

Return to Tanglewood (2017): All Italian | Program Notes

Vivaldi, the Rock-n'-Roll Composer of the 18th Century

by Jeannette Sorrell

One day when Vivaldi (the Redhead Priest) was saying Mass, a musical theme came into his mind. He at once left the altar where he was officiating and repaired to the sacristy to write out his theme, then he came back to finish the Mass. He was reported to the Inquisition, which luckily looked on him as a musician, that is, AS A MADMAN, and merely forbade him to say Mass from that time forward.

– P. L. de Boisgelou, 1800

By around 1700, Venice was already a tourist destination. The glittering floating city was full of European princes and British aristocrats, attracted by the lavish spectacles, the eight opera houses, and... the over 10,000 elegant prostitutes. The city maintained several very large religious orphanages for its several thousand illegitimate and orphaned girls (the daughters of aristocrats who had amorous adventures).

And so it was that when a young priest named Antonio Vivaldi failed to cut the mustard, the church elders decided to send him to one of the orphanages, where he could be useful as a music teacher. The famous story relayed by Boisgelou (quoted above) has fascinated music-lovers for centuries. What led to Vivaldi's sudden exit during Mass? Here is his own explanation, in a letter of 1737:

When I had been ordained a priest for a year or a bit more, I discontinued saying Mass, having had to leave the altar without completing it because of a chest ailment...that has burdened me since birth. For this reason I nearly always stay home, and I only go out in a gondola because I can no longer walk.

However, Vivaldi's statement is not credible in view of his hectic travel schedule as impresario, conductor and entrepreneur throughout Europe. The view of Mr. Boisgelou, quoted above, was shared by other writers of the time: Vivaldi's ambitions lay in the music world, not the priesthood.

The Church leaders wisely sent their redhead priest to the Ospedale della Pietà, one of the four religious orphanages with an extraordinary emphasis on music. The girls at the orphanage played and studied music – and little else – all day. The orphanage had several orchestras of different levels. Vivaldi became the music master and composer for the most elite orchestra – the one whose public concerts every Sunday drew aristocratic tourists from far and wide.

Imagine this:

On a Sunday afternoon, the chapel of the Pietà is packed with well-to-do Venetians and distinguished foreign visitors. They peer in fascination at the gallery above, where an orchestra of about 40 girls performs the latest concertos of their music-master, Antonio Vivaldi. The *prete rosso*, or "Redhead Priest," is now in his 40's and celebrated throughout Europe. But perhaps he is not as famous as these orphan girls for whom he composes. The girls give world-class virtuoso performances. Their Sunday concerts (technically church services) are the greatest tourist attraction of Venice. The girls, dressed in white, are partly screened from view by a wrought-iron lattice, much to the chagrin of the audience.

Vivaldi's Orphan Girls

The orphans for whom Vivaldi wrote his concertos may have been the most music-absorbed young people that history has known. These girls had no identity other than their roles in the elite orchestra. They had no last names, and were known as “Marietta dal Violino,” or “Bernardina dal Violoncello,” etc. Vivaldi often wrote his concertos for a particular girl, indicating her name at the top of the manuscript. Many of the most virtuosic violin concertos were written for “Anna Maria dal Violino.”

It is well known that these orphans received proposals of marriage from wealthy gentlemen. What most people do not realize, though, is that any orphan of the Pietà who chose to marry was required to sign a contract saying that she would never perform as a musician again. This was how the Pietà maintained its standing as a leading tourist attraction of the world. Thus, many of the girls turned down their marriage offers, because they could not face the idea of living without music.

Anna Maria dal Violino received proposals year after year, and was the subject of love poems printed in Venice newspapers. Nevertheless, she apparently could not bring herself to marry in view of the sacrifice she would have to make. She remained at the Pietà her entire life, becoming the principal Maestra of the orchestra.

There is rustling in the crowd as a favorite young soloist, Anna Maria del Violino, takes her place in front of the orchestra. But before she begins to play, Vivaldi unexpectedly reads aloud – a poem about Spring. Then the performance begins, with music that seems stunningly modern. Bird-calls, thunder, and even the barking of a sheepdog are all brilliantly depicted in the music. The crowd has never heard music telling a story in such a detailed way. The solo violin part played by Signorina Anna Maria is formidable.

