

## Vividly Vivaldi

by René Spencer Saller

Born in Venice, in 1678, Antonio Vivaldi was an ordained priest, a virtuosic violinist, and an influential music teacher. The so-called *prete rosso* ("Redheaded Priest") also happened to be one of the most inventive and prolific composers of the Baroque era. Like his slightly younger contemporary Johann Sebastian Bach, who collected his scores and studied them obsessively, Vivaldi wrote prodigiously in almost every genre. In addition to some 90 operas, dozens of sacred works, four oratorios, and about 40 secular cantatas, he generated reams of instrumental music, including at least 500 concertos for solo instruments and orchestral groupings. With this massive catalog of concertos, Vivaldi helped establish the structural conventions that continue, 300 years later, to define the form: a three-movement, fast-slow-fast structure, balanced between individual virtuosity and collective unity.

After giving up his pastoral duties late in 1706, at the age of 28, Vivaldi taught violin at a prestigious all-girls orphanage-*cum*-conservatory in Venice, the Pio Ospedale della Pietà, where he had been giving lessons for the past three years. Although he eventually retired from full-time teaching so that he could focus on opera commissions elsewhere, he kept supplying the Pietà with new material until about 1729. He spent several months in Mantua and Rome, shepherding his operas through to production, and overseeing still more opera premieres in Vienna and Prague in the early 1730s. After burning bridges in his native Venice and squandering a hefty fortune, he returned to Vienna in 1741. One month after arrival, he succumbed to a gastrointestinal illness and died on July 28, 1741, at age 63. He received a pauper's burial.

This all-Vivaldi program skips around both chronologically and conceptually, interspersing instrumental and vocal pieces. The sacred and the secular, the dramatic and the devotional—all the transformational paradoxes in Vivaldi's musical career are vividly represented. To maintain some coherence in the program notes, the musical selections are discussed not in the order presented but by type: operatic arias, instrumental concertos, and sacred choral setting.

And yet the deeper we let ourselves listen, the less inclined we are to accept such sharp and rigid distinctions among genres. There is something weirdly modern about the Baroque aesthetic, a lean austerity lurking behind the gleaming artifice. Take the countertenor-sung "Mentre dormi, amor fomenti." Suffused with an autumnal glow, the aria sounds at once eternal and eternally new. If you didn't already know that it comes from an 18th-century opera about the intricate hook-ups of Grecian lovers at the Olympic games, you might even mistake it for an art song by Rufus Wainwright, or an outtake from the last David Bowie album.

### **Arias and Duets**

The first two selections come from *Ottone in villa*, which received its premiere in 1713. Although this was Vivaldi's first major opera, the 35-year-old composer had years of experience composing sacred and secular music and revising other composers' operas for a fee. Set in ancient Rome, *Ottone* turns a convoluted plot about mismatched lovers into a transcendent musical occasion. Four of the five main roles are performed by women, but only two of them are actually supposed to be female characters, and one plays a woman who is disguised as a man. "Gelosia, tu già rendi l'alma mia" is sung by Caio at the end of the first act. Alternating vengeful coloratura with slower, more introspective passages, Caio rails against his faithless lover. In yet another gender-bending complication, Caio is meant to be male; the role, originally intended for a castrato, usually falls to a female soprano nowadays.

The haunting "L'ombre, l'aure, e ancora il rio" comes at the end of Act II. Here Caio grieves while the offstage Tullia (disguised as a male page so she can spy on her former lover) echoes and mocks him. Also offstage, a pair of flutes and two "echo" violins enhance the sense of displacement and isolation.

Based on an epic poem by Ariosto, which had already inspired Vivaldi to compose a similar opera in 1714, *Orlando furioso* was completed in 1727. Its titular hero is a knight who is driven insane by his unrequited passion for a princess. In "Nel profondo cieco mondo," Orlando's technically perilous opening aria, he sings of hope while facing down fears for the future: "Into the deep, dark world, let the fate once merciless to my heart tumble down./The stronger love will triumph

with the help of courage." Like many roles in Vivaldi operas, the aria can be sung by a countertenor, as it is here, or by a mezzo-soprano or contralto.

"Mentre dormi, amor fomenti" comes from *L'Olimpiade*, Vivaldi's 1734 setting of an Olympics-themed libretto by Pietro Metastasio. In this Act 1 aria, Licida, the prince of Crete—in love with one woman but promised to another—sings a deceptively simple lullaby. "Mentre dormi" represents the Baroque aria at its most luminous and affecting: "While you sleep, may love grow in you..../May the stream flow more gently; may even the slightest breeze stop blowing."

"In braccio dei' contenti" comes from *Gloria e Imeneo*, one of three serenades that Vivaldi composed in the 1720s for assorted French aristocrats. *Gloria e Imeneo* isn't the original title, which is unknown because the first few pages of the manuscript, including the opening sinfonia, are missing. The work was commissioned to celebrate the wedding of Louis XV to the Polish princess Maria Leszczynska. In the spirit of such serenades, it was first performed outdoors, at the French Embassy in Venice, on the evening of September 12, 1725. The excerpted duet, which closes the hour-long serenade, spreads the final layer of ganache on the wedding cake: Imeneo (Hymen, a.k.a. the God of Marriage) and La Gloria (the personification of kingly glory) keep one-upping each other in fulsome praise for the royal couple.

### **Three Concertos**

Vivaldi composed a staggering number of concertos, many of which he sold outright to wealthy patrons and never published. He quit publishing when he was in his early 50s, about a decade before he died, once he figured out that he could make more money selling each original manuscript for exclusive use. This arrangement might have been profitable for the composer in the short term, but most of these one-of-a-kind compositions disappeared forever. His surviving instrumental works from this period share the melodic ingenuity and emotional vibrancy of his operas.

