

Chapter Two

“The Glorious Venetian Republic” — The Historical and Musical Setting of Vivaldi’s Venice

Vivaldi spent well over fifty of his sixty-three years in his native city of Venice. Except for a roughly two-year stay in Mantua (1718–20), his final months in Vienna (about 1740–41, though the exact dates are still unknown), and musical travels, Vivaldi lived in the *Serenissima*, the Most Serene Republic. In Venice he worked throughout his life as an artist, and from Venice his fame emanated throughout Europe. Yet Venice was more than his home city: it served as the native soil and as the vital nerve of his art. The unique atmosphere that had grown out of the interaction of many different factors – from social and general history, landscape and climate, and culture and the arts – made Vivaldi’s life work “Venetian art” in a sense far beyond the narrow or local sense of the word.

By 1700 the Republic of St. Mark was no longer a leading economic or political power. As early as the sixteenth century the Republic had lost its dominant position as the center for trade with the Orient because of both the shifting of international trade to the oceans and the colonial expansion of other European states. During the seventeenth century, and as a result of the momentous and difficult struggle with the Ottoman Empire, it not only lost important possessions in the eastern

Mediterranean – for example, the island of Crete in 1669 – but it also declined in political authority. In 1668, ten years before Vivaldi’s birth, the Venetians managed to retake the Peloponnesus (formerly known as Morea) from the Turks, and in 1699 the Treaty of Karlowitz (Karlovac), which ratified a victory over the Turks in alliance with Austria, placed the *Serenissima* in a more positive position. This change of fortune did not, however, last. Following a new, protracted war with the Turks, Venice was forced in 1718 to cede its former possessions to Austria at the Peace of Passarowitz. Venice had ceased to be a major power.

Of course, the island republic’s decline as the dominant maritime-mercantile power in the Levant touches only one side of a development that included Venice’s economic and social structure and, not least, the life of its citizens. Most of all, it affected the city itself, which – although it had a population of 140,000, or about 50,000 fewer inhabitants in 1696 than at the end of the fifteenth century – was still almost three times larger than Hamburg (fig. 2). The leading patricians who had originally engaged in commercial shipping became increasingly involved in finance and in speculative ventures in a crisis-ridden society clearly on the decline. Venice had turned from a dynamic trading power into an El Dorado for culture- and for pleasure-hungry travelers, a metropolis of art and amusement. The Venetian Carnival attracted tens of thousands of foreigners as early as 1680, and during Carnival nights one could place unlimited bets at twenty different casinos.¹ Venice had become a city of amusement and of elegant festivities, not only for the



Figure 2. Venice in an engraving by Matthäus Merian the Elder (1638).

visitors who poured in from all over Europe but also for many of the Venetian nobility, who dissipated their ancestors' wealth (fig. 3). Considering the contradictions resulting from this development, it must seem astonishing that the Republic, established during the Middle Ages with an elected Doge as its head, was not seriously challenged during the rest of the eighteenth century. The Venetian Republic ceased to exist as an independent state when Napoleon conquered the city in 1797. Still, the fact that Venice's form of government continued for centuries without external change should not lead us to believe that its political system was unchanged either in substance or in prestige. During the final period of the Republic, it was precisely the entrenched mechanics of a well-established governmental mechanism that preserved the existing system and maintained the balance of power with every means at its disposal. One of those means was the operation of a highly developed surveillance system by the *Inquisitori di Stato* ("The Three"), appointed and endowed with broad powers from within the Council of Ten (*Consiglio dei Dieci*), which was elected annually by the Great Council (*Maggior Consiglio*), the state's supreme judicial authority. The inquisitors' tasks extended from censorship to prosecution of cases of high treason. They maintained an army of paid agents (*sbirri*). One famous witness of the power and methods of the inquisitors was the Venetian Giacomo Casanova, who was imprisoned in the lead chambers (*piombi*) of the



Figure 3. "Masked Ball at the *Ridotta*" (detail), by Pietro Longhi.

