



The Resurrection of Vivaldi

Antonio Vivaldi, known as the Red Priest on account of the colour of his hair, dropped into total oblivion after his death in Vienna in July 1741. It was not until the late nineteenth century and the rediscovery of Johann Sebastian Bach's work that Vivaldi's name was brought back to light.

This marked the beginning of the excavation work that led scholars to the rediscovery of his many great concertos and sonatas, as well as a number of operas, both in old printed versions published in Amsterdam, and in manuscripts preserved in various libraries in Italy.

This eventually led to recognition of Vivaldi's role as creator of the soloist concerto, as well as the equally important role he played in the field of sacred and profane vocal music.

His most lasting claim to fame springs from the concerto grosso for strings and solo instrument.

He wrote about four hundred of these, and for every instrument, such as violin, viola d'amore, flute, even mandolin and bassoon, which enabled him to work with a wide range of tone colours. In his first published collection, *Harmonic Inspiration*, Opus III, he established what would be the classic three-part form, with the succession of the now canonical tempos of allegro-largo-allegro, and with the first violin receiving a major role as soloist.

Although this form had in fact already been used by such a composer as Torelli (to whom its invention is attributed), Vivaldi vitalized it with strikingly new elements in both rhythmic and thematic terms. Vivaldi's work is distinguished by the great variety of motifs, which have a unique explosive energy in the allegros and a heart rending melancholy in the adagios.

Vivaldi also put his experience in the theatre to good use, imbuing his works with an amazing cantabilità, a deeply felt lyricism and a moving sweetness, which then evolved where needed to reveal a well-structured dramatic force.

The intense lyrical of his compositions indicate Vivaldi as a clear forerunner of Romanticism.

So far as rhythm is concerned, Vivaldi's concertos pulsate with life, expressing feverish anguish and modern cadences. This rhythmic pulsation is obtained with a skill and flair that led him to use passages of violent abandonment and unpredictable changes of tempo.

Among the merits attributed to the Red Priest is that of having been ahead of his time in inventing the symphonic poem, which did not receive official recognition until Liszt's work in the nineteenth century, and was then brought to its highest expression by Richard Strauss.

The Four Seasons, which are part of the collection entitled *The Trial between Harmony and Invention*, Opus VIII, and represent the prototype of much programmed music, stand out from the numerous similar works because of their capacity to take the concepts expressed in the four sonnets forming the poetic background of the composition and translating them into music, achieving all this with such simple and effective means as the tremolo of the strings in imitation of the rustling of leafy branches.

Nor is this the only example. Vivaldi contributed to the evolution of descriptive music in such pieces as "The Storm Sea, Concerto No 5, Opus VIII), *The Goldfinch*, concerto for flute and string, *The Night and The Cuckoo*. He also displayed his artistic genius when working with voices, especially in sacred pieces, and his *Gloria*, *Credo* and *Beatus Vir*, for soloists, chorus and orchestra are masterpieces of powerful inspiration and heart-rending intensity.

A Venetian by birth (born 1675) Vivaldi worked for many years as a violin teacher and master composer at Santa Maria della Pietà on the Riva degli Schiavoni in his native city. This church had a girls' orphanage attached to it, and boasted one of the best girls-only orchestras in Europe, providing Vivaldi with a compliant instrument for his various musical experiments.

A year after his ordination in the priesthood, he stopped celebrating Mass because of a chest condition, perhaps asthma. He died in Vienna in 1741 without a cent to his name.