

## Felice Giardini, Italian composer and free mason

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Felice Giardini was born in Turin on 12<sup>th</sup> April 1716. Today his name appears in almost all the volumes on Western Music History. However, it is always included in a vague list of Italian composers and instrumentalists who had success in England around the mid-1700s.

After singing as a choirboy at the Milan Cathedral for three years, he went back to Turin where he studied the violin with Giovan Battista Somis, who had been a pupil of Arcangelo Corelli, was then the founder of the school of violin in Turin and the teacher of the famous Gaetano Pugnani and Giovan Battista Viotti.

By the age of twenty, he was a violinist in the Orchestra of the Teatro Regio in Turin. News about this period is very vague and some historians believe Giardini was playing at the San Carlo Theatre in Naples during the early years of the 1740s.

There is no clear information until the period 1748-1750. During these years Giardini went on a series of journeys which took him to Germany, then to France and finally to London, where he would have lived for the following 35 years. In the English capital, Giardini became famous as a skilful and refined violinist in a very short time and, following the same path as Geminiani from Lucca, he began to attend the cultural and aristocratic circles of the city. This allowed him to obtain the licence of King George II to publish nine collections of pieces both vocal and instrumental. They included duo Sonatas for Violin and Basso Continuo, Violin Duets, Violin Concertos, Cantatas, Solos for Transverse Flute. The *Six Sonatas for Harpsichord and Violin Op. 3* are particularly interesting and they stand out from the other pieces: in these pieces the harpsichord is not used for the basso continuo as usual, but it is used as an obbligato instrument in dialogue with the violin. The dedications on the frontispieces of these collections clearly confirm the high level of Giardini's acquaintances. Thanks to these contacts and his skills on the violin, he had the opportunity to play the main series of concerts in the *Great Room* during the years 1751 and 1752 and then to handle its artistic direction in 1753 and 1755. The hall was inaugurated near Soho Square a few years before and, in a short time, it had become one of the most popular hall in the city.

Since he arrived in London, Giardini showed to be a charitable person, as it is proved by the concerts he promoted periodically from 1752 to 1780 in favour of the Lock Hospital, a hospital which was specialized in treating venereal diseases and was founded in 1747 in Grosvenor Place, near Hyde Park Corner.

In 1753 he married the Florentine singer Maria Caterina Violante Vestris. Already on the stages of the Neapolitan theatres in 1742, Vestris had quite a libertine life and, before marrying Giardini, she was the mistress of many European important men: King Charles III of Naples, Francis I Emperor of Austria, the Governor of Milan Gian Luca Pallavicini are just a few examples that can be mentioned. The marriage between the Florentine singer and the violinist from Turin lasted a few years and it ended in 1755, when Vestris finally left for Paris, where she was acclaimed many times at the Concert Spirituel, the public concert series organized in Paris at the Tuileries Palace.

During these first years in London, Giardini was also the violin teacher of Sir William Hamilton (1730-1803), future English ambassador in Naples. Hamilton was a well-known figure of music history because he welcomed the Mozart family in Naples and because of his antiquarian studies and his researches on volcanology on the city of Pompeii.

In the 1760s, Giardini established a new important and artistically stimulating relationship with two remarkable German musicians, Carl Friedrich Abel (1723-1787) and Johann Christian Bach (1735-1782), who settled in London in 1759 and in 1762 respectively. In a short time they were part of the group of the Queen's musicians and in 1764 they began a very close collaboration, which led to the establishment of the so-called *Bach-Abel Concerts*. Very important musicians of the era such as the famous Joseph Haydn, besides, obviously, their friend Felice Giardini participated in these concerts, organized until 1783.

From 1756 to 1766, Giardini composed the music for different operas, which are unfortunately lost. As an impresario he promoted their staging, but he did not have much success.

Giardini gave hospitality to his old fellow student Gaetano Pugnani (1731-1798), who shortly before had been initiated into the Libera Muratoria, probably in a lodge in Turin. This institution was officially founded in London in 1717 and it had spread across different parts of Europe. It was the most latest experience of western esotericism and it proposed moral ideas which were accepted by its affiliates, who aimed at reaching a personal and a social improvement. During the second half of eighteenth century, the English Libera Muratoria considerably invested in promoting musical culture, especially in the chamber music field. From 1765 to 1767 different members of the Royal Family joined Masonry. In particular, three of them were King George III's brothers, who shortly after would have influenced Giardini's artistic success. The spread of esoteric ideas especially in upper middle classes and aristocracy, the importance given to music, the joining of many friends and musicians, like the enthusiastic one of Pugnani, were all reasons that presumably favourably predisposed Giardini towards the Libera Muratoria and that convinced him to join it some years later.

On 7<sup>th</sup> June 1770, the organist and English composer Charles Burney went to Italy. He used his journey as a base for his *History of Music*, a first pioneering history of western music. Before leaving, Burney meticulously prepared every detail in order to make his research faster and more useful. In particular, he took advantage of the great popularity that Giardini had reached during those years both as violinist and impresario and he persuaded the Italian violinist to write some letters of presentation for him. His journey report published in 1771 with the title *The present state of Music in France and Italy (Viaggio musicale in Italia)* contains clear proof of these letters.