Doges' palace in 1755 by order of the state inquisitors. He came to understand that "the Venetian Republic regards self-preservation as its first duty ... and is prepared to sacrifice everything to this duty, ... even the laws".² He also saw that "government policy prefers to tolerate dissipation as proof of purported personal freedom".³ A century earlier a chronicler had declared Carnival celebrations and the toleration of courtesans to be "objects of most exquisite policy".⁴

Johann Adam Hiller reports an incident experienced by the Dresden violinist Johann Georg Pisendel at the hands of the Venetian inquisitors' *sbirri*. Hiller's account is evidence that Vivaldi was also used to being watched. According to Hiller,

He [Pisendel] took a stroll with Vivaldi on St. Mark's Square. In the midst of their conversation, Vivaldi stopped abruptly and whispered to him that they should go straight home and that he would find out why once they got there. Pisendel did as he was told, and Vivaldi informed him that four *sbirri*, whom Pisendel had not noticed, had been closely following and observing him. Vivaldi asked him whether he had done or said something that was illegal in Venice, and since Pisendel could not remember anything of the sort, he [Vivaldi] advised him not to leave the house until he could find out more and tell him what was going on. In fact, Vivaldi went straight to the state inquisitors, where he found out that they had been looking for another man who resembled Pisendel and whose whereabouts they now knew.⁵

It is fitting that we recall such incidents since the tendency is to view Venetian life and culture of this period as consisting of nonstop festivities and untrammelled freedom. This image cannot hold up to closer examination, in spite of the fascination with Carnival, regardless of the almost proverbial cosmopolitan populace that captivated the imagination of visitors, and even with all the wealth, beauty, and gaiety that the city achieved in its final artistic blossoming.

Twilight comes to mind in describing this last golden age of Venetian art and culture. What an abundance of impressive names it evokes, what a special flair is associated with lasting artistic achievements in architecture and the plastic arts, in painting, in music and the theater. The only art missing is literature, that is, literature outside the theater.

Still, eighteenth-century legitimate Venetian theater can boast a pair of such characteristic and yet utterly different playwrights as Carlo Goldoni and Carlo Gozzi.

The architects Baldassare Longhena and Giorgio Massari stand out most among the creators of the city's impressive baroque buildings. Longhena designed the church of Santa Maria della Salute. It was built between 1631 and 1687 and became one of the city's largest religious structures: a Venetian landmark. Longhena was also responsible for some of the most beautiful palaces of the late period, such as the Palazzo Pesaro and Ca' Rezzonico. The latter was begun in 1660 and completed a century later by Massari; Venice's leading artists decorated its interior. A splendid group of painters added to the glorious tradition of Venetian painting that extended from the Bellinis to Giorgione, Titian, Tintoretto, and Veronese. The common elements of the Venetian style of painting are affirmed in the delicate pastel portraits of Rosalba Carriera, in the precise details and enchanting atmosphere of Canaletto, in the almost impressionistic city and genre paintings of Francesco Guardi, and in the light murals and ceiling frescos of Giambattista Tiepolo. All display both a wealth of nuance and a faceted coloration reminiscent of the bright, soft atmosphere of Venice (fig. 4).



Figure 4. "The Church of Santa Maria della Salute in Venice", by Francesco Guardi.

But most of all, late-seventeenth-century and eighteenth-century Venice was a city of music. No other European city could compete with the wealth of vocal and instrumental music performed in the city's churches, in its opera houses and palazzi, and in the open air. The city was a center of musical life, and its music and culture profoundly influenced European musical development.

St. Mark's Basilica enjoyed by far the richest musical tradition (fig. 5). Venice's rise as a major European musical center began toward the middle of the sixteenth century with the flourishing of church music in St. Mark's (the Doges' church adjoining the Doges' palace). The succession of choral directors and organists included Adrian Willaert, Claudio Merulo, Andrea and Giovanni Gabrieli, and Claudio Monteverdi, names that speak for themselves. By the time of Hans Leo Hassler and Heinrich Schütz, they had already made Venice a magnet for musicians from the north. Performances in St. Mark's were especially famous for their colorful instrumental ensembles and spatially conceived works written for and performed by multiple choruses.

After Monteverdi, who was *primo maestro di cappella* at St. Mark's from 1613 to 1643, the main musical focus shifted away from the basil-

