

PROGRAM NOTES

PHILHARMONIA MARCH 2014: RACHEL PODGER AND VIVALDI

By Bruce Lamott

When a talented teenage Saxon prince returned to his duchy of Saxe-Weimar from a trip to Holland in 1713 with the twelve concertos of Vivaldi's newly published *L'estro armonico*, Op. 3, he was carrying what Vivaldi scholar Michael Talbot calls "perhaps the most influential collection of instrumental music to appear during the whole of the eighteenth century." Vivaldi had submitted these works to the French publisher Etienne Roger in Amsterdam during an involuntary hiatus (1709-11) in his teaching career at the Ospedale della Pietà, an orphanage in Venice whose famous all-female orchestra had no doubt premiered many of them. (Though more graciously translated as "Musical Inspiration," the title literally is "harmonious estrus.") Sadly, Prince Johann Ernst died only a couple of years later at age 18, never fully appreciating the profound effect this compilation of string concertos would have on his court organist, J.S. Bach. Bach made transcriptions of five of these works (two for harpsichord, three for organ) for the young virtuoso, but in the process, the study of these works also sparked a profound change in Bach's "musical thinking."

After the dormancy of Baroque music in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, revival of interest in this music first began with research into the works of Bach. Understanding what Bach saw in these concertos can now lead us back to a greater understanding of the style of Vivaldi himself. Recounting information received from Bach's contemporaries, including sons Carl Phillip Emanuel and Wilhelm Friedemann, in the earliest biography of Bach (1802), Nikolaus Forkel cites Bach's admiration for Vivaldi's "chain of the ideas, their relation to each other, the variety of the modulations, and many other particulars." Bach scholar Christoph Wolff credits Vivaldi's concertos with reflecting a "concrete compositional system based on a process of musical thinking in terms of order, continuity, and proportion."

Instead of a rigid structure framed by a *ritornello* (literally, "the little thing that returns," as heard in the introduction and conclusion of the fast movements) and interspersed with virtuosic solo episodes, the Vivaldi ritornello generates a series of thematic modules which are extended, elaborated, contrasted, and reassembled by soloist and ensemble alike. The ritornello itself is often constructed on a three-part rhetorical principal of

proposition	elaboration	conclusion
<i>Vordersatz</i>	<i>Fortspinnung</i>	<i>Epilog</i>

any part of which is capable of further amplification. Students of music appreciation who are often introduced to the baroque concerto as "standard recipe" of discrete R's (ritornellos by the ensemble) and S's (solo passages), will find this evening that this formula as ill-fitting as Cinderella's slipper on a stepsister's instep.

At the heart of Vivaldi's style is what Wolff describes as "an enormously fruitful dialectic of two extremely different aesthetic premises: simplicity and complexity." This is most apparent in the slow movements, in which a terse and sparse unison *tutti* introduces a lyrical arioso for the soloist(s). Vivaldi's appeal to modern audiences is due in part to his clear delineation of harmonies, and to his thwarting of the listener's expectations. Active chord progressions surprisingly stall upon plateaus of a prolonged single harmony, often over a single bass note

(*pedal point*). The most active harmonic movement is propelled by the Baroque device known as "sequence," in which a single melodic figure is repeated in various keys, often in a succession known as the "circle of fifths," in which a downward leap of five notes in the bass line (or upward by four notes) changes what was once the original key (tonic) into the fifth note (dominant) of the scale a fifth below; *that* key then becomes the dominant of the key five notes below *it*, and so forth. (Theoretically, if this cycle were to be repeated 12 times – an eventuality prevented in the Baroque period by tuning in an unequal temperament – it would arrive back on the original tonic.) The virtue of this device is that on this escalator of harmonic instability, we can grasp the handrail of melodic familiarity; Vivaldi also keeps the listener in suspense as to his ultimate destination; although he clearly differentiates major and minor harmonies, he freely moves between them, and his goals – both harmonic and melodic – are refreshingly unpredictable.

