a wedge is used rather than a staccato mark. In some cases, the printed edition uses wedges and staccato markings within a movement (usually the slow central movement). When this is the case, both marks have been used. Where parallel passages indicate the use of articulations, these have been included between brackets.

Dynamic markings: In the original edition, the placement of dynamic marks can be inconsistent within the bar and sometimes across the barline. Where the correct placement of the dynamic is clear from the musical phrasing, the dynamics have been repositioned without comment. Where dynamics are less clear, or missing, the editor's dynamics occur within square brackets.

Crescendo/diminuendo markings: “Cresc.” and “dim.” markings are generally used, but there are rare exceptions to this with the use of hairpins. Where these are editorial, they are enclosed in square brackets. Other markings such as *rinf.* have been retained except where it seems clear that this refers to a crescendo.

Realization of notational shorthand: For spacing reasons, some use of notational short-hand has been used. When this is the case, the first full beat has been written out.

Altered note values: In the sources, there are occasional errors and inconsistencies in note values. Where these occur, the altered note values are given within brackets.

Accidentals: As is standard modern practice, accidentals remain valid until the next barline. This differs from eighteenth-century practice where this convention was not consistently employed. Wherever this is the case, accidentals are added in brackets.

¹⁵ James Hepokoski and Warren Darcy, *Elements of Sonata Theory: Norms, Types, and Deformations in the Late-Eighteenth-Century Sonata* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 345–6.

Figured bass: Although the eighteenth-century parts usually position the figured bass numerals above the relevant bass notes, the modern score and parts show them below the basso line.

Missing music: Where music is missing in the original, alternative sources are sought (e.g., when a bar is missing due to a printer's error or when music is unreadable). When eighteenth-century concordances are unobtainable, editorial notes are added in smaller font within brackets.

CRITICAL NOTES

The notation of dynamics and articulation has been standardized throughout. Where these are missing in the original source, they have been reconstructed from parallel passages. These are indicated by the use of dotted slurs and brackets. Where there is inconsistency in the use of staccato articulation marks, the editors have taken decisions based on the collocation of the markings. As is common with music printed in this period, *appoggiature* are inconsistently notated. These have been standardized. Copyist errors have been corrected in brackets (see notes below), along with errors in accidentals. Rehearsal letters, cues in parts, and bar numbers have been added for convenience.

Mvt. 1 Allegro Spiritoso

- | | | |
|-----------|---------------------------|---|
| m. 20 | Basso | 3rd beat figured bass changed to $\frac{6}{4}$ (correction of misspelling) |
| m. 30, 32 | Ob 1, Ob 2,
Vn 1, Vn 2 | second thirty-second note changed to B \flat 6 (maintain harmony from previous measure) |
| m. 47 | Vn 2 | 1st beat changed to E \flat 6 (maintain harmony from previous measure) |
| m. 49 | Vn 2 | first dotted eighth note changed to B \natural 5 (maintain harmony from previous measure) |
| m. 51 | Vn 2 | 1st beat changed to E \flat 6 (maintain harmony from previous measure) |
| m. 57 | Vn 2 | first dotted eighth note changed to A \flat 5 (maintain harmony from previous measure) |
| m. 95 | Vn 1, Vn 2 | first eighth note changed to C6 (unison with Ob 1) |
| m. 96 | Hn 1 | 1st beat changed to D6 (parallel passage with m. 94) |

Mvt. 2 Andantino

- | | | |
|-----------|------------|--|
| m. 8 | VA | third note changed to F4 (parallel with Basso) |
| m. 9 | Vn 1, Vn 2 | second note of 4th beat change to C \sharp 6 (flattened 7th) |
| m. 12, 14 | VA | first note changed to G4 (parallel movement with Basso) |
| m. 15 | Vn 1, Vn 2 | appoggiatura B \flat 4 added to third note (parallel passage with m. 31) |
| m. 23 | Vn 1 | appoggiatura C5 added to 3rd beat (parallel with Vn 2) |

Mvt. 3 Allegro

- | | | |
|-------|---------------------|--|
| m. 18 | Ob 1, Ob 2 | second eighth note changed to D6 (parallel with Vn 1) |
| m. 26 | Ob 1, Ob 2,
Vn 1 | rhythm on 1st beat changed to match Vn 1 (parallel structure to Vn 2 in m. 31) |
| m. 31 | Ob 1, Ob 2 | second eighth note changed to D6 (parallel with Vn 1) |
| m. 48 | Ob 1 | eighth notes D7, A6, F6 added to missing measure (mirroring Vn 1) |
| m. 52 | Vn 2 | 2nd beat notes changed to G6 sixteenths and 3rd beat changed to F \sharp 6 sixteenths (parallel with Vn 1) |
| m. 52 | VA | 3rd beat eighth note changed to A5 (parallel with Basso) |

CATALOGUE REFERENCES

RISM A/I P/PP 2215 [Répertoire International des Sources Musicales;
<https://rism.online/sources/1001211197>]

LaRue 13453 (P589) [Jan LaRue, *A Catalogue of 18th-Century Symphonies*, Volume I: Thematic Identifier (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988)]

ILLUSTRATIONS

Piccinni portrait: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Piccinni,_Niccol%C3%B2_1.JPG (public domain in its source country on January 1, 1996, and in the United States).

Publication announcement: *St. James's Chronicle; or, The British Evening-Post*, 25 February—27 February 1768, p. 3 (courtesy of the British Library Archives)

Publication announcement: *The Public Advertiser*, 9 March 1768, p. 1 (courtesy of the British Library Archives)

Libretto title page: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Niccol%C3%B2_Piccinni_-_The_Death_of_Abel_-_titlepage_of_the_libretto_-_London_1768.png?uselang=en#Licensing (public domain in its country of origin and other countries and areas where the copyright term is the author's life plus 70 years or fewer).

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND ESSAY

<https://repertoire-explorer.musikmph.de/en/periodical-overtures-details/>



PERFORMANCE MATERIALS

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