
The Story of Antonio Vivaldi: His Life, His Times and His Music



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Vivaldi's Life

People with the name of Vivaldi have lived in Venice for several centuries. Our story begins, however, with Giovanni Battista Vivaldi, the father of composer Antonio Vivaldi. Giovanni was a barber by trade, but he also worked in the bakery belonging to his own father. He loved music, and learned to play the violin well enough to join the orchestra of St. Mark's Basilica, a position he held for the rest of his life.

The year 1685 was special for the world of music. The career change of the senior Vivaldi set the stage for the career of his son, Antonio. It was also the year that saw the births of composers J.S. Bach, G.F. Handel, and Domenico Scarlatti.

Antonio Lucio Vivaldi was born on March 4, 1678, in Venice. He was weak and sickly at birth, and would suffer health problems throughout his life. Young Antonio had three sisters and two brothers, but very little is known about Vivaldi's youth, other than the fact that he appeared to have inherited his father's musical abilities – and his flaming red hair.

Antonio probably studied the violin with his father, and, when he was ready, occasionally filled in for him in the orchestra of St. Mark's.

Red-haired, destined for priesthood from birth

As the eldest son in the family, Vivaldi was destined for the priesthood. This was a common practice in poorer families. The priesthood assured him a livelihood. He became known as "il prete rosso" (the red-haired priest).

Vivaldi did not enter a monastery as was customary, because of his health problems. In 1693, at the age of 15, he was tonsured by the Venetian patriarch. (A tonsure is a special haircut for men entering the priesthood that leaves the top of the head bare.) He received two local parishes, and became a full-fledged priest in 1703.

Twice blessed

Vivaldi was baptized twice. Because he was born weak and sickly the midwife who assisted at his birth baptized him herself, fearing that he would die. He survived, and two months later was baptized by the parish priest, Giacomo Fornaciere, at the church of San Giovanni in Bragora. The double baptism was not discovered until 1962.

Vivaldi continued his musical studies at the same time as he pursued Holy Orders. The combination of these two vocations was not unusual. He remained a priest for the rest of his life.

Hired by famous orphanage for girls

In 1703, he was hired by the Ospedale della Pietà, the famous orphanage for girls in Venice, a position he was to hold on and off (mostly on) for the next 36 years. Initially he was hired as a violin teacher, but as the years went on Vivaldi was given more and more responsibility.

For each special feast day he composed an oratorio, one or more concertos, or lighter instrumental music of all kinds. He also taught theory and the playing of instruments.

By the time he began working at the Pietà, Vivaldi was already composing. Between 1703 and 1705, the Venetian firm of Sala published his Opus 1, a set of trio sonatas for two violins and violone (double bass) or harpsichord. The influence of composers such as Corelli can be seen in these pieces, but even so, Vivaldi was already demonstrating the musical form for which he would be noted.

Sometimes a funny man

A note written on one of Vivaldi's compositions reads "per li cognioni", which means "for blockheads" in English.

Vivaldi: A priest who didn't say mass

Vivaldi stopped saying mass shortly after his ordination, and no one really knows why. One popular story hints that he was too busy with music and composing.

Apparently while saying mass one day, Vivaldi had an idea for a new piece of music. He immediately left the altar and went to write it down and, when he was done, returned to complete the mass. As the story goes, this strange behavior was reported to Venice's Inquisitors, who deduced from it that the priest was quite mad, and forbade him to say mass from that day forth. (Note: Inquisitors of State were selected each month. It was their role to watch out for acts against the church or state. They also granted licenses to the city's theatres and approved the texts of shows.)

More likely, Vivaldi's reason for not saying mass was his poor health. He wrote the following entry in his journal: "When I had barely been ordained a priest, I said mass for a year or a little more. Then I discontinued saying it, having on three occasions had to leave the altar without completing it because of this ailment."

The ailment to which Vivaldi refers has been described elsewhere in his own words as a tightness in the chest. It is now assumed that Vivaldi suffered from asthma throughout his life.

A religious man with a talent for music and a mind for business

Even though he was a priest, Vivaldi was a shrewd businessman. Like other composers, he always dedicated his compositions to a member of the nobility in the hopes of getting something in return. His dedications featured flowery language and a snobbish tone.

