

***L'Estro Armonico* (Opus 3): Homage to a Medici Prince Antonio Vivaldi (1678 – 1741)**

The first decade of the eighteenth century was an exciting one for Vivaldi. In 1703 he became fully ordained as a priest and obtained a teaching post at the Ospedale della Pietàⁱ. His duties still left him time to freelance as a violinist (often with his father, Giovanni Battista Vivaldiⁱⁱ) and to compose a moderate amount of music. His works had so far generated a modest amount of local success with two sets of sonatas being published by the Venetian publishing houses of Giuseppe Sala in 1705 and Antonio Bortoli in 1709ⁱⁱⁱ. In addition to various sonatas and concertos, Vivaldi received a commission to compose his first (known) vocal work, a serenata titled *Le gare del dovere*^{iv} for a performance in Rovigo in 1708. The publication of *L'Estro Armonico* three years later proved to be one of the major turning points in his career, and his concerto style took Europe by storm.

Vivaldi chose the Amsterdam firm of Estienne Roger to publish *L'Estro Armonico*, whose printing presses used a more modern technology than their Venetian counterparts^v. In addition, Roger had a fantastic distribution network, particularly in Northern Europe where, at various times he had agents in Berlin, Brussels, Cologne, Halle, Hamburg, Leipzig, Liège, London and Rotterdam; Roger's state-of-the-art technology combined with Vivaldi's cutting-edge concerto style proved to be an immediate success.

In search of an influential patron, Vivaldi dedicated *L'Estro Armonico* to the Grand Prince of Tuscany, Ferdinando de' Medici^{vi}, son of Cosimo III de' Medici. The Medici were famous for their support of the arts, and Ferdinando was particularly interested in music. Sometimes described as 'The Orpheus of Princes', he possessed a fine voice, played the harpsichord, studied various string instruments with Piero Salvetti and counterpoint with Gianmaria Pagliardi. He often gave lavish musical entertainments at his villa in Pratolino and, in 1696 he built a theatre there for his annual operatic productions. The many musicians he patronised include Bartolomeo Cristofori, Handel, Pasquini, (Antonio) Veracini, Casini, Alexis Saint-Martin^{vii}, both Scarlattis and Orlandini. Perhaps his greatest gift to the musical world was his patronage of Cristofori who was afforded the time and money to invent the piano, several examples of which were owned by the Prince. He died prematurely in 1713, probably from syphilis which it is presumed he contracted whilst in Venice in 1696, the result of one of his many romantic flings with both men and women.

Following the publication of *L'Estro Armonico*, Roger brought out an edition of Vivaldi's Opus 2 the following year and proceeded to publish the first editions of all Vivaldi's further publications save for six cello sonatas, which were published in Paris. The excellent distribution which the company maintained north of the Alps probably accounts for J. S. Bach's encounter with these works which impressed him to such an extent that he transcribed no fewer than six of them for keyboard. Maybe it was the use of counterpoint in concertos 2, 7, 8, 10, 11 and 12 which held such an attraction for Bach^{viii}. The high incidence of this compositional device in *L'Estro Armonico*, particularly the fugue in the eleventh concerto, may have been part of Vivaldi's plan to cultivate Ferdinando; this particular work astounded many eighteenth century writers, even Vivaldi's critics.

Of the many pioneering aspects of these works, perhaps the most forward-looking is the use of the *cantabile* (singing) style. String instrument treatises had long extolled the virtues of imitating the human voice, and here, Vivaldi calls for passages to be played *cantabile* no fewer than five times. These directions occur largely in slow movements, but also notably in the finale of the eighth concerto, where the second violin's melody serves as an excellent contrast to the first violin's bariolage passagework^{ix}, an effect to which he would return many times throughout the course of his career. Vivaldi's vocal style was soon imitated by composers such as Albinoni, Tartini and Veracini.

The instrumentation of *L'Estro Armonico* is unique amongst his output, calling for four violins, two violas^x, cello, violone, and harpsichord. The concertos are ordered in groups of three with the first of each group being scored for four solo violins, the second for two solo violins and the third for one solo violin; occasionally in the concertos for more than one violin, the cello also joins the solo party. Unlike almost all other Vivaldi concertos, the inclusion of extra (ripieno) players is not necessary as these concertos were intended to be played one to a part; as such, these works are a very late example of consort music.

