

ANTONIO VIVALDI (1678- 1741)

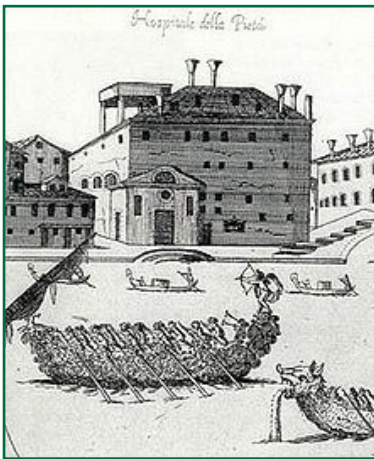
In January, we had two outstanding presentations that dealt with Venice: its art of the 16th Century and also one of its most memorable figures of the 18th Century (Casanova). In the March Alla Corrente, I would like to write about one of the great Italian composers of 18th Century Venice, whose music (especially The Four Seasons) is an important part of today's symphonic repertoire. While Vivaldi is most famous as a composer, he was regarded as an exceptional technical violinist as well. Finally, March 4 of this year will be his 337th birthday.

Antonio Lucio Vivaldi was born in Venice on March 4th, 1678. Vivaldi's parents were Giovanni Battista Vivaldi and Camilla Calicchio. Vivaldi had five siblings: Margarita Gabriela, Cecilia Maria, Bonaventura Tomaso, Zanetta Anna, and Francesco Gaetano. Giovanni Battista, who was a barber before becoming a professional violinist, taught Antonio to play the violin and then toured Venice playing the violin with him.

Antonio's health was always problematic. His symptoms, "*strettezza di petto*" (tightness of the chest), have been interpreted as a form of asthma. This did not prevent him from excelling in playing the violin, composing, or taking part in musical activities, but it did stop him from playing wind instruments. Through his father, Vivaldi met and learned from some of the finest musicians and composers in Venice at the time.



Vivaldi sought religious training as well as musical instruction. At the age of 15, he began studying to become a priest. He was ordained in 1703, at the age of 25. (Because of his red hair, he was known locally as "*il Prete Rosso*," or "the Red Priest"). However, Vivaldi's career in the clergy was short-lived. In 1704, according to his own account, he no longer wished to celebrate Mass because of his physical ailment (*strettezza di petto*). It is also possible that Vivaldi was simulating illness; there is a story that he sometimes left the altar in order to quickly jot down a musical idea in the sacristy. (However, he had suffered this ailment in childhood, so this view might not be correct). In any event, he had become a priest against his own will, perhaps because in his day training for the priesthood was often the only possible way for a poor family to obtain free schooling. He was given a dispensation from celebrating Mass because of his health. Ultimately, Vivaldi only said Mass a few times and appeared to have withdrawn from other priestly duties, though he continued to consider himself a priest.



Ospedale della Pietà

In September 1703, Vivaldi became *maestro di violino* (master of violin) at an orphanage called the *Pio Ospedale della Pietà* (Devout Hospital of Mercy) in Venice. Vivaldi was only 25 when he started working at the *Ospedale della Pietà*. Over the next thirty years he composed most of his major works while working there. There were four *Ospedali* in Venice; their purpose was to give shelter and education to children who were abandoned or orphaned, or whose families could not support them. While often referred to as "orphans," these *Ospedali* were often, in addition, homes for the female offspring of noblemen and their numerous dalliances with their mistresses. They were thus well endowed by the "anonymous" fathers, their furnishings bordered on the opulent, the young ladies were well looked-after, and the musical standards

among the highest in Venice. The boys who were taken in learned a trade and had to leave when they reached 15 years old. The girls received a musical education, and the most talented stayed and became members of the *Ospedale della Pietà's* renowned orchestra and choir.

Venice's reputation as a center of baroque music was one of the highest in Europe, due largely to these four *Ospedali* that had become conservatories of music. By the early 18th Century, their excellence in music was unrivalled.



Shortly after Vivaldi's appointment, the *Ospedale* musical groups began to receive appreciation and esteem from abroad. Vivaldi wrote *concerti*, cantatas and sacred vocal music for his *Ospedale*. These sacred works, which number over 60, are varied; they include solo motets and large-scale choral works for soloists, double chorus, and orchestra. In 1704, the position of teacher of *viola all' inglese* (English viola) was added to his duties as violin instructor. The position of *maestro di coro* (choirmaster), which was at one time also filled by Vivaldi, required a lot of time and work. He had to compose an oratorio or concerto at every feast, in addition to teaching the students both music theory and how to play certain instruments.