Vivaldi rarely missed a chance to promote himself. For example, in 1709, King Frederick IV of Denmark and Norway, travelling in disguise as the Duke of Olemberg, arrived unexpectedly in Venice and attended a concert that Vivaldi was conducting. Vivaldi took advantage of the occasion to dedicate his new Opus to Frederick.

In 1715, he dedicated a set of arias to Grand Prince Ferdinand of Tuscany. He made sure to include praise for the publisher Estienne Roger, who was based in Amsterdam, because he wanted his works published in northern Europe where they would earn him more fame and more money.

During the same year, a Prussian nobleman, Johann Frederick Armand von Uffenbach, visited Venice and ordered several pieces of music. Vivaldi soon presented him with the music, claiming to have composed it in only three days. He likely drew upon materials he had already composed, but nevertheless, the situation shows how music had become a product for sale in Venice in the early part of the eighteenth century. In fact, once Vivaldi determined he could make more money selling directly to his clients, he stopped publishing his music.

The one and only maestro at the Pietà

Originally hired by the Ospedale della Pietà in 1703 as a violin teacher, Vivaldi worked at the famous girls' orphanage until 1740. Working at the Pietà was very rewarding for Vivaldi. The orphanage had a large collection of instruments, and the girls who stayed there loved music as much as Vivaldi himself. This arrangement made it much easier for Vivaldi to experiment with unusual combinations of musical effects.

Vivaldi's employment at the Pietà was not continuous. Sometimes his working contract was not renewed right away, because the orphanage was short of money. On other occasions, Vivaldi was performing or arranging operatic productions in other cities. Nonetheless, during Vivaldi's lifetime no other violin maestro was ever appointed at the Pietà.

Vivaldi's life: fast-paced, far from easy

Vivaldi was a rather complex person, who often found himself in the middle of professional disputes, financial difficulties and personal problems.

Many of the disputes centred upon Vivaldi's involvement with opera. Not content to be just a composer, Vivaldi was also very active in staging and producing his operas. Given the high cost of such an undertaking and the tough competition among composers to have their work produced, it is no wonder Vivaldi ended up in disputes. One of the worst took place in 1736, when Vivaldi proposed conducting the operatic season in Ferrara, Italy.

At first, Vivaldi's idea was well received by his patron – the Marquis Guido Bentivoglio. But as their correspondence with each other

indicates, many problems soon arose. A troublesome singer and confusion about what would be performed contributed to the situation. Unpaid bills and mounting expenses made matters worse, so much so that the Marquis felt Vivaldi was using him and expressed his displeasure. The straw that broke the camel's back, however, was when the Cardinal of Ferrara, Tomas Ruffo, flatly denied Vivaldi permission to stage any operas in Ferrara.

Financial problems plague Vivaldi

Ruffo felt that priests should not be involved with the theatre, and he hinted that Vivaldi was having a romantic relationship with one of the singers, Anna Giraud. Ruffo also did not like the fact that Vivaldi did not say mass.

Ruffo's decision created terrible financial problems for Vivaldi, who had to pay his performers even if the operas were not staged. Vivaldi tried to have one whole season cancelled, but that was not realistic. Instead, he agreed to turn everything over to a local producer so that the show could go on.

Vivaldi still hoped to make enough money to pay his expenses. Unfortunately, the first opera was a failure and there was thought given to cancelling the second one. The financial situation didn't get any better. It was becoming clear to Vivaldi that time and people's goodwill were running out for him.

In 1738, he staged his last major season in Venice. Although it was successful, Vivaldi's role was becoming more and more that of an editor or arranger than an original composer. Soon, there was no longer any interest in his operas. They were considered unfashionable.

At this point, Vivaldi was 62 years old, tired and out of money. He set out on what was to be his final journey, to the city of Vienna in Austria.

There he hoped to find favour with Charles VI. Before leaving Venice, he convinced the Board of Governors of the Pietà to buy a large collection of his music (which they did rather reluctantly).

Bad luck seemed to follow Vivaldi to Vienna. Charles VI, who had admired Vivaldi's music, died in October 1740 after eating poisonous mushrooms. The new rulers, Maria Theresa and Francis Stephen, were busy with political problems involving Prussia, and showed no interest in Vivaldi.

