



Antonio Vivaldi, 1678-1741

What was so unusual about the life of the composer we know as “The Red Priest”?

Antonio Vivaldi was born in the Republic of Venice. His father was a well-known violinist who not only taught his son the basics of

baroque music but also performed and toured with him throughout his life. Because of his ill health (asthma?), Antonio was unable to play wind instruments and concentrated on the violin. His mother was so concerned about his survival as a child that it is believed it was she who urged him to become a priest. He entered the seminary at the age of 15 and was ordained ten years later. He soon became known as the “Red Priest” because of his red hair (a tiny wisp of which is barely visible beneath the white wig in the picture above). Unfortunately, within a year his illness prevented him from continuing to say Mass because of the incense.

In 1703 Vivaldi became the master of the violin at the Pio Ospedale della Pieta`, an orphanage for girls in Venice where he spent the next thirty years off and on, as a teacher and composer. Records show that he composed 140 concerti in a ten year period. He also composed a number of oratorios and other religious works for the talented members of the girl’s chorus and orchestra who stayed on as permanent residents of the Pieta`. One such piece, “Juditha Triumphans”, was commissioned by the Republic of Venice to celebrate the triumph over the Turks in 1716, with all eleven singing parts, male and female, performed by the girls of the Pieta`. Eventually he decided to try his hand at opera as well, and at one point claimed to have written 94 of them, but “only” fifty have been found. It seems his “modern” operatic style was not as popular among his contemporaries as were his concerti.

Beginning in 1718 he travelled throughout Italy, producing a number of operas in Milan, Mantua and Rome, and playing for Pope Benedict XIII. While in Trieste in 1728 he met the Emperor Charles VI who knighted him and invited him to come to Vienna as court composer. When he did find himself free to go to Vienna in

1741, it was probably because he had squandered much of the fortune he had earned. It is also reported that Vivaldi sold off many of his manuscripts over time, causing most of them to be lost, and when he did land in the court of Charles VI, it was just one month before the Emperor's death. Within a few months Vivaldi too was dead, and was buried in a pauper's grave in Vienna.

Even though Bach had transcribed several of Vivaldi's concerti for a larger orchestra, the bulk of his works were scattered in a number of private and public collections all over Europe, and were not substantially re-discovered until the twentieth century. Since World War II several of his violin and choral pieces, especially "The Four Seasons" and "The Gloria", have become standard components of the modern repertoire for orchestras everywhere, thereby revealing a number of rather incongruent aspects of Vivaldi's career.

"The Four Seasons" is most famous for his vivid musical illustrations of natural phenomena such as wind, rain storms, thunder and bird calls, requiring fantastic virtuoso violin performances, even from the young women of the Pieta`. This was composed by a man who could barely tolerate the outdoors because of what might today be called chronic allergies. The four sonnets he wrote to precede each component of the piece, are remarkable in the degree to which they describe the beauty of each scene illustrated by his music.

"The Gloria", one of the most beautiful choral works ever written for the Mass, was done so by a priest who ceased to be active in the priesthood within a year of his ordination. Did one preclude the other?

Most of his works were written hurriedly to meet important deadlines, but rarely showed any sign of having been re-written or re-worked before publication, as most composers do. His seem to have been inspired by the moment and left the way they were originally written down, without any second thoughts on his part.

Vivaldi reportedly earned over 50,000 ducats in his lifetime, far more than any of his contemporaries, and was known to have lived in one of the best neighborhoods of Venice. But he died a pauper.

The bulk of his music was written, not for professional musicians, but for orphans who were his students at a house of charity. Today, many musicians are delighted to be able to match the virtuosity of those young women when performing these works for modern audiences.

In 2007 Barbara Quick wrote a novel based on Vivaldi's work at the Pieta` entitled, "Vivaldi's Virgins", from the point of view of one of "his" orphans. (Harper Collins, Pub.) It has been a bestseller on Amazon.com ever since.