Though Vivaldi is a staple on commute-hour radio broadcasts, it is only in live performance that his artifice can be fully appreciated. What may be heard on a recording as monotonous literal repetition is seen in live performance to be a dynamic exchange between two different performers alternating the roles of soloist and accompanist – at times in melodious, sensual responses, at others in competing flights of virtuosity. Beyond the intellectual manipulations of counterpoint and form, Vivaldi is especially attentive to the sensation of listening, exploiting his own understanding as a virtuoso violinist as well as, no doubt, the encouragement and approbation by his young female protégées at the Ospedale. His harmonies shimmer with activity (sometimes called "animated homophony") as parts interchange notes in static arpeggios or rapid "violinistic" repetitions. Chords thicken with accumulating parts and rising melodic lines. Jabbing interjections intersperse with silence, stodgy dotted rhythms give way to limpid lyricism, and vigorous activity suddenly halts in a prolonged freeze-frame of static harmony.

The influence of Vivaldi reached beyond the work of J.S. Bach to a much wider audience, thanks in part to the music publications of Etienne Roger in Amsterdam (1711, reprinted in 1717). Unlike Italian printers who set their music in moveable type--each lozenge-shaped notehead attached to its own 5-line chunk of staff--Roger's engraved plates trace the contours of Vivaldi's lines with scrupulous attention to bowings and articulations. While reprints of Italian scores had to be re-set, making them more susceptible to errata, Roger's engravings were simply run through the press again. [See it for yourself at IMSLP.org by comparing Corelli's Op. 1, printed in Rome (1685), with Vivaldi's Op. 3 (Amsterdam, 1711).]

While the complete catalogue of Bach's works by Wolfgang Schmieder (the source of the Bach-Werke-Verzeichnis, or BWV numbers) was published in 1950, the Vivaldi catalogue by the Danish scholar Peter Ryom (the RV numbers stand for *Répertoire Vivaldien*, not Ryom-Verzeichnis, according to biographer Michael Talbot) is still a work in progress, issued most completely in 2007. Other than the ubiquitous *Four Seasons* (*Le quattro stagioni*, Op. 8, published in *Il cimento dell'armonia e dell'inventione* in 1723-25), few of Vivaldi's 639 instrumental works have programmatic titles or opus numbers, making us dependent on RV numbers to sort through the 99 works in C Major or 44 works in D Minor). With only twelve authenticated published opuses, the chronology of Vivaldi's vast *oeuvre* has not yet been attempted; thus RV numbers do not indicate early or late works--even the *Four Seasons* (RVs 269, 315, 293, 297) are not numbered consecutively. A very helpful concordance of the various

attempts to catalog his works can be found at
<http://www.classical.net/music/composer/works/vivaldi/lists/ryom.php>.

The twelve concertos in *L'estro armonico*, like this evening's program, were organized into four groups of three concertos, each with solo complements of four, two, and single violins. RV 578 introduces the soloists as a *dramatis personae*: first individually, then in pairs, framed by a stately sarabande figure reminiscent of Vivaldi's variations on *La folia*. Well-known in Bach's organ transcription, RV 522 alternates vigorous rhythmic activity with harmonic stasis; the animated ritornello of the first movement stalls on a single chord before resuming the competitive rapport between the soloists. The slow movement begins with an austere unison ritornello which repeats as a ground bass accompaniment for the plaintive duet of the soloists.

The sole representative on this program, of Vivaldi's next opus, RV 249, comes from *La Stravaganza, Op. 4* (Roger, 1716), an upcoming collection he already mentioned in the preface to *L'estro armonico* five years earlier. The "extravagance" alluded to in the title is readily apparent in the sinuously chromatic solo tarantella that bursts open the work without the expected ritornello. A study in musical *chairoscuro*, the concerto juxtaposes extreme contrasts in texture, dynamics, and tempo, as a percussive Presto precedes an Adagio labyrinth of suspended harmonies, marked *arcate lunghe* (long bows). The extended ritornello of the final movement is hijacked by the soloist whose triplets turn it into a momentary *gigue*.