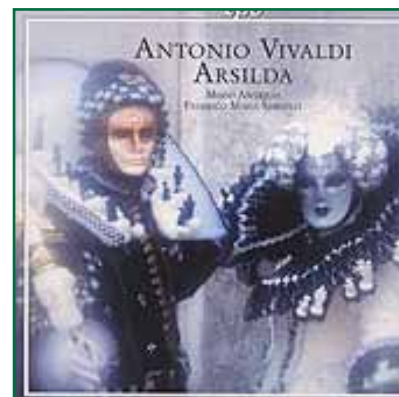
His relationship with the board of directors of the *Ospedale* surprisingly was often strained. The board had to take a vote every year on whether to keep a teacher. The vote on Vivaldi was seldom unanimous, and it went 7 to 6 against him in 1709. Vivaldi was released from the school and between 1709 and 1711 he worked as a freelance musician. Perhaps also during this period he worked for the *Teatro Sant' Angelo*, a Venetian opera theater. He also remained active as a composer, and in 1711 twelve *concerti* he had written over several years were published in Amsterdam by the music publisher Estienne Roger under the title *l'Estro armonico (Harmonic Inspiration)*. After this period as a freelance musician, he was recalled by the *Ospedale* with a unanimous vote in 1711. Clearly, during his absence the board had realized how important a role he played in not only teaching his students well but also in spreading the fame of the school through his compositions. In 1716, he became responsible for all musical activity of the institution when he was promoted to *maestro de' concerti* (music director).

In February 1711, Vivaldi and his father traveled to Brescia, where his setting of the *Stabat Mater* was played as part of a religious festival. The work seems to have been written in haste: the string parts are simple, the music of the first three movements is repeated in the next three, and not all the text is set. Nevertheless, the work is one of his early masterpieces.

Vivaldi was employed for most of his working life by the *Ospedale della Pietà*, generally accepted as being the best of the four *Ospedali*. Many of his works sound like five-finger exercises for students, and this is precisely what they were. He would often play these with his many talented pupils; the brilliance of some solos he wrote in his "student exercise" *concerti* testifies to the extremely high performance standard attained by "his" ladies.

In 1713, Vivaldi was given a month's leave from the *Ospedale* in order to stage his first opera, *Ottone in villa*, which was not performed in Venice but at the Garzerie Theater in Vicenza. In the 1713-14 season he was once again attached to the *Teatro Sant' Angelo* in Venice, where he produced an opera by the composer Giovanni Alberto Rostori. The following year (1714), Vivaldi became the impresario of the *Teatro Sant' Angelo*, where his opera *Orlando finto pazzo* was performed. The work was not received well, and it closed after several weeks, being replaced with a repeat of a different work already given the previous year.

In the late 1715 opera season, Vivaldi planned to put on an opera composed entirely by himself, *Arsilda, regina di Ponto*, but the state censor blocked the performance. The main character, Arsilda, falls in love with another woman, Lisea, who is pretending to be a man. Vivaldi got the censor to accept the opera the following year, and it was a resounding success when it was performed in 1716.



As far as his theatrical activities were concerned, the end of 1716 was a high point for Vivaldi. In November, he managed to have the *Ospedale della Pietà* perform his first great oratorio, *Juditha Triumphans devicta Holofernis barbaric*. The work is an allegorical depiction celebrating the victory of the Republic of Venice over the Turks and the recapture of the island of Corfu in August, 1716. It is one of his sacred masterpieces. All eleven singing parts were performed by girls of the *Ospedale*, both the female and male roles. Many of the arias include parts for solo instruments—recorders, oboes, violas d’amore, and mandolins—that showcased the range of talents of the girls.

Also in 1716, Vivaldi wrote and produced two more operas, *L’incoronazione di Dario* and *La costanza trionfante degli amori e degli odi*. The latter was so popular that it was performed two years later, re-edited and retitled *Artabano re dei Parti*. It was also performed in Prague in 1732. In the following years, Vivaldi wrote several operas that were performed all over Italy.

