

## BMC 12 - ANTONIO VIVALDI: *Concertos for Strings & Diverse Instruments*

Though he wrote many fine and memorable Concertos, such as the Four Seasons and the Opus 3 for example, Vivaldi also wrote many works which sound like exercises for students. And this is precisely what they were. Vivaldi was employed for most of his working life by the Ospedale della Pietà. Often termed an "orphanage", this Ospedale was in fact a home for the female offspring of noblemen and their numerous dalliances with their mistresses. The Ospedale was thus well endowed by the "anonymous" fathers; its furnishings bordered on the opulent, the young ladies were well looked-after, and the musical standards among the highest in Venice. Many of Vivaldi's Concerti were indeed exercises which he would play with his many talented pupils, and the wide variety of instruments for which he wrote shows their tremendous versatility. In the program on this disc we have selected some of Vivaldi's finest music, chosen also to give a wide instrumental variety. The Opus 3 Concertos are particularly fine; they were well-known to Bach, who transcribed No. 11 as a Concerto for Organ solo (BWV 596, which you can hear on BACH 707 played on the Pedal-Harpsichord) and No. 10 as a Concerto for Four Harpsichords and Strings, BWV 1065.

Vivaldi also composed many operas which were performed in Venice and other Italian cities, later attaining Europe-wide popularity. On a visit to Mantua he had made the acquaintance of the singer Anna Giraud (or Giro), and she had moved in to live with him. Vivaldi maintained that she was no more than a housekeeper and good friend, just like Anna's sister, Paolina, who also shared his house.

He was a prolific writer of operas as well as concerted works. Between 1725 and 1728 for example some eight operas were premiered in Venice and Florence. Abbot Conti wrote of his contemporary, Vivaldi: "*In less than three months Vivaldi has composed three operas, two for Venice and a third for Florence; the last has given something of a boost to the name of the theater of that city and he has earned a great deal of money.*"

During these years Vivaldi was also extremely active in the field of Concertos. In 1725 the publication *Il Cimento dell'Armenia e dell'invenzione* (The Trial of Harmony and Invention), Opus 8, appeared in Amsterdam. This consisted of twelve Concertos, seven of which were descriptive: *The Four Seasons*, *Storm at Sea*, *Pleasure* and *The Hunt*. Vivaldi transformed the tradition of descriptive music into a typically Italian musical style with its unmistakable timbre in which the strings play a big role.

In 1730 Vivaldi, his father, and Anna Giraud traveled to Prague. In this music-loving city (half a century later Mozart would celebrate his first operatic triumphs there) Vivaldi met a Venetian opera company which between 1724 and 1734 staged some sixty Operas in the Theater of Count Franz Anton von Sporck (for whom incidentally, Bach produced his Four Shorter Masses). In the 1730-1731 season, two new Operas by Vivaldi were premiered there after the previous season had closed with his Opera *Farnace*, a work the composer often used as his showpiece. They returned to Venice at the end of 1731.

After his stay in Prague, Vivaldi concentrated mainly on Operas. No further collections of instrumental music were published. However Vivaldi continued to write instrumental music, although it was only to sell the manuscripts to private persons or to the Ospedale della Pietà, which after 1735 paid him a fixed honorarium of 100 ducats a year.

In 1738 Vivaldi was in Amsterdam where he conducted a Festive Opening Concert for the 100th Anniversary of the Schouwburg Theater. Returning to Venice, which was at that time suffering a severe economic downturn, he resigned from the Ospedale in 1740, planning to move to Vienna under the patronage of his admirer Charles VI.

His stay in Vienna was to be short-lived however, for he died on July 28th 1741 "*of internal fire*" (probably the asthmatic bronchitis from which he suffered all his life) and, like Mozart fifty years later, received a modest burial. Anna Giraud returned to Venice, where she died in 1750.

### **Vivaldi re-discovered.**

Although a substantial amount of Vivaldi's work had been printed during his lifetime, mostly by the Amsterdam Printer Estienne Roger, only a few copies of these editions had survived, in libraries and private collections, known only to musicologists and scholars. Not even his dates were documented. The story of Vivaldi's 20th century rediscovery has its own drama with several tense moments for the key players.

In the autumn of 1926 a boarding school in Piedmont run by Salesian Fathers discovered in their archives a large amount of old volumes which the administrators, no doubt short of funds as religious boarding schools often are, wanted to sell to

Antique Dealers. They called upon the National Library in Turin to value the material to give them some idea of the price which prospective Dealers would have to pay. The matter was turned over to Dr. Alberto Gentili, Professor of Music History at Turin University. He asked for a list and suggested that the material be sent to Turin so that he could inspect it carefully. The Salesians obliged and several crates arrived. Dr. Gentili immediately went to work examining the contents. On opening the first crate he found before him volume upon volume of Vivaldi autographs.

Controlling his overwhelming emotions, he immediately realized that the manuscripts must not fall into the hands of professional dealers, which would result in the inevitable dispersion of individual manuscripts and possible sale abroad. Naturally Dr. Gentili and the Library Administration fervently wished to secure this treasure for Turin. Yet the Library was without funds to acquire the collection from the Salesians, and to approach the Government was very risky, for if the State were to become the owner of the collection the Government would have exercised the right of choosing the institution in which the manuscripts were to be housed. Proceeding with the utmost secrecy, Dr. Gentili went begging and finally succeeded in finding a public-spirited Turinese who would agree to purchase the collection and donate it to the Turin Library, which was thus able to take possession of 97 volumes containing rare printed music, manuscripts and autographs of the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries.

Studying the individual volumes carefully however, Dr. Gentili made a somewhat disturbing discovery. The last pages of some volumes failed to show the conclusion of the composition and a logical continuation could not be found in other volumes. It therefore became evident that the material was in fact only part of a possibly much larger collection which had no doubt been split among the Heirs of the one-time owner. Further investigation revealed that the Collection had been assembled by the Genoese Count Giacomo Durazzo (1717-1794), Austrian Ambassador in Venice and active patron of Gluck.

A great deal of searching and sleuthing had to be done to find living members of the Durazzo family and potential owners of the remnants of the original Collection, and even then, Dr. Gentili was forced once again to "go begging" in search of finance, and again, his success assured the purchase of the rest of the Collection. Thus it is thanks to the tireless efforts and ingenuity of Dr. Alberto Gentili the great Collection of Vivaldiana (319 items) had been saved for posterity.

The establishment of the Turin Collections led to the Vivaldi renaissance, marked by the Vivaldi Week celebrated in Siena in September, 1939 and the projected issuance of the Complete Works of the great Venetian master. Alas, the war halted this promising start, and the entire project was put on hold. After the liberation of Italy, Antonio Fanna, a young Venetian businessman and fervent admirer of Vivaldi, founded the *Istituto Italiano Antonio Vivaldi* for the publication and promotion of Vivaldi's music; thus the newly discovered Vivaldi items began to appear in publication and were soon heard in Italy, spreading throughout Europe.

In London, as part of the great postwar Festival of Britain held in 1951, the Royal Festival Hall was opened on the Thames' south bank, and it was there that excited London concert-goers were presented with a season almost entirely devoted to the manifold and varied works of this "newly discovered" Baroque Master. This event was mirrored in major concert-halls throughout the world. Thus the once-obscure Antonio Vivaldi was elevated to his present status as *the* great Italian contemporary of Bach and Handel.