

NOTES ON THE PROGRAM

Fire and Love, à la Baroque

by Jeannette Sorrell

In Italy there is an old saying... “*L’Italiano è la lingua della musica, degli angeli, e dell’ Amore.*” (Italian is the language of music, of the angels, and of Love.)

Italians are passionate about art and love. In a piazza in Tuscany on a hot summer night, it is not unusual to see two young men get into a fist fight over a girl. The Italian language is particularly emotional, being full of strong inflections and accents. Did the language develop in this way because of the emotional temperament of its people? Or vice versa? Whichever is the case, it’s clear that composers from Monteverdi to Vivaldi and beyond have always been aware of their language’s particular ability to convey feelings of love – not to mention the jealousy and despair that often goes along with amorous adventures.

In Venice of the 17th century, CLAUDIO MONTEVERDI was the *Maestro di Capella* at the great basilica of San Marco; but he also provided the aristocrats of Venice with plenty of love songs and party music. About 100 years later, a red-haired priest named ANTONIO VIVALDI walked those same streets. The Prete Rosso, as he was known, provided Venetians with passionate operas as well as lively instrumental concertos for the city’s famous orchestra of young ladies.



Antonio Vivaldi

In Vivaldi’s time, the renowned Venetian orphanage known as the *Ospedale della Pietà* was likely the scene of flirtations and passions expressed through music. This large home for the illegitimate daughters of the nobility provided an elite musical education for many talented teenage girls. When the Church leaders decided that a young priest named Antonio Vivaldi was not actually suited for the priesthood, they sent him to become the music teacher at the *Ospedale*.

Over the next three decades, Vivaldi served as music-master to the elite top-level orchestra of the orphanage – the showcase ensemble. In this role, he composed about 500 concertos for his young female protégés. Since Vivaldi’s concertos were written primarily to be played by teenage girls, he infused them with youthful energy and a kind of rhythmic drive that, in my opinion, often resembles rock n’ roll.

The orphans for whom Vivaldi wrote his concertos 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

NOTES ON THE PROGRAM (continued)

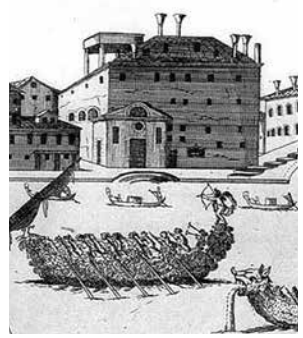
the manuscript. Many of the most virtuosic violin concertos were written for “Anna Maria *dal Violino*.” These girls, confined in a convent and punished if they spoke, gave world-class, virtuoso performances. They often received proposals of marriage from wealthy gentlemen. However, any orphan of the Pietà who chose to marry was required to sign a contract saying that she would never perform as a musician again.

Vivaldi 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.

The delightful *Ciaccona in C Major* that opens our concert is based on an old renaissance dance with a lively syncopated rhythm. Vivaldi’s version was the finale of his *Concerto for Strings, RV 114*. I lightly arranged it to feature a pair of soloists who weave variations and are “answered” by the orchestra.

Nicola (Antonio) Porpora was an Italian opera composer and teacher of singing, whose most famous singing student was the castrato Farinelli. Porpora’s aria “*Alto Giove*,” which I have arranged as an instrumental piece, is from the opera *Polifemo*. Polyphemus, the giant son of Poseidon, loved the sea-nymph Galatea, and wooed her with no success. A sense of love and longing rings through Porpora’s beautiful harmonies. In my arrangement, the vocal line is given to a solo violinist, who is eventually answered by a companion violinist in a flirtatious encounter.

Italians did not have a total monopoly on love songs in the Baroque period. The young HENRY PURCELL (who died tragically at the age of 36) left us some of England’s most exquisite love songs. Two of Shakespeare’s plays provided the inspiration for our pair of Purcell songs tonight. *If Love’s a sweet passion* is from Purcell’s 1692 semi-opera, *The Fairie-Queen* (a loose adaptation of Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*). With a lilting, French-flavored rhythm, this song was one of Purcell’s most popular theatre ayres, and was republished in many collections in the 18th century. The song *If music be the food of love* quotes the opening words of Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night*.



Ospedale della Pietà

A

Song in the New O P E R A call'd ,
The FAIERY QUEEN. Sung by
Mrs. Dyer :

If Loves a sweet Passion, why does it torment, if a bitter
Oh tell me whence comes my content? Since I suffer with
Pleasure why should I complain, or grieve at my Fate when I
know tis in pain; yet so pleasing the Pain is, so soft is the Dart,
that at once it both wounds me and tickles my Heart. M^r H. Purcell

I prefs her hand gently, look languishing down,
And by Passionate silence I make my Love known;
But Oh! how I'm blest when so kind she does prove,
By some willing mistake, to discover her Love;
When in striving to hide, she returns all her Flame,
And our Eyes tell each other, what neither dare Name.

If Love's a sweet passion from Purcell's The Fairie-Queen

of this concerto features crisp, dotted rhythms, tossed back and forth in a friendly conversation between the two soloists. The lively finale is rustic and earthy, with uneven phrases suggesting the influence of Polish folk music.

Vivaldi's *Concerto for Two Violins in C minor* is rich in drama. The piece is almost like a moody pair of lovers, with melancholy passages interspersed with exuberant virtuosity in the solo violins. Vivaldi's gorgeous aria *Vedrò con mio diletto* ("I will see my love with joy") is from the 1724 opera *Giustino*, written for the carnival celebrations in Rome. This aria was originally sung by a male castrato.

We conclude with Vivaldi's *Concerto for Four Violins in B minor*, surely one of his most stunning compositions. With opportunities for dialogue between four different soloists, plus the first cellist who has solo aspirations, the concerto achieves an exceptionally climactic moments when all the solo voices join together. It is not surprising that Bach admired this piece, and arranged it for four harpsichords so that he could play it with his sons at Zimmerman's Coffeehouse in Leipzig.

We hope this evening of baroque romance inspires your Valentine weekend.



Was Vivaldi in Love?

The question haunted the Venetian gossips of the 18th century.
Vivaldi was a priest. What was he doing with Anna Girò?

Born c. 1710, the mezzo-soprano Anna Girò was about 30 years younger than Vivaldi. She was his prima donna, and they toured together in opera productions for months at a time, nearly always with Anna in the starring role. She became known as "l'Annina del Prete Rosso."

It appears that Anna arrived in Venice in 1720 to live at the *Ospedale della Pietà*, an "orphanage-cum-conservatoire," where Vivaldi was music master. Most likely, she became his student. Four years later, the young singer made her debut at the Venice Opera, as a teenager. It was a triumph. And within months, Anna and her elder half-sister, acting as chaperone, moved in with Vivaldi – ostensibly as housekeepers.

It was not unusual for priests in the 18th century to have live-in housekeepers. But were they in love? Everyone thought so.

The plot thickens when you consider the words of Vivaldi's librettist: *"Anna did not have a beautiful voice, nor was she a great musician, but she was pretty and attractive, she acted well and had protectors: one needs nothing more to deserve the role of a prima donna."*

In 1737, Vivaldi was formally censured by the Church for his conduct with the young woman. The following year, he was not allowed to enter the city of Ferrara where his opera *Farnace* was to be performed.

The city's cardinal disapproved of a priest living under the same roof as a female singer. Vivaldi adamantly denied any romantic relationship, writing to his patron, "Over the past 14 years, La Girò and I have appeared together in many European cities, and her modesty was everywhere admired. It is impossible to perform the opera without La Girò because it is impossible to find another prima donna of her caliber."

We will probably never know....

– JS

