

Chapter Three

Vivaldi's Training as Priest and His Appointment as *Musico di Violino* *Professore Veneto*

In January 1963 the English scholar Eric Paul located the long-sought-after document that established Vivaldi's date of birth. Paul, who had done valuable research into Vivaldi's family history, discovered the record of the composer's dates of birth and christening in the baptismal register of the church of San Giovanni in Bràgora. This finding finally eliminated speculation about his year of birth. To be sure, some publications have appeared since the finding of the baptismal record that have given Vivaldi's approximate year of birth as 1675 (others have used "c. 1678"). In the same way, some recent scholars have continued the nineteenth-century practice of giving the year of his death as 1743 even though in 1938 the actual date of his burial was established as 28 July 1741.

The baptismal record found by Eric Paul indicates that Vivaldi was born 4 March 1678 in the parish of San Giovanni in Bràgora in Venice, and that he was baptized by the midwife on the same day because he was in danger of death. Antonio's church baptism took place on 6 May of the same year (fig. 8). The baptismal register contains the following entry:

6 May 1678. Antonio Lucio, son of Giovanni Battista, instrumentalist and son of the late Agostino Vivaldi, and his wife, Camilla, daughter of the late Camillo Calicchio, born this 4 March, on which day he received home baptism from midwife Margarita Veronese due to danger of death, was brought to the church this day. I, Pastor Giacomo Fornacieri, performed the exorcisms and christening, at which Antonio Gerolamo Veccelio, owner of the Doge Apothecary in our parish, was godfather.¹

This brief notice provides details of the circumstances surrounding Vivaldi's birth. Of particular interest are the *per periculo di morte* (due to danger of death) explanation for Antonio's having been baptized immediately at birth, and the biographical information about his parents. Understandably, we can only speculate what this "danger of death" might have been. Many scholars are inclined to regard it as the first symptoms of the chest condition that, according to the composer's own state-



Figure 8. San Giovanni in Bràgora, the church where Vivaldi was baptized, as it appears today.

ments, he suffered from birth.² Note, though, that Vivaldi's biographer Remo Giazotto provided an entirely different explanation when he suggested that fear following the earth tremor that took place in Venice on 4 March 1678 was the probable cause for Vivaldi's emergency christening.³ The unusually long period between his birth and his baptism suggests that his weak constitution may have been the actual cause for delay.

Although available information about the background and class of Vivaldi's parents is still rather sketchy, the details suffice to give us a general picture.⁴ The composer's father, Giovanni Battista (Giambattista) Vivaldi, was originally from Brescia, where he was born in 1655 to Agostino Vivaldi, a landlord, and Margarita Vivaldi. He moved to Venice in 1665 with his widowed mother and his elder brother Agostino. Giovanni Battista was trained as a barber, though he also received thorough training as a violinist. The record of Antonio's baptism, dated 6 May 1678, calls Vivaldi's father a *sonador* (instrumentalist), and we have proof that he was employed as a violinist by the Cappella Ducale at St. Mark's in 1685. Vivaldi's mother, Camilla Calicchio, was the daughter of the tailor Camillo Calicchio, a resident of Venice since 1650, and his wife, Giannetta (Zanetta) née Temporini. She was also born in 1655.

Giovanni Battista Vivaldi married Camilla Calicchio in the church of San Giovanni della Zuecca (Giudecca) (no longer standing) on 11 June 1676.⁵ San Giovanni in Bràgora parish, located between St. Mark's Square and the Arsenal (near Riva degli Schiavoni, where the Calicchio family lived) was also where the young wife gave birth to their first child, Antonio Lucio, on 4 March 1678. Antonio's birthplace was located on the Campo grando (the present-day Campo Bandiera e Moro), where the Vivaldis lived "at the Bràgora" (*alla Bràgora*) until November 1705.⁶

The first documents that mention Antonio date from 1693. The other information we have from this period concerns the birth of siblings and further details of Giovanni Battista Vivaldi's career.

