

BMC 16-17 - Antonio Vivaldi: Concertos: "La Cetra"

Antonio Vivaldi, born in Venice on March 4th, 1678, was known as "*The Red Priest*" through not only being a fully ordained priest, but having red hair. He was employed for most of his working life in Venice at 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 composed as advanced exercises which he would play with his many talented pupils, and the wide variety of instruments for which he wrote attests to their tremendous versatility.

Vivaldi also composed many Operas which were performed in Venice, and elsewhere in Italy, later attaining Europe-wide popularity. In 1720 Vivaldi staged new Operas written by himself in the Teatro Sant' Angelo.

He was a prolific writer, both in his operatic works as in his concerted compositions. Between 1725 and 1728 for example some eight Operas were premiered in Venice and Florence.

Abbot Conti, Vivaldi's contemporary, wrote: "*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.*"

In addition to the Concertos for Diverse Instruments composed for the Ladies of the Ospedale, Vivaldi also produced several "prestige" sets of Concertos for which he arranged publication. In 1725 the publication *Il Cimento dell' Armonia 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 major role.

Vivaldi also made sure that his name remained known to any princes or church dignitaries who might offer him extra employment or patronage. If one may judge by the number of composers who were in his service, or who dedicated works to him, Austrian Emperor Charles VI must have been known not only as being passionately fond of music, but also as a potentially generous patron. Vivaldi dedicated the greatest number of his compositions to the Emperor, and may well have composed the present set of Concertos in Vienna. This set of Twelve Concertos, which Vivaldi entitled *La Cetra (The Lyre)*, was published in Two Books of Six in 1728 by the Amsterdam publisher Le Cène as Opus 9. Peter Ryom, editor of the Vivaldi Collected Works (RV numbers) has observed:

"Musically speaking, Vivaldi's Opus 9 is one of the finest and most interesting collections he has left us. Above all, it is an unequivocal reflection of the evolution his style underwent during the years separating it from the first collection of Concertos, the famous Opus 3 entitled *L'Estro Armonico*. Although the latter, dating from 1711, already includes Concertos for a Solo Instrument, the pieces assembled are principally works rooted in the old Concerto Grosso style with two or more soloists. Despite the undeniable musical quality of Opus 3, the Concertos are frankly less sophisticated, especially in matters of form.

"In Opus 9, on the other hand, we find the full development of the "classic" Vivaldian Concerto style, that style made up of elements characteristic of most of his instrumental works, developed gradually from Opus 4 onwards: the tripartite concerto-form, the finely balanced alternation of *tutti* and *solì* on which the fast movements are built, the often contemplative character of the slow movements, the harmonic and rhythmic structure of the themes, etc.

"For all that, and notwithstanding the presence in these Twelve Concertos of countless typically Vivaldian characteristics, the compositions are far from uniform. On the contrary, each one of them strives to display their composer's diversity of expressive means and astonishing richness of invention. From this point of view, too, Vivaldi's Opus 9 is a significant work."

William BOYCE (1710-1779)

Although Boyce's most enduring monument was his historical collection of *Cathedral Music*, which began publication in 1760 and profoundly influenced '*choirs and places where they sing*' for the next century and a half, he deserves to be remembered also for his excellent instrumental music. His published sets of Voluntaries and Trio Sonatas were great favorites of their time, and recent revivals of his Eight Symphonies (mostly overtures to sacred or secular works of various kinds) and Twelve Overtures (derived from Court odes) demonstrate his instinctive feeling for orchestral color in addition to nobility of contrapuntal thought.

The early stages of Boyce's career were not unlike those of Purcell, Greene, and Handel, where the slender rewards of an Organ

appointment were helped out by fees from the Theatre and the Pleasure Gardens. Much of Boyce's Orchestral Music was performed at Drury Lane Theatre, as well as in the Pleasure-Garden settings of Vauxhall and Ranelagh. Whenever a complete band was lacking, a group of four musicians would play his Trio Sonatas, whose tuneful elegance endeared them to musicians of every class.

There is however one category of his Instrumental Music that has so far gone largely unnoticed - his *Concerti Grossi for String Orchestra*. These were never published in the composer's lifetime and in fact remained in manuscript until quite recently. The circumstances of their composition cannot be ascertained; but since it was not unusual in the Eighteenth century to perform a Concerto Grosso during the intermissions of an Oratorio or Cantata, these works may have come into being as Interludes for Boyce's *Solomon* or for his setting of David's *Lamentation over Saul and Jonathan*. Alternatively they could have been written expressly for the Three Choirs Festival, which he conducted in 1737 and also subsequently. The orchestral parts in the Bodleian Library betray signs of frequent usage, with some interchange of movements, and the transposed organ parts suggest a high-pitched continuo instrument by no means unusual in Boyce's day.

Vincent Novello, who owned the score of the B-Minor Concerto, presented it to the British Museum in August, 1849, with a note to the effect that his gift was made "as a tribute of respect to the memory of Dr Boyce, who in my estimation, for purity of melody, solidity of harmony, and skillful refinement in the construction of his sterling counterpoint, was one of the very best composers of the genuine English school."

Enrico ALBICASTRO (c.1670-c.1738)

A well-to-do and talented violinist and composer, Heinrich Weissenburg von Biswang was born in Switzerland. Translating his family name into Italian (Weissen burg = White Fortress = Albi Castro) he set out on a career in the Low Countries as one of the itinerant *oltr emontani* who fed the busy Amsterdam presses of Roger and Witvogel inbetween a Concert schedule relatively as demanding as those known to virtuosi of our own time.

On leaving his ancestral home in the Simmental, Albicastro studied for a while at the University of Leyden, the registers showing both forms of his name as well as indicating his two major interests at that time - music and the military. He is known to have served as a cavalry officer in the Wars of the Spanish Succession; and although (like Albinoni) he styled himself a *dilettante* on the title pages of some of his works, there is no evidence that musical composition was a mere pastime.

Indeed the seriousness of his studies emerges with insistent clarity in his chamber music, which comprised books of Solo Sonatas and of Trio Sonatas, as well as in his solitary orchestral work, the Concertos of Op. 7. As a performer, he must have possessed an unusually good technique, for the Sonatas for Violin and Continuo make abundant use of multiple-stopping, arpeggio passages, and complex bowings, while the Concertos contain numerous examples of exceptionally tricky and brilliant figurations for the first violins. As a contrapuntalist, his allegiance leans more toward the German than to the classical Italian school of Corelli.

Albicastro's harmony has been compared for its unusual richness and bold progressions to the Organ Fantasias of Bach, and it is possible that the keyboard played as important a part as the violin in the early shaping of these Concertos, which were published in the customary set of twelve by Roger of Amsterdam about the year 1703. They are not *Concerti Grossi*, but rather Orchestral Concertos in which dynamic and other contrasts are achieved by means of controlled tone and tempo instead of the deliberate inequality of *concertino* and *tutti*. Their basic four-movement plan is characterized by a composite opening movement designed to introduce or alternate powerful and self-contained musical ideas. Thus the Concerto in B-flat twice juxtaposes a series of solemn chords and a brief but dashing *Allegro* before finally moving on to a majestic *Grave* in triple time, full of striking harmonic colors and aggressive bass trills. The corresponding movement of the B Minor Concerto begins with a splendidly rhetorical rising phrase in the basses, but soon relaxes into a chromatic vein which is echoed (after a short *Allegro*) in the closing *Spiritoso* section.