Bach's affinity for RV 565 is not surprising, as in its gross anatomy it resembles an organ toccata and fugue. The opening D minor chord is prolonged by a steepchase of imitative figuration between the soloists, broken by a surprise interruption of the cello solo, as if breaking loose from the static harmony. What follows belies any criticism that Vivaldi could not write a decent fugue; this one inspires Bach's own amalgam of fugue and concerto, in which the solo passages act as episodes between entries of the fugue subject. The slow movement is a gentle *arioso* in the gently rocking rhythm of the *siciliana*, in contrast to a prickly *spiccato* (sharply detached) accompaniment. The cello joins the violin duo in the final movement with a rapid-fire exchange of phrases before yielding the bass line to the violas for a shimmering episode of "animated homophony."

The solo concerto RV 391 had a double life, both in published form entitled *La cetra* (The Kithara), *Op. 9* (1727) and as one of twelve other concertos in a manuscript bearing the same name that Vivaldi presented personally to the Habsburg Emperor Charles VI in Trieste in 1728. Though there is no further evidence of his relationship to Charles, their fates were linked. Vivaldi was in Vienna looking for new audiences for his operas when the Emperor died in October 1740, and the year-long mourning period which closed the theaters left the composer in poverty when he died on 27 July 1741. The solo violin is irregularly tuned (*scordatura*) to better access the harmonies of B minor, and the outer movements both contain stately stodgy dotted rhythms that may be a nod to imperial taste. The closed form of the ritornello is opened up by the solo entrance in a cadenza-like flourish. Midway through the movement, the soloist breaks into undulating arpeggios, becoming a virtuoso accompanist to a soaring melody in the second violin. The final movement is a rondo, alternating another stodgy march with eccentric solo excursions.

The opening of RV 578 foreshadows Vivaldi's *Winter* concerto (published some fourteen years later) and the solo cello joins the violin duo for a rollicking Italian *giga* in the final movement. Another contribution from the published *La Cetra* collection, RV 530 reveals Vivaldi's more rustic side with a violin duet locked in the simple harmonies of improvised folk music, thirds and sixths in parallel motion. There's little differentiation in their animated Alphonse & Gaston interchanges, and the clockwork *spiccato* in the slow movement provides a foil to another *cantabile* melody.

That Vivaldi's music continued to inspire Bach is evidenced by his transcription for four harpsichords of RV 580, almost twenty years after his arrangements for the young Saxon prince. This time the beneficiaries were his eldest sons, Carl Philipp Emanuel and Wilhelm Friedemann, accompanied by the Collegium Musicum meeting at the Zimmermann Coffee House in Leipzig. As in RV 565, Vivaldi animates the tonic chord in an 18-measure *Vordersatz* on B Minor before the fourth violinist breaks the spell and launches an excursion of spinning-out (*Fortspinnung*) through the circle of fifths. The first violin does the heavy lifting in extended solo episodes, but the other three volley with sequences that extend into the cello as well. Most striking (to us and to Bach) is the *Larghetto* movement in which Vivaldi breaks up a single chord on each beat into five different patterns on three rhythmic levels (4+4 in 32nd note undulations, bowed 3+1 sixteenths in downward arcs, 4 sharply separated (*sciolto*) sixteenths in rising arcs, and bowed sixteenths in two-note alternations, all accompanied by repeated eighth-note chords in the divided violas and cello), producing a sort of 18th century minimalism. These shimmering harmonies slowly "progress" to unpredictable destinations (similar in effect to the opening of Handel's *Zadok the Priest*). The concerto ends with a "textbook" 3-part Vivaldi ritornello, in which the soloists finish one another's phrases, and the first violin is invited to play an octave higher ("alla ottava alta se piace"), in the stratosphere near the bridge where Vivaldi's own playing was reputed to dazzle his audience.

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