His progressive operatic style caused him some trouble with more conservative musicians, like Benedetto Marcello, a magistrate and amateur musician who wrote a pamphlet denouncing him and his operas. The pamphlet, *Il teatro alla moda*, attacks Vivaldi without mentioning him directly. The cover drawing shows a boat (the *Sant’Angelo*), on the left end of which stands a little angel wearing a priest’s hat and playing the violin. The Marcello family claimed ownership of the Teatro Sant’Angelo, and a long legal battle had been fought with the management for its restitution, without success. The obscure writing under the picture mentions non-existent places and names, one of which, ALDIVIVA, is an anagram of A. Vivaldi.



While Vivaldi certainly composed many operas in his time, he never reached the prominence of other great composers like Alessandro Scarlatti, Johann Adolph Hasse, Leonardo Leo, and Baldassare Galuppi, as evidenced by his inability to keep a production running for any extended period of time in any major opera house. His most successful operas were *La costanza trionfante* and *Farnace* which garnered six revivals each.

In 1717 or 1718, Vivaldi was offered a new prestigious position as *Maestro di Cappella* of the court of Prince Philip of Hesse-Darmstadt, governor of Mantua. He moved there for three years and produced several operas, among which was *Tito Manlio*. In 1720 Vivaldi returned to Venice where he again staged new operas he had written in the *Teatro Sant’ Angelo*. In 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. In his *Memoires*, the Italian playwright Carlo

Goldoni gave the following portrait of Vivaldi and Giraud: “This priest, an excellent violinist but a mediocre composer, has trained Miss Giraud to be a singer. She was young, born in Venice, but the daughter of a French wigmaker. She was not beautiful, though she was elegant, small in stature, with beautiful eyes and a fascinating mouth. She had a small voice, but many languages in which to harangue.” Vivaldi stayed together with her until his death.

In 1721, he was in Milan, where he presented the pastoral drama *La Silvia*, (of which nine arias survive). He visited Milan again the following year with the oratorio *L'adorazione delli tre re magi al bambino Gesù* (now lost). In 1722 he moved to Rome, where he introduced his operatic new style. While in Rome, the new pope, Benedict XIII, invited Vivaldi to play for him. In 1725, Vivaldi returned to Venice, where he produced four operas in the same year.

During this period (around 1720-23), Vivaldi wrote *The Four Seasons*, four violin *concerti* depicting scenes appropriate for each season. Three of the *concerti* are of original conception, while the first, *Spring*, borrows motifs from a *sinfonia* in the first act of his contemporaneous opera *Il Giustino*. The inspiration for the *concerti* was probably the countryside around Mantua. The *concerti* were a revolution in musical conception: in them, Vivaldi represented flowing creeks, singing birds (of different species, each specifically characterized), barking dogs, buzzing mosquitoes, crying shepherds, storms, drunken dancers, silent nights, hunting parties from both the hunters’ and the prey’s points of view, frozen landscapes, ice-skating children, and warming winter fires. Each *concerto* is associated with a sonnet, possibly by Vivaldi, describing the scenes depicted in the music. They were published as the first four *concerti* in a collection of twelve, *Il cimento dell’armonia e dell’inventione*, published in Amsterdam by Michel-Charles Le Cène in 1725.



Pope Benedict XIII
(In office from 1724 until his death in 1730)

During his stay in Rome and other cities, Vivaldi remained in the service of the *Ospedale*, which had already appointed him *Maestro de’concerti* (music director) in 1716. He was required only to send two *concerti* per month to Venice (transport costs were paid by the client) for which he received a ducat per *concerto*.

His presence was never required. He also remained director of the *Teatro Sant’ Angelo*.



Between 1725 and 1728 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 *concerti*. In 1725 *Il cimento dell’armonia e dell’inventione* (*The Trial of Harmony and Invention*), appeared in Amsterdam. This consisted of twelve *concerti*, 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.

These *concerti* were enormously successful, particularly in France. *Spring* was a firm favorite of King Louis XV, who would order it to be performed at the most unexpected moments, and Vivaldi received various commissions for further compositions from the court at Versailles.

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 Bach had 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 Vivaldi often used as his showpiece.