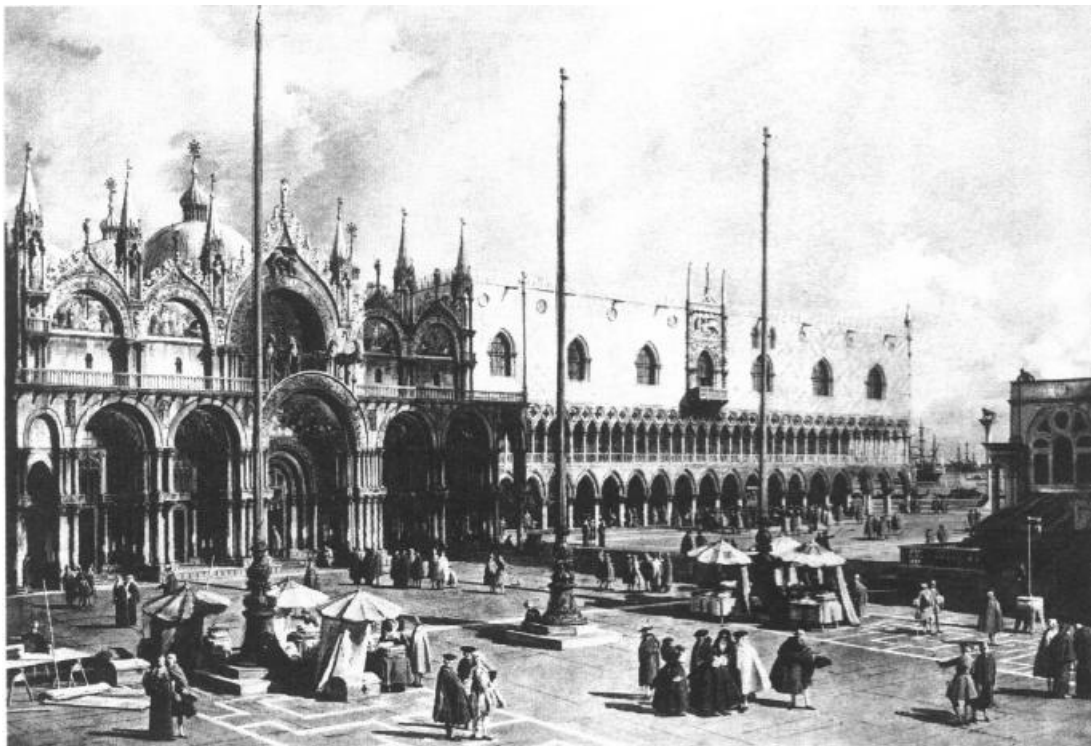


Figure 5. “St. Mark’s Square with the Basilica and Piazzetta”, by Giovanni Antonio Canal (known as Canaletto).

ica. Church music performed in the home of the city's patron saint lost its predominant position with the rise of and increased interest in other types of musical activities. After Monteverdi very few of the musicians appointed by the procurators to the office of *primo maestro di cappella* were first-rate composers. The best of his successors were Giovanni Legrenzi (*vice-maestro* from 1681, *primo maestro* from 1685 to 1690), Antonio Lotti (1736 to 1740), and Baldassare Galuppi (*vice-maestro* from 1748, *primo maestro* from 1762 to 1785). Of these three, Giovanni Legrenzi deserves special attention as he may have been one of Vivaldi's teachers. As a result of Legrenzi's reorganization and the enlargement of the St. Mark's orchestra to thirty-four instrumentalists, Vivaldi's father was employed, starting in 1685, as violinist in the Cappella Ducale. Thus young Antonio had a direct link to the highest Venetian musical institution, which in the decades around 1700 employed such renowned musicians as Carlo Francesco Pollarolo (first as organist, then as *vice-maestro* of the chapel from 1692), Antonio Lotti (at the time still a singer and an organist), and Antonio Caldara (cellist).

Beginning in the late seventeenth century, however, St. Mark's sacred music (as well as that of the city's other leading churches) was surpassed in public favor by the music of the *ospedali*. These musical institutions, which played a prominent role in the history of music, included the Ospedale della Pietà (Hospital of Mercy), Vivaldi's most important musical venue in Venice. The *ospedali* – which had as their purpose the raising of orphaned, illegitimate, and abandoned girls with government, foundation, and private funds – were so called because they were attached to hospitals. Of the city's many *ospedali*, four earned reputations in music: the Ospedale della Pietà (founded in 1346), the Ospedale dei Mendicanti (Beggars' Hospital), the Ospedale degli Incurabili (Hospital of the Incurables), and the Ospedaletto (Small Hospital).