The instrumental concerto was a relatively new phenomenon and first appeared in Italy in the 1690s. Vivaldi imitated the North-Italian model of Giuseppe Torelli and Tomaso Albinoni which principally used a three-movement layout (fast-slow-fast), often promoting a single soloist^{xi} and taking advantage of the techniques which had been perfected by violinists over the previous twenty years. Whilst only four of the concerti in *L'Estro Armonico* are strictly solo works, the other eight are composed using the same idea, where lengthy passages for the soloists are punctuated with (usually) shorter episodes involving everyone.

The recent identification of an anonymous concerto housed in Dresden, supports our belief that several of these concerti were composed individually prior to the publication of the Opus 3^{xii}. The concerto RV 578a, is an early version of the second concerto of *L'Estro Armonico*. The later version shows that Vivaldi re-worked this concerto considerably, inserting a solo passage into the opening movement and heavily revising the solos found in the other movements.

There is no evidence that the dedication of this fine set of 12 concertos to the Medici Prince bore any reciprocal fruit for Vivaldi. If Ferdinando's life hadn't been cut short, who knows what opportunities might have presented themselves to our composer? However, there can be no doubt that the publication of these works significantly elevated Vivaldi's status as a composer and within two years, Vivaldi had secured commissions to provide an opera and an oratorio for performances in Vicenza. This opera was to be the first of many, for which Vivaldi's understanding of the vocal style – as portrayed in *L'Estro Armonico* – served him so well.

© Adrian Chandler

ⁱ The Ospedale della Pietà was a Venetian founding institution situated on the Riva dei Schiavoni. Select members of the female occupants were instructed in the playing of musical instruments and in singing.

ⁱⁱ Giovanni Battista Vivaldi was also known as Giambattista Vivaldi and – significantly on account of his red hair – Giovanni Baptista Rossi, a trait inherited by his famous son, who was known as *Il Prete Rosso*.

ⁱⁱⁱ Sala published Vivaldi's 12 trio sonatas Opus 1 whilst Bortoli published his 12 violin sonatas Opus 2. Both these sets were later published by the Amsterdam publishing house of Estienne Roger in 1715 (Opus 1) and 1712 (Opus 2).

^{iv} RV 688; this work is lost.

^v The Venetian printing houses used an antiquated technology which needed a separate block for each note; the appearance was often shambolic particularly where large groups of semiquavers were concerned. Estienne Roger on the other hand printed music using copperplate engravings which produced aesthetically-pleasing, easy-to-read results.

^{vi} Interestingly, Arcangelo Corelli's Concerti Grossi, Opus 6, were dedicated to Ferdinando's brother-in-law, the Elector Palatine Johann Wilhelm II.

^{vii} Sometimes known as Alessio S. Martino, Alexis was the father of the famous brothers Giuseppe and Giovanni Sammartini.

^{viii} Vivaldi's concertos served as a blueprint for Bach's own concerto and aria forms.

^{ix} A passage of fast notes played on alternating strings.

^x The use of two viola parts was common in Venetian music. Up until the very beginning of the eighteenth century (for instance, Albinoni's Opus 2, 1700), it was common for the top viola part to be played by an alto viola and the bottom part to be played by a larger tenor viola. Vivaldi's nomenclature however calls for both parts to be played on the alto instrument.

^{xi} The concerto grosso form on the other hand, which found particular favour in Rome on account of the works of Arcangelo Corelli, was essentially a grandiose version of the trio sonata. It is possible to perform these works with just two violins and continuo; it was equally possible to turn trio sonatas into concerti grossi by *adding* extra parts, as proven by Francesco Geminiani and Francesco Maria Veracini.

^{xii} Similarly, several works for Vivaldi's Opus 8 have prototypes. It was normal for composers to include what they deemed as 'perfected' works amongst their published opera, to ensure that their collections were as successful as possible.