The mystery of Anna

Anna Giraud (Giro) was an opera singer who made her debut in 1725. Earlier, she had been Vivaldi's star pupil; not only did she sing, but she also played the harpsichord. In time, both Giraud and her sister moved into Vivaldi's home. The sister acted as Vivaldi's nurse. The exact relationship between Vivaldi and Giraud remains a mystery. Was she merely his student... or were they in love as some people hinted? Vivaldi denied any romantic connection. As an ordained priest, he would not have been allowed to have a romantic relationship.

Vivaldi dies in poverty

On July 28, 1741, Vivaldi died in Vienna. He had been living in the house of a saddle-maker's widow on the Karntnerstrasse, now a fashionable avenue in Vienna. The cause of death is described in cryptic terms as *innlicher brand* (German for *internal inflammation*), which could be any number of things. He was buried the same day in a pauper's grave in the Hospital Cemetery.

Since he died in poverty, he was entitled only to the Kleingelaut, or the pauper's peal of bells, six pall bearers and six choirboys (one of whom was Joseph Haydn, who later became a famous composer). Although many of the details of the funeral service are contained in the archives of St. Stephen's Cathedral, Vienna, the precise location of Vivaldi's grave is not known.

St. Mark's – A timeless tourist attraction

St. Mark's is still a famous Venetian tourist attraction, drawing visitors from all over the world. The Basilica of St. Mark's did not achieve the status of cathedral until the 19th century, but it had been a focal point of the city's religious life long before that. This was due in part to its location adjoining the Doge's (the leader of Venice) Palace and looking

out over Venice's main city square. It was here that Venetian leaders worshipped and so it became the chief centre for sacred music. Being in charge of St. Mark's – being its procurator – was a very important job in Venice. One of the procurator's responsibilities was to hire a senior musical director whenever the post was vacant. Most procurators were rather cautious in their choice of musical director. Many of the most talented musicians of the day didn't get the job because they were viewed as too daring. As a result, much of the music composed and performed at St. Mark's was rather dull. Talented, ambitious musicians who did manage to get the job often viewed it as a stepping stone to greater things. Nonetheless, St. Mark's did make its own contribution to Venice's musical tradition by using multiple choirs located in different parts of a building.

Vivaldi's Times

The 17th century was a time of invention and discovery in Europe. There was a great outpouring of art, literature and technology everywhere. It was the era of the invention of the telescope and the microscope. Isaac Newton's work on motion and gravitation laid the groundwork for the science of physics, and medicine benefited from new discoveries in anatomy and physiology.

Who was in charge?

Venice was independent until Italy was united in the 19th century. It was ruled by the city's Catholic state. The head of state was called the Doge and he was elected to the position for life. Most of the laws were made by the Great Council. There were various other groups with special responsibilities, including three Inquisitors of State who were selected each month. It was their role to watch out for acts against the church or state. They also granted licences to the city's theatres and approved the texts of shows.

Italy led the way in music. New musical forms – the cantata, the oratorio, the concerto, the sonata and the opera arrived. The Baroque period began. The violin had made its first appearance in the sixteenth century, but now the city of Cremona in Italy produced three of the most famous names ever associated with the production of the instrument: Nicolo Amati, Giuseppe Guarneri, and the great Antonio Stradivari.

Venice...A great cultural centre

As Vivaldi was beginning his career in music, Venice was already one of the great centres for music and other forms of culture. Visitors from all over Europe were drawn to the city to admire the architecture, take part in the many ceremonies that marked the Venetian calendar, and attend the theatres and gaming houses. People rarely left Venice without a souvenir in the form of a painting or a musical score. Before long, Venice came to rely more and more on its cultural activity as a source of revenue. In fact, Venetian artists and musicians developed a rather commercial "art for export" attitude. They tried to create art and music that visitors would want to buy.

Venetian composers saw their art as trend-setting rather than as part of a long tradition. As Venice became famous for its music, there was a big increase in the speed and the amount of music produced. New pieces were composed, played and put aside quickly, sometimes after only one performance. The ability to compose fast was seen as an advantage. A hastily composed piece of music was admired as proof of the composer's skill.

This speed was characteristic of Vivaldi. Indeed, he once boasted that he could compose a concerto with all its parts faster than a copyist could copy it! If pressed for time when writing operas, Vivaldi would adapt fragments from earlier works, and those of other composers as well. Another time-saver of his was to transfer passages from his instrumental and vocal music back and forth. Nonetheless, there was nothing careless about Vivaldi's work, in spite of his break-neck speed. His work shows crossed-out passages (evidence of editing), and sometime he would leave in two passages, so that the musician or conductor could choose.