The extensive and devoted musical training of female pupils by these charitable institutions may have been motivated initially by religious and pedagogical purposes; however, the *ospedali* were increasingly guided by monetary motives. The custom of performing music in public on Saturdays, on Sundays, and on holidays was an important early form of public concert life in Italy and, not incidentally, brought in a good deal of money for the financing of the *ospedali*. Thus, during the seventeenth century the musical training of the girls became so profes-

sional that the *ospedali* (which increasingly accepted girls who were not orphans) took on the characteristics of music schools and conservatories (fig. 6). Although subsequent music history often calls them conservatories, it must be remembered that not all pupils enjoyed special musical training – that would have been virtually impossible given the number of girls involved (the Pietà, for example, housed 400 to 500 girls in 1663 and about 1000 in 1738). Intensive musical training was reserved for the *figlie di coro* (choir girls), as distinct from the *figlie di comun* (commoners). From the ranks of the former the chorus and orchestra members as well as the vocal and instrumental soloists were selected. A considerable number of girls, some of whom (especially the unmarried ones) remained in the *ospedali* until middle age, became vocal and instrumental virtuosos whose fame extended far beyond Venice. Their names, usually followed by their voice type or instrument (“Prudenza dal contralto”, “Madalena dal violin”), appear in the journals of travelers to Venice and even in Johann Gottfried Walther’s 1732 *Musikalisches Lexikon* (Music Encyclopedia). For instance, the controller and later royal tutor and court counselor Joachim Christoph Nemeitz, a German traveler to Italy in the early eighteenth century, remembered the names of eight *Mädgen* (girls) “particularly ... famous” at the time (1721), including the violinist Anna Maria of the Pietà, about whom it was said “very few virtuosos of our sex are her equal”.⁶

The reputation for high-quality musical performances at the *ospedali* did not rest on musical offerings by a handful of virtuosos; the high



Figure 6. Girl from the *Ospedale*.
Engraving by Vincenzo Coronelli,
Venice, 1707.

standard of music-making by the full orchestra made the Pietà concerts famous. According to Nemeitz, this *ospedale* had “an orchestra so select as to be found only at a few large courts”,⁷ and only twenty years later Charles de Brosses, who later became the first president of the Dijon Parliament, placed the Pietà strings above those of the Paris Opéra. We are indebted to de Brosses for one of the most vivid descriptions of the impression made by the *ospedali* concerts.

The best music-making in Venice is to be found in the orphanages for girls, consisting entirely of orphans, of illegitimate children, or of children from families unable to pay for their education. The state educates them at its expense and has some of them trained to be good musicians. It is therefore no wonder that they sing like angels, and play violin, flute, oboe, organ, cello, and bassoon, not even stopping at the largest instruments ... ; some forty girls perform at each concert. I assure you, there is no more delightful sight than a pretty young nun wearing a white robe and a bouquet of pomegranate flowers in her hair, leading an orchestra with incomparable grace and with the proper feeling. The lightness of attack and the purity of tone of their voices is simply divine. ... Zabetta from the *Incurabili* has an astonishing tessitura and a quite amazing violin-like tone in her throat; I have no doubts that she swallowed a fiddle by the excellent Somis. Everyone says she is the best and anyone who claims another is as good as she runs the risk of enraging the rabble. But, hush, no one hears me gently whisper in your ear that Margarita from the *Mendicanti* is just as good and even, as far as I'm concerned, much better.⁸

De Brosses here captured some of the atmosphere these concerts must have generated, and this explains why they became increasingly popular. It is not at all surprising that in addition to the teachers (*maestre*) hired from the ranks of the girls (not only to give instruction and to conduct rehearsals but also and most importantly to compose new works) the city's leading male musicians were also engaged as *maestri* by the *ospedali*. These were coveted positions in Venetian musical life because they insured a fixed income while at the same time leaving enough spare time for the *maestri* to engage in artistic activities else-

where. Virtually every well-known composer active in Venice during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries held at least a temporary post in one of the *ospedali*. Starting in 1672 Giovanni Legrenzi was *maestro di musica* at the Mendicanti; from 1701 to 1713 Francesco Gasparini served as *maestro di coro* at the Pietà; Antonio Lotti, Johann Adolf Hasse (from 1727), and Niccolò Jommelli were employed by the Incurabili; and Baldassare Galuppi worked at both the Mendicanti and the Incurabili. Antonio Vivaldi was linked to the Ospedale della Pietà for almost four decades, notwithstanding a number of somewhat long interruptions.

As the finest concert-like forms of public music-making, the performances by the *ospedali* were a kind of antithesis to the indisputable main attraction of the Venetian music, theater, and amusement industry of the time: the opera. During the second half of the seventeenth century and the entire eighteenth century, Venice was the “city richest in opera”⁹ in Italy, that is, in the world. The opening in 1637 of the world’s first public opera house, the Teatro Nuovo di San Cassiano, was followed by that of several other houses, so that in the period around 1700 the city had at least six simultaneously playing opera houses. The most renowned of these theaters (which were usually named after the closest church) were the Teatro di San Giovanni e Paolo and the Teatro di San Moisè (both founded as opera houses in 1639), the San Samuele (1656), the Sant’Angelo (1676), and, the largest and most splendid, the Teatro di San Giovanni Grisostomo, which opened in 1678 (fig. 7). Operas by Vivaldi were performed at three of these theaters.