On 5<sup>th</sup> November 1770, Burney visited the Conservatory of S. Onofrio in Naples and in his journey report he wrote: "*However, I heard in a private room two of the boys accompany each other; the one played a solo of Giardini's on the violin, and the other one of his own on the base; the first was but indifferently executed, but the second was a pretty composition, and very well performed. I find all over Italy that Giardini's solos, and Bach's and Abel's overtures, are in great repute, and very justly so, as I heard nothing equal to them of the kind, on the continent*". On July 1722 Burney set off again, this time to Germany. On 1<sup>st</sup> October, after staying in Berlin, he arrived at Potsdam where he met the Bohemian violinist and composer František Benda (1709-1786). When Burney met him, he introduced himself showing a letter written by Giardini. Burney described Benda's reaction when he saw the letter of Giardini with these words: "*I was furnished with a letter to him from Mr. Giardini, with whose remembrance he appeared to be much pleased, and said, that though it was more than twenty years since he had seen or heard him, he had not forgot his fine tone, so remarkably clear, full, and sweet; and added, that he should always retain a precise and pleasing idea of his graceful manner of playing, of his fancy in extempore cadences, and facility in executing whatever was possible to be performed on the violin*".

In the 1770s Giardini was very active as a violinist and a conductor and his name appeared in many concert seasons such as the *Three Choirs Festival*, a music festival founded in 1715 and still held today, promoted every year by the choirs of the cities of Gloucester, Worcester and Hereford. During those same years Giardini was a soloist violin and a conductor in the seasons at the

*Pantheon*, a public building in London designed by the neo-Gothic architect James Wyatt who was inspired by the monument with the same name in Rome.

Even though he was very busy as a violinist and a conductor, Giardini managed to continue with his plans as a composer. In these years his operas 17 and 18, collections for Trio ensembles with different formations (violin, viola and cello; guitar, violin and fortepiano; harpsichord, violin and cello) were published.

On 23<sup>rd</sup> January 1777, the *Lodge of the Nine Muses 330*, which is now still in existence, was founded in London. Among its founders there was Luigi Borghi (1745-*post* 1806), the violinist and composer from Bologna who had already been a pupil of the above-mentioned Gaetano Pugnani. One year later it was founded, in about five months, in this lodge the three musicians and friends Abel, Giardini and Bach were initiated, on 13<sup>th</sup> February, 12<sup>th</sup> March and 15<sup>th</sup> June respectively. In 1778 Giardini worked on the composition of the opera *Sappho*, unfortunately lost, and his operas 21 and 22, two collections of quartets for different formations. Their frontispieces show that Giardini was appointed as *Music Master* of the Dukes of Gloucester and Cumberland, to be precise William Henry and Henry Frederick, brothers of King George III, who have been mentioned before about their Masonic affiliation. The six quartets of Op. 21 – three for harpsichord, violin, viola and cello and three for harpsichord, two violins and cello – were dedicated to Georgiana Spencer Cavendish, Duchess of Devonshire (1757-1806). First child of Earl Spencer – who belonged to the Spencer family Lady Diana would have descended from – she married William Cavendish, 5<sup>th</sup> Duke of Devonshire, in 1774. The relationship between Giardini and the Duke and the Duchess of Devonshire was very solid and the first four quartets that the composer dedicated to the couple were followed by many other compositions: in 1781 he composed a *Devonshire Minuet* for Fortepiano and Violin, in 1783 he dedicated to William Cavendish his Op. 25, a new collection of six quartets, three for violin, flute (or oboe), viola and cello and three for two violins, viola and cello and in 1790 he dedicated to the Countess his Op. 30, six trio sonatas for two violins and bass.

Thanks to his patrons, and in particular to William Henry, Duke of Gloucester, who in the meanwhile had become the Grand Maestro of the *Grand Lodge of England*, Giardini was able to carry on composing his works, and in 1782 he managed to publish a new collection of six quartets: Op. 23, dedicated to the Prince of Wales, the future George IV. This collection included two quartets for violin, two violas and cello, two for two violins, viola and cello and other two quartets for violin, oboe, viola and cello.

In 1784 Giardini left London and went on a journey with his patrons. He passed through Siena and Roma, he arrived in Naples towards the end of 1786. He stayed in Naples for the whole carnival season and he used to go very often to the British embassy where his old pupil sir William Hamilton still served as the British Ambassador. Thanks to his efforts, the British embassy in Naples had become a unique cultural centre of great weight for the circulation of ideas during that age. Hamilton was a point of reference for all those foreigners who stopped off in Naples during their *Grand Tour*. In Naples Giardini managed to have some letters of presentation for a journey in Spain and Portugal that he made around mid-1787. When he came back to London in 1790, he tried again in being an impresario managing the staging of Cimarosa's *Ninetta* at the Hay-Market. Unfortunately it was not a success: English people's musical tastes had been changed in the meantime and there were new musicians and composers on the stages of the theatres. For these reasons in 1792 Giardini, almost an eighty-year-old man, ran the last risk in his life. He left for Saint Petersburg with an opera buffa company which included some of his pupils. On the basis of the scarce information about the adventure in Russia, it is possible to assume that it was not a success.

Felice Giardini died forgotten and poor in Moscow on 8<sup>th</sup> June 1796.