### **Concerto for Strings in C major, RV 114,**

Vivaldi's Concerto for Strings in C major, RV 114, comes from a set of concertos copied out by his violinist father in the 1720s. The precise

date of composition is unknown, but believed to be sometime after 1717. Choppy and propulsive, the opening Allegro combines dotted, dancelike rhythms with inventive counterpoint. Appended to the central movement, a twilit Adagio, is the closing Ciaccona—Vivaldi's take on a French fad. French operas of Vivaldi's era generally ended with a *chaconne*, a series of variations over a descending repeated bass figure. Vivaldi's Ciaccona respects this convention, dipping into C minor and blurring the line between coquettish and creepy. Listen for the ground bass, which anchors this triple-meter dance, and let it remind you of the walking bass lines in blues, rock, and soul music, still centuries away from being born.

### **Concerto for 2 Horns and Strings in F major, RV 538**

Baroque horn concertos often called for a range that could not easily be played by a single hornist on the natural horns of the era, which were valveless. To address this problem, Vivaldi and his contemporaries composed for two or more horns. Both of Vivaldi's two surviving double-horn concertos are in the key of F major, with consecutive RV numbers. The opening Allegro juggles hunting calls and virtuosic fanfares. The central Largo, in D minor, lets the cello sing an aching aria while the horns sit out the slow movement. (This was a common practice, since natural horns weren't suited to the minor key.) The two horns return for the closing Allegro non molto.

### **Concerto grosso in D minor, RV 565**

The Concerto grosso in D minor, RV 565, is the eleventh of a dozen concertos for stringed instruments compiled in Vivaldi's *L'estro armonico (The Harmonic Inspiration)*, first published in Amsterdam in 1711. Cast in four compact movements, RV 565 is scored for a standard trio sonata complement of two violins and a cello, supplemented by a string orchestra and, holding down the figured bass line, an organ. It begins with the two violins playing in unison over a jagged cello backdrop. The violins settle into a melody, which the cello takes up, and soon everything erupts into a full-fledged, four-part fugue. Pastoral and melancholy, the Largo initiates a gently rocking *siciliano* rhythm (in 12/8 meter). Vivaldi further specified that the Adagio and Largo should be performed *spiccato*, a technique that involves bouncing the bow off the strings. In the finale, the cello keeps veering off the continuo's path, hell bent on its own virtuosic adventures.

In 1713 or 1714, J.S. Bach transcribed this concerto for pipe organ.

### **Gloria in D Major, RV 589**

Gloria in D major (RV 589), Vivaldi's most significant sacred work, was probably composed sometime after 1713 and before 1717, when Vivaldi retired from full-time teaching at the Ospedale della Pietà. The score was clearly intended for performance by the orphanage's gifted chorus. At this stage of his career, Vivaldi was transitioning from full-time violin master to a composer of both sacred and secular music.

In the Roman Catholic tradition, the Gloria text is a hymn of praise used as the second part of the Ordinary of the Latin Mass, after the Kyrie. It begins with the words of the angels, as recounted in the Gospel of Luke: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men of good will." The score disappeared after Vivaldi's death and was rediscovered in the late 1920s, along with another Gloria in D major that's less famous but almost as good. (He wrote at least three settings of the text, but only two survive.) Since the first modern performance of RV 589, in 1939, this iteration of the Gloria hymn has resonated with audiences in ways that Vivaldi never imagined. At least 100 recordings of it exist, and it has graced several film soundtracks, including the Academy Award-winning *Shine*, about the concert pianist David Helfgott.

Because there were no male choristers at the Pio Ospedale della Pietà, Vivaldi originally scored all the parts (even the tenors and basses) for female singers. He supplemented the typical Baroque orchestra of strings and basso continuo (organ, ideally) with oboe and trumpet. The one-movement piece is in twelve sections, each distinguished by a different musical setting. Eight of the numbers are composed for the entire chorus; the remaining four feature soloists, singing either alone or with other performers.

### **Number by Number**

The opening number, "Gloria in Excelsis," establishes the triumphant key of D major with exuberant leaping octaves and momentum-building repetitions. Behind all the bombast, a crackling energy propels the music forward, buffeted by bursts of winds and bright choral flourishes. In contrast, "Et in terra pax," in B minor, is smudged with chromatic

shadows. Then "Laudamus te," featuring two sopranos and an instrumental refrain, doles out more lyrical exaltation. After two choral numbers, the solemn "Gratias agimus tibi" and the contrapuntal "Propter magnam gloriam," the only solo soprano aria unfolds: "Domine Deus, Rex coelestis." For this slow and rapturous ode to the almighty, the soprano is joined by a solo violin. The rhythmically tricky seventh number, "Domine Fili unigenite," goes to the general chorus. It's followed by the sumptuous minor-key Adagio "Domine Deus, Agnus Dei," for countertenor (originally contralto) and chorus, the only setting in the cycle where the chorus joins the solo singer, in responsorial style.

After another choral interlude, the fleet and urgent "Qui tollis peccata mundi," the countertenor sings his only true solo, the "church aria" "Qui sedes ad dexteram Patris." This piece resurrects material from the first movement and helps prepare listeners for the climactic conclusion. The whole chorus returns for the final two numbers, "Quoniam tu solus sanctus," a simplified version of the "Gloria in Excelsis," and "Cum Sancto Spiritu," which culminates in a majestic double-fugue.

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