The status of these opera houses and their management policy were determined by the peculiar social structure of a city built on both tourism and commerce and dominated by a patrician upper class. The owner of the theater was a nobleman or noble family who built the house, in part at least, with money paid by wealthy families for ownership of private boxes. The nobleman deeded the theater to a director or impresario, unless he performed this function himself. The impresario then took charge of all the business and artistic matters. He signed contracts with all involved, from the librettist and composer to the stage architects and designers, from the singers and the other musicians to the stagehands, and he also bore the financial risk of the enterprise.

The principal source of revenue in an impresario-run theater was the rental of permanent boxes by both local patricians and outside aris-



Figure 7. Interior of the Teatro San Giovanni Grisostomo. Copper plate engraving from “Venezia festeggiante” by Vincenzo Coronelli.

ocrats. At times, families bought boxes outright and had them painted or papered according to their individual taste. All these theaters were “box theaters” with a number of tiers, each consisting of a row of small boxes separated from one another. The Teatro di San Giovanni Grisostomo – one of the three theaters owned by the Grimani family – contained five tiers of thirty-five boxes each, for a total of 175.

While the boxes in the preferred second and third tiers were rented in perpetuity to “persons of station”, places in the upper rows and in the orchestra area were for public sale, although purchasing a ticket did not entitle its holder to a seat. That “luxury” had to be paid for separately, as did the printed libretto and the small wax candle necessary for following the libretto. In Venetian operatic life, it was an important sociological fact that the orchestra section on the main floor was filled with a public that belonged neither to the ruling class nor to the cream of the crop of visitors from out of town. This was where the middle class, the many foreigners, and, especially, the characteristic group of *barcaruoli* (gondoliers) were concentrated. The last group were admitted to the theater free of charge owing to their function as a *claque*. It was to this mixed audience (representing a cross-section of almost all social classes) that Venetian opera owed its unmistakable atmosphere.

The following first-person description by Joachim Christoph Nemeitz, from his 1721 impressions of the Venetian opera, is typical.

There are a number of opera houses in Venice, yet the best are St. Chrysostomo, St. Angelo, St. Moses, and St. Cassiano. Unlike Paris, London, Hamburg, and other cities, operas [in Venice] are not performed throughout the year; they are presented regularly during Carnival and sometimes at Ascension. Their entrepreneurs are noblemen and other well-to-do persons who each season (by privilege from the Republic) select the libretto, the music, the singers, the orchestra, and everything else that goes with them. They also supply the funds for them; they receive the profit if they succeed, but should the opera not be successful they suffer losses. One of the above theaters has five rows of boxes and ten to twelve rows of connected chairs in the orchestra. Unlike other cities, there is no fixed price for the boxes: prices are lowered or raised depending on the success of the opera. One also has to rent an entire box, whereas elsewhere individual box seats are sold. The orchestra chairs, however, have a given price: at St. Chrysostomo in 1721 one pays three lire fifteen sols admission and thirty-six sols for each chair.¹⁰ At St. Angelo, on the other hand, admission costs two lire and a chair thirty sols, and at St. Moses thirty-one sols admission and twenty sols for a seat. The little book in which the opera text is printed usually costs thirty sols, at times more, depending on how thick it is. The operas, which are performed every day, begin at 7:00 in the evening and last until 11:00 at night, after which most people go to the fancy-dress ball. Foreigners should not be ashamed to go to the orchestra section at the opera. Even princes, counts, and other persons of quality occasionally take seats there because you have a better view than in the boxes. Moreover, everyone wears a mask. But whatever you do, do not do anything wrong, because the people in the boxes, especially the upper ones, are at times so insolent they will do anything – even spit – particularly when they see someone using a small candle to read the libretto. The most insolent of all are the *barcaruoli*, who are admitted gratis, and other common folk, who stand below the boxes on all sides. They clap, whistle, and yell

so loudly that they drown out the singers. They pay no attention to anyone, and they call this Venetian freedom. They applaud by stamping their feet and by shouting a loud bravo, while clapping is common elsewhere. In St. Angelo and in other lesser theaters if the audience wishes to hear an aria repeated they stamp their feet until the male or the female singer comes out again; this is not the custom at St. Chrysostomo, where arias are not repeated. The last two evenings, Shrove Monday and Tuesday, the operas are played quite carelessly because everyone is thinking about feasting. It is customary to give the fellow who shows you to your place in the opera a few sols to keep him happy.¹¹

