

The Music

The Venetian violinist and composer, Antonio Vivaldi (1678-1741), is often described as the most innovative and influential Italian composer of his generation. His works, particularly the four famous concertos known as *The Four Seasons* have become practically synonymous with the Italian baroque style. And yet Vivaldi's legacy and vast body of works was nearly lost in obscurity until shortly after World War II, when recordings and performances of Vivaldi's music began to emerge following the rediscovery of hundreds of manuscripts in the Turin National Library. The listening public became instantly captivated by Vivaldi's ingenuity and vivacity, and the race was on to discover more about the composer's fascinating and multifaceted life—as a priest, a virtuoso violinist, an opera impresario, the teacher and composer at the *Ospedale della Pietà* (a charitable institution for orphaned and abandoned girls), and not least, as the prolific composer of more than five hundred concertos. This latter accomplishment, arguably his most important, we celebrate tonight.

The publication in 1711 of the 12 concertos, op 3 titled *L'estro armonico* (“harmonic inspiration” or “harmonic fire”) quickly established Vivaldi as the leading Italian concerto composer. Composed over a broad time frame, the op. 3 concertos encompass a wide formal and stylistic range. Many belong to the earlier *concerto grosso* tradition established by the great Roman instrumental composer, Arcangelo Corelli. In the Corelli tradition, the smaller *concertino* or solo group alternates with the larger *tutti*, sharing themes and musical figurations and creating wonderful sonorous contrasts. From this model Vivaldi developed what came to be known as the *ritornello* form where alternating solo and repeating tutti passages were developed on a larger structural and thematic level, with the solo part given increasing scope and opportunity. The concerto in D minor for two violins and cello, which opens this evening's program, is the most famous of the op. 3 set, the result of J.S. Bach's arrangement of the work for organ. Written in the Corelli tradition, it begins with nothing but D minor arpeggios and scales over a repeating D eighth-note pedal played by the two solo violins for 20 whole bars. Only Vivaldi could create from something so simple such an exciting sound scape, which he then deftly drops into the hands of the solo cello to complete the brilliant introduction. Three bars of *adagio* transition lead to an energetic fugue followed by a stunning and lyrical siciliano-styled *largo* for solo violin. The *ritornelli* of the final *Allegro* interrupt the soloists with rapid and dynamic chromatic passages. Harmonic fire indeed!

The violin concerto in D minor comes from the same set of concertos in which *The Four Seasons* appear, op. 8 *Il cimento dell'armonia e dell'inventione* (the contest between harmony and invention) first published in 1725. The four seasons concertos have attained such great popularity, and deservedly so, but with the unfortunate consequence that the other concertos of the op. 8 set are often overlooked. Indeed for many, the seasons are the only works of Vivaldi's that they know. But it is important to remember that Vivaldi's reputation was well in place before the seasons had ever been heard. Europe's love affair with all things Italian was in full swing towards the middle of the 18th century, and demand for all of Vivaldi's music, vocal and instrumental, was particularly high. The opening *Allegro* ritornello of concerto no. 7 begins in a heartfelt, almost gentle manner through imitative suspensions, which then contrast nicely with solo passages full of energy and momentum. Listen for the nearly direct quote from the last movement of the Spring Concerto. In the *Largo*, essentially a lovely sarabande, Vivaldi provides merely the bare bones of a solo part, leaving the greater part of expression to the creativity and interpretation of the violinist. The final *Allegro* is a delightful romp in triple meter.

Vivaldi also made significant contributions to another type of concerto, the *ripieno concerto*, or concerto without soloists (*ripieno* being the term often used to describe the larger group of players). Vivaldi wrote roughly 45 of these works, some of them serving as orchestral show pieces for the Pietà

orchestra, with others on a larger more serious scale, borrowing not only from the conversational nature and repeating *ritornello* structure of the solo concerto, but also elements from the opera sinfonia. The result of these concertos, likely composed during Vivaldi's years of artistic maturity, is the precursor of the orchestral symphony which would come to dominate the instrumental efforts of composers for centuries to come. Vivaldi's string writing is highly technical and with a great variety of affects and characters depicted throughout. The ebullient A major *concerto ripieno* with its serenade-like Adagio is a wonderful example of this inventiveness. One can hear a hint of what Mozart, inspired by Vivaldi's advances in string writing, would one day compose. The rich C minor concerto, which closes tonight's performance, is conversational, showy, dramatic, displaying all the instrumental and theatrical skills at Vivaldi's finger tips.

The viola d'amore, an instrument very popular in the late 17th and 18th century, is the basic size of a viola, but with the flat back and sloping shoulders of a viol. Vivaldi wrote for a viola d'amore with 6 playing strings, and an additional 6 resonating sympathetically without being bowed or fingered. The standard tuning used is that of d minor (d-a-d-f¹-a¹-d²), the key of this evening's concerto, but for concertos not using d minor, a different tuning would be used, for instance tuning the f to f# for the key of D major. As you will hear, in yet another lovely siciliano *largo*, open strings are used to maximum effect, increasing the special resonance of the instrument described as "silvery," "tender and languishing," or as by Mozart's father, a "special kind of violin that sounds lovely in the stillness of the night." From evidence left on a number of the autograph scores of Vivaldi's d'amore concertos, it is likely that these works were written in the early 1720s for the brilliant violin student at the Pietà, Anna Maria. It seems also not unreasonable to assume that Vivaldi both mastered the instrument and took great pleasure in playing it himself.

The twenty-seven cello concertos were also likely composed for the Pietà in the 1720s. The young girls at the Pietà must have been fine cellists indeed as the technique required by these works is of the highest standard of the day. The very buoyant opening *ritornello* of RV 413 is richly developed with two very distinct thematic ideas, and the solo cello part is rich in imaginative figurations. The stately *Largo* is one of Vivaldi's finest, displaying the upper range of the cello voice to great advantage. The final *Allegro* is both a tour de force for orchestra and soloist, and at the same time playful and engaging.

The Italian concerto, in Vivaldi's hands, grew into a form not just for connoisseurs, but for the public at large. The concerto was suitable for performance not only in the princely chambers and private and semi-private venues offered by the noble families of Venice, but also at the *Ospedale della Pietà*, and among the great city's theaters and opera houses. Vivaldi wrote concertos for every instrument (and combination) imaginable, and brought all his skills to bear, frequently transferring music from opera to concerto and vice versa. His sense of the theatrical and dramatic is palpable in his concertos, as is the freshness and vibrancy of his writing. In short, Vivaldi was the genius and force behind a truly popular music for a new century and a new kind of audience.