Composers vied with one another to draw attention to their own talents. A popular strategy was to mimic sounds from nature in their music. Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* with its weather effects and attempts to emulate birds singing, is an excellent example of this technique.

Any excuse to have a party

The major emphasis placed on music by the nobility was not entirely for love of the art. A more selfish motive sometimes came into play.

Many aristocrats saw music and festivities in general as an effective way to draw people's attention away from the political problems of the day (which the aristocrats themselves may have been involved in). So they encouraged celebrations on every possible occasion: the election of new leaders, the arrival of visiting heads of state and ambassadors, birthdays of important people, and any other reason they could dream up. In 1730, Venetians even celebrated the 100th anniversary of the plague, of which many Venetians died in 1630!

Copy cats

Until the middle of the eighteenth century, musicians worked mainly from manuscripts (handwritten), rather than printed copies. In Italy, music printing was far too expensive for most composers. It was more economical for them to use copyists, as the opera houses did. Vivaldi is known to have used several copyists. Some of his music is written in his own hand; other pieces are written in different hands, but with corrections and additions by Vivaldi.

Where did opera come from?

Vivaldi spent a lot of time working on operas. The opera first appeared in Florence, Italy, as an attempt to revive and revitalize Greek drama. The first opera house in Europe with a paying audience opened for business in March 1673. It was called the San Cassiano and, by now, you can probably guess where it was located: Venice, of course.

Shocking behaviour!

Foreign visitors were shocked by what they described as the loose behaviour and appearance of the orphanage girls in Venice, and even of the nuns. In Naples, a story is told of a convent of nuns who wanted larger quarters. Next door was a monastery. One night, the nuns raided the monastery, catching the monks asleep. They beat the monks with large sticks and drove them out without even giving them time to dress. The city authorities allowed them to keep the property they had acquired in this fashion.

Music and culture made Venice great

In Vivaldi's time, Venice was widely respected as one of Europe's major centres for music and culture. Thanks to its rare combination of stunning architecture, lively entertainment and inspiring ceremonial events, the city had the power to attract visitors from far and wide.

As Vivaldi's musical career was unfolding, Venice's biggest tourist attraction of all was the opera.

The city enjoyed three opera seasons: winter (Carnival), spring (Ascension), and fall.

Carnival was the main season for opera, with theatres presenting two or three productions. It was a festive time when all of Venetian society, including the clergy, joined in the celebrations by wearing masks. During Carnival, five or six opera houses would present their programs, usually comedies, in keeping with the festive nature of the season.

Opera houses required that the works they staged be adapted to their own resources, which varied from place to place. They employed copyists whose task was to tailor materials as necessary. Often the copyist would be required to piece together a “new” work, called a “pasticcio”, from bits of earlier compositions, sometimes by different composers.

The theatres and operas were owned and supported by the nobility, many of whom were themselves composers and musicians. However, the management of these establishments was usually entrusted to professional directors or impresarios.

Staging an opera was expensive. Singers expected high salaries, and because of competition among the various establishments, ticket prices had to be kept low.

Music – Focal point of Venetian society

Venetians at all levels of society, from the gondoliers on the canals to the rich aristocrats in their palaces and summer homes, adored music. Every Sunday and holiday from Easter to the end of September, there would be a procession of gondolas through the city and in the evening the air was filled with the gondolier’s songs. Often, Venetians reacted with passion and even violence to music that moved them. Sometimes women would weep, cry out or even faint when listening to a popular singer. This powerful combination of passion, appreciation and musical talent eventually helped to establish opera as a cultural form.

Music of the orphanage – A unique musical tradition

“They are reared at public expense and trained solely to excel in music. And so they sing like angels.”

- Charles de Brosses

Venice had yet another unique musical tradition, that of the “ospedale”, or orphanage. The orphanages date from the fourteenth century when a monk, Brother Pieruzzo, became concerned about the large number of abandoned children in the city, and founded the first asylum of the Pietà at San Francesco della Vigna.

By Vivaldi’s time, there were four such orphanages for girls in Venice, and their contribution to the musical tradition of the city is immense. The Ospedale della Pietà, where Vivaldi was employed for 36 years, was the most famous. It housed approximately 1,000 girls, who were divided into two groups: those who studied music, and the non-musicians who received a general education.