As Nemeitz's account indicates, operas were given only "during Carnival and sometimes at Ascension". He also remarks in a note that "the Republic sometimes allows performances to begin in October or November". Here he is referring to the tradition of *stagioni*, that is, the one or more relatively short seasons during which theater was performed. Venetian opera houses were not open the year round. By far the most important season was Carnival (in winter), which lasted from 26 December (St. Stephen's Day) to Shrove Tuesday. During this *stagione* each of the leading Venetian opera houses put on between two and four operas. The other seasons during which some theaters remained closed were shorter and, in general, involved staging only one opera: the spring or Ascension seasons (*La primavera* or *L'ascensione*) and an autumn season (*L'autunno*), which, except for a period before Christmas, more or less became part of the Carnival season. In theory, the repertory was planned and prepared and the ensembles assembled for only a single season.

Today it is hard for us to appreciate the cultural and social role opera played in Venice. Opera was a form of amusement that people enjoyed as often as possible, especially during Carnival. The Frankfurt patrician Johann Friedrich Armand von Uffenbach attended the same opera three times within two weeks when he was in Venice for the 1715 Carnival. According to Reinhard Strohm,

to understand [opera] history using present-day phenomena ...
we must equate eighteenth-century Italian opera with today's

opera plus film, television, and, perhaps, soccer. Incidentally, this applies not only quantitatively but in many respects qualitatively as well, because most performed operas were new and soon forgotten after a few performances (like films today), people spent every free evening there (as many do with television today), and the operas sometimes contained the unexpected, which excited the audience so much they cheered the singers.¹²

Only by taking the prevailing view of the pleasures of opera into account can we grasp that, as reported by Taddeo Wiel, 1274 operas were performed in Venice during the eighteenth century.¹³

Many of the composers who dominated Venetian opera during the century and a half between Monteverdi and Galuppi are well known: Francesco Cavalli, Antonio Cesti, Giovanni Legrenzi, Carlo Francesco Pollaro, Francesco Gasparini, and, between 1710 and 1740, Tommaso Albinoni and Antonio Vivaldi. In addition to these masters, who were linked to Venice either permanently or for long periods, are those who worked temporarily for Venetian opera houses: Alessandro Scarlatti, Antonio Caldara, Leonardo Leo, the Germans Johann David Heinichen, George Frideric Handel (*Agrippina*, 1709), and the young Johann Adolph Hasse, who first composed an opera for Venice (*Artaserse*, 1730) following his early successes in Naples. Venice was the home of two of the most important eighteenth-century librettists: Apostolo Zeno and Carlo Goldoni. Some of the great vocal stars of the period performed on Venetian stages: Faustina Bordoni, who made her debut in her native city in 1716, the young Francesca Cuzzoni, who first sang in Venice in 1718, and the castrati Antonio Bernacchi and Farinelli. Above all, it was the great vocal art of such *prime donne* and *primi uomini* (and many others whose names are known today only by specialists) that turned each opera performance into a celebration.

Although no other musical institution could compete with the opera's and the *ospedali*'s effects on the public, there were a number of other musical venues in addition to St. Mark's with its sacred music. Various forms of musical performance, including the so-called academic concerts, were held in the palaces of the nobility, and festive concerts took place at the numerous foreign embassies in Venice, which was also a center of international diplomacy. On 29 August 1739 de Brosses

reported from Venice that even at that season – that is, not during Carnival – scarcely an evening went by without a concert, and that the populace had come in droves to the canals, where they listened as intently as if it were their first time.¹⁴

Could a musician wish for a better place to practice his craft? Did he not have every possibility to develop as an artist? We must assume that Vivaldi did in fact perceive the extraordinary opportunities his native city offered him, even if toward the end of his career he attempted to seek his fortune elsewhere. To be sure, the few surviving documents reveal nothing about his attitude toward his city or about how he felt as a Venetian. Only once, in a handwritten dedication to the *nobile* Antonio Grimani, is there a hint of his pride in the Venetian Republic. He deplores the decay of “poor Italy”, unable to free itself “from the lamentable misfortunes of a foreign yoke”, and he continues: “On the other hand, we are somewhat comforted by the glorious Venetian Republic, which has preserved our Italian liberty from its beginnings to our times; may God preserve it until the end of time”.¹⁵