Following the performance, Anna Maria and Maestro Vivaldi are both greeted by ecstatic coughing and shuffling from the crowd (who are not allowed to applaud at this “church service”). Several wealthy gentlemen make their way to the iron screen to proffer marriage proposals to Anna Maria and a few of the prettiest girls.

* * *

Vivaldi, in these concertos for his young protégés, was the great developer of *ritornello* form – the form that became the model for concerto-writing by all European composers of the century, including J.S. Bach. The Italian word “ritornello” means something that *returns*. The same word is used to mean the *refrain* in pop music – and indeed, Vivaldi’s ritornellos convey the bold and driving sense of rhythm and melody that is more commonly associated with pop music. After all, he was writing for teenagers.

In 1725 Vivaldi published a collection of twelve concertos titled *Il cimento dell’Armonia e dell’Inventione* - The Contest Between Harmony and Invention. With this curious title, he unleashed a revolutionary question: should music simply be about harmony, or could it serve to illustrate inventive ideas, events, moods, natural scenes, etc? Vivaldi set out to prove that it could do both. The first four concertos of the collection, titled *Le Quattro Stagioni* (*The Four Seasons*), are virtuoso demonstrations of music in the service of *storytelling* – in this case, the story of Nature and her various moods.

Though Vivaldi had written music in imitation of Nature before, he took the art to new heights this time, supplying sonnets to clarify the meaning of the music. Scholars generally believe that the sonnets were composed by Vivaldi himself, as they do not seem to be the work of a trained poet.

The “Summer” concerto is a brilliant evocation of hot summer days in Italy – sighing in the heat, the buzzing of flies and wasps, and a stunning depiction of a thunderstorm. Anyone who has been in Italy during a summer storm will appreciate how the torrent of cascading violin scales evokes the onslaught of rain when the clouds burst.

The role of the performer as an animated and improvisatory storyteller was fundamental to baroque performance, and especially to Vivaldi’s music. The notes on the page exist to convey an emotion or mood or event, and the performer’s job is to evoke those feelings in the listener. Thus these concertos are a fresh experience for us each night – always an adventure.

The **Concerto for Two Cellos** was probably premiered by two teenage cellists at the orphanage. It is a wonderful example of Vivaldi’s driving rock-n-roll rhythm, as the cellists engage in a duel that is alternately playful and fiery. The beautiful middle movement is a poetic dialogue with haunting and exotic harmonies.

Vivaldi had a meteoric career, achieving Beatles-level popularity and then crashing to complete oblivion. It is not surprising that his concertos are by far the most popular pieces in the classical repertoire. Inspired by the youthful

energy of his young interpreters, he imbued his concertos with the same sense of driving rhythm and earthy harmonies that we all respond to in rock music. We in Apollo's Fire think of him as the rock-n-roll composer of the 18th century.

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Vivaldi's Sonnet for the "Summer" Concerto

L'Estate

Allegro non molto - Allegro
Sotto dura Stagion dal Sole accesa
Languè l' huom, languè 'l gregge,
ed arde il Pino;
Scioglie il Cucco la Voce, e tosto intesa
Canta la Tortorella e 'l gardelino.
Zeffiro dolce Spira, mà contesa
Muove Borea improvviso al Suo vicino;
E piange il Pastorel, perche sospesa
Teme fiera borasca, e 'l suo destino.

Adagio e piano - Presto e forte
Toglie alle membra lasse il Suo riposo
Il timore de' Lampi, e tuoni fieri
E de mosche, e mossoni il Stuol furioso!

Presto
Ah che pur troppo i Suo timor Son veri
Tuona e fulmina il Ciel e grandioso
Tronca il capo alle Spiche e a' grani alteri.

Summer

Allegro non molto
During the harsh season of the sun,
Humans and sheep languish,
and the pine trees burn.
We hear the cuckoo's voice,
Then sweet songs of turtledove and goldfinch.
Soft breezes stir the air... but the threatening
North wind sweeps them suddenly aside.
The shepherd trembles,
Fearing violent storms and his fate.

Adagio e piano - Presto e forte
The fear of lightning and fierce thunder
Prevents him from resting his tired limbs,
As gnats and flies buzz furiously around him.

Presto
Ah, his fears were justified –
The Heavens thunder and roar majestically,
Cutting the heads off the wheat and grain.