Although they were referred to as girls, many were mature women. Many were proficient musicians who did not wish either to marry or to enter a convent as nuns, the only other options open to them. So they stayed at the Ospedale as musicians and teachers of music. Those who were teachers were given the title of Maestra.

The “girls” formed not only the choir, but the orchestra as well. They played all known instruments, and sang all parts including tenor and bass. Many were both expert singers and instrumentalists. Performances were given on special occasions and were open to the public. New music was required for each occasion, much of it written by the Ospedale’s own teachers and other Venetian composers. The performances invariably attracted huge crowds and resulted in large financial donations to the institution.

The Pietà made a specialty of including unusual instruments, possibly to attract larger audiences to their performances, or to keep the girls occupied. Someone would have to teach the girls how to play the new instruments. This task was usually assumed by a male teacher, who would be engaged only until one of the girls became proficient enough on the instrument to be able to assume the teaching responsibilities herself. This method was used to keep the presence of men in the

girls orphanage to a minimum. During performances, the girls were kept from public view behind a “modesty screen”.

Vivaldi's Music

Vivaldi composed a large variety of music – instrumental, sacred and vocal. He devoted much of his time and energy to the opera, and probably viewed himself primarily as a composer of operas. He claimed to have composed some 94 operas, most of which have been lost.

Opera was not the only form of vocal music Vivaldi composed. His vocation as a priest and his lengthy association with the Ospedale della Pieta resulted in a great body of sacred music as well. His sacred music included motets, psalm settings, Manificats, Vespers, Masses, Mass Movements, oratorios, cantatas and serenatas. In this type of music, he is best known for his Mass, *Gloria in D*, composed around 1715. Consisting of nine movements, this Mass features solo voices, and wonderful contrasts in scoring, style, mood and key. It is the first piece of Vivaldi's church music to have been recorded in the twentieth century, after World War II, and continues to enjoy enormous popularity. It has been described as the "Four Seasons" of its kind.

Although he frequently borrowed from his earlier compositions, reworking themes and entire movements and reusing them in a new context, his musical style continued to be fresh and quite original. He made a point of keeping up with modern trends in music, and ended up influencing composers in the future.

Vivaldi's concertos models for other famous composers

Vivaldi's concertos served as models for some of the compositions by Johann Sebastian Bach. Bach was so taken with Vivaldi's *L'Estro Armonico* that he made six arrangements of it. Vivaldi's Baroque concertos, and particularly his alternating solo and ensemble features, served to inspire composers in the later years of the eighteenth century, and still survive in concertos and other forms of instrumental music.

***The Four Seasons* is likely Vivaldi's best-known work**

Vivaldi is perhaps best known by contemporary audiences for his *Four Seasons*, which is intended to tell a story. *The Four Seasons* is not a

stand-alone piece, but is in fact a part of *Il Cimento dell'Armonia e dell'Invenzione, opus 8* (The contrast between Harmony and Invention), published around 1725. For each of the seasons, Vivaldi wrote a sonnet, which corresponds to the music. The music not only attempts to portray the season, but also to recreate suitable sound effects, such as storms, birds singing, and dogs barking.

For example, *Winter* – the final concerto of *The Four Seasons* – is written in the key of F minor, which is the same key used in the sleigh ride pieces that were popular in Vivaldi's time. As the piece progresses, the music builds in such a manner that the audience, with a little imagination, can actually experience the cold of winter. Chattering teeth, freezing winds, careful footsteps on ice, even the warmth of a fire can all be recognized in the music as the story unfolds.

**“Winter” from Vivaldi's *The Four Seasons*:
A Sonnet written by the composer to accompany the music**

Frozen and trembling among the chilly snow,
Our breathing hampered by horrid winds,
As we run, we stamp our feet continuously,
Our teeth chatter with the frightful cold.

We move to the fire and contented peace,
While the rain outside pours in sheets.
Now we walk on the ice, with slow steps,
Attentive how we walk, for fear of falling;

If we move quickly, we slip and fall to earth,
Again walking heavily on the ice,
Until the ice breaks and dissolves;

We hear from the closed door
Boreas and all the winds at war –
This is winter, but such as brings joy.