At the end of 1731 Vivaldi returned to Venice, but at the beginning of 1732 he left again for Mantua and Verona. In Mantua, Vivaldi's opera *Semimmide* was performed, and in Verona, on the occasion of the opening of the new *Teatro Filarmonico*, *La fida Ninfa* (with a libretto by the Veronese poet and man of letters, Scipione Maffei) was staged.

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.

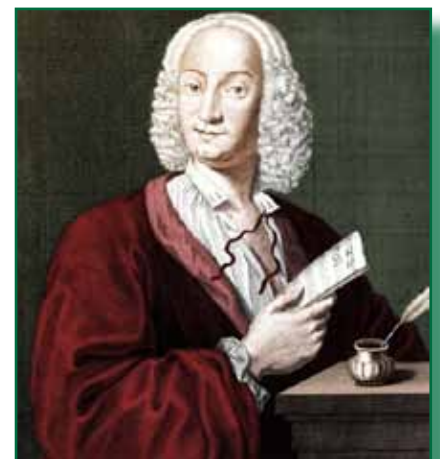
In 1738 Vivaldi was in Amsterdam where he conducted a festive opening concert for the 100th Anniversary of the Schouwburg Theater. Returning to Venice, which was at that time suffering a severe economic downturn, he resigned from the *Ospedale* in 1740.

Vivaldi's renown as a composer and musician in early life did not translate into lasting financial success. Eclipsed by younger composers and more modern styles, Vivaldi left Venice for Vienna, possibly hoping to find a position in the imperial court under the patronage of his admirer, Charles VI. However, he found himself without a prominent patron following the death of Charles. He died in poverty in Vienna on July 28, 1741 "of internal fire" (probably the asthmatic bronchitis from which he suffered all his life). He was buried in a simple grave (like Mozart 50 years later) after a funeral service that proceeded without music. Anna Giraud returned to Venice, where she died in 1750.

POSTHUMOUS REPUTATION

Vivaldi's *concerti* and arias had an important influence on Johann Sebastian Bach, especially in his *St. John Passion*, *St. Matthew Passion*, and cantatas.

During his lifetime, Vivaldi's popularity quickly made him famous in other countries, including France, but after his death the composer's popularity dwindled. After the Baroque period, Vivaldi's published *concerti* became relatively unknown and were largely ignored. Even Vivaldi's most famous work, *The Four Seasons*, was unknown in its original edition during the Classical and Romantic periods.



During the early 20th century, Fritz Kreisler’s *Concerto in C, in the Style of Vivaldi* (which he passed off as an original Vivaldi work) helped revive Vivaldi’s reputation. This spurred the French scholar Marc Pincherle to begin an academic study of Vivaldi’s works. Many Vivaldi manuscripts were rediscovered, which were acquired by the Turin National University Library as a result of the generous sponsorship of Turinese businessmen Roberto Foa and Filippo Giordano, in memory of their sons. This led to a renewed interest in Vivaldi by, among others, Mario Rinaldi, Alfredo Casella, Ezra Pound, Olga Rudge, Desmond Chute, Arturo Toscanini, Arnold Schering and Louis Kaufman, all of whom were instrumental in the Vivaldi revival of the 20th century.

In 1926, in a monastery in Piedmont, researchers discovered fourteen folios of Vivaldi’s work that were previously thought to have been lost during the Napoleonic Wars. Some missing volumes in the numbered set were discovered in the collections of the descendants of the Grand Duke Durazzo, who had acquired the monastery complex in the 18th century. The volumes contained 300 concerti, 19 operas and over 100 vocal-instrumental works.

The resurrection of Vivaldi’s unpublished works in the 20th century is mostly due to the efforts of Alfredo Casella, who in 1939 organized the historic “Vivaldi Week,” in which the rediscovered *Gloria* and *l’Olimpiade* were revived. The choral composition *Gloria* is particularly famous and is performed regularly at Christmas celebrations worldwide today. Since World War II, Vivaldi’s compositions have enjoyed wide success. Historically informed performances, often on “original instruments”, have increased Vivaldi’s fame still further.



Alfredo Casella, Composer
(1883-1947)

Adapted by James J. Boitano, PhD from baroquemusic.org, biography.com, on-line edition of *Encyclopedia Britannica*, and *Wikipedia*.

The Four Seasons

(CLICK TO PLAY)



Alphonse Mucha
“Die vier Jahreszeiten”