The Vivaldis had nine children: five sons (including Antonio) and four daughters. Of these, only Antonio seems to have chosen music as a profession. One of the sons, Francesco Gaetano (1690–1752), was a barber and wigmaker in Venice and, at least for a time (in 1731), a printer; he was temporarily banished from Venice in 1721 for insulting a nobleman. Sometime between 1729 and 1730, Antonio's youngest brother, Iseppo (Giuseppe) Gaetano, born in 1697, was punished with

three years of exile from Venice for injuring a grocer's errand boy. Three of the composer's nephews, Pietro and Daniele Mauro (b. 1715 and 1717 respectively) and Carlo Vivaldi (b. 1731), became music copyists (*copisti musica*).

According to accounts from the 1680s detailing the career of Giovanni Battista Vivaldi, he was a highly regarded violinist. On 23 April 1685 when he began as a violinist in the St. Mark's orchestra, his annual salary was fifteen ducats. Beginning on 21 August 1689 he was paid a salary of twenty-five ducats, perhaps because in addition to his orchestral duties, he performed solos. On 22 July, one month before this raise, he was appointed instrument teacher (*maestro d'instrumenti*) at the Ospedale dei Mendicanti, and we have records showing that he performed during the same year at the city's leading opera house, San Giovanni Grisostomo. The most important indication of his excellent reputation as a violinist, however, is found in a guide to Venice (*Guida de' forestieri*) by Vincenzo Coronelli that lists him, together with his son "the priest", as one of the city's leading performers on the instrument. The guide, published in 1706, is the first record to mention father and son together as musicians. Incidentally, a number of these documents refer to Giovanni Battista Vivaldi as "Gio: Baptista Rossi", and others add "known as Rosetto" after "Vivaldi", clearly indicating that he had red or sandy hair, which Antonio inherited. It has been posited that the elder Vivaldi used the pseudonym "Giambattista Rossi" for the opera *La fedeltà sfortunata*, which was first performed in 1688.

Documentation of Antonio's career begins with records from the summer of 1693. He was already fifteen years old and most likely had a substantial portion of his musical education behind him. The documents of 1693 almost exclusively concern his training for the priesthood, as do most of the records from the ensuing decade. On 17 June 1693 the Curia Patriarcale di Venezia had two witnesses confirm the legitimacy of his birth, the baptismal date of 6 May 1678, and the reputation of his good character; and on 18 September the Venetian patriarch presented the fifteen-year-old with a tonsure. In place of attending a seminary for training in the priesthood, Vivaldi was apprenticed to the priest at St. Geminiani; this is indicated by the note "Ecclesiae S. Geminiani" (of St. Geminiano Church) that follows Vivaldi's name in the Registro Sacre Ordinazioni. In the following years similar entries indicate that he was subsequently associated with San Giovanni in Oleo

parish for a considerable time. Both churches were near St. Mark's Square.

Vivaldi's training for the priesthood extended over a period of ten years, and the period is documented in full. He received the four minor orders as follows: porter on 19 September 1693, lector on 21 September 1694, exorcist on 25 December 1695, and acolyte on 21 September 1696. The first two of the higher orders – subdeacon and deacon – followed on 4 April 1699 and 18 September 1700 respectively. After the relatively long period of two and a half years as deacon, Vivaldi was ordained to the priesthood on 23 March 1703. He was a member of San Giovanni Church in Oleo parish at the time.

Prior to 1703 the only indication that the aspiring cleric performed as a professional musician was the appearance of the notation “Pré [priest] Vivaldi” as violinist that occurred on the performance fees account register dated 28 February 1697, naming the performing musicians at the Cappella Ducale of St. Mark's for Christmas 1696.⁷ Even though the eighteen-year-old had just become an acolyte and was still a good way from being ordained as a priest, the reference was clearly to Antonio. He was paid one sequin for his services.

We can only conjecture about his musical training and his other activities as a child and as a young man. In any event, he must have found enough time during his training for the priesthood for intensive musical studies, because when he was ordained as a priest at age twenty-five he was already an accomplished musician. He took up his first professional position in music at the Ospedale della Pietà as *maestro di violino* in 1703 – the same year that George Frideric Handel entered the Hamburg Opera Orchestra as violinist and Johann Sebastian Bach took up the post of organist at the Neue Kirche in Arnstadt.

It is generally assumed, and rightly so, that Antonio's father, Giovanni Battista Vivaldi, was his first and probably his most important music teacher. He must have begun teaching him the violin at a very early age. In addition, his father must have introduced him to the main Venetian performance venues, where church and opera music as well as a wide range of specifically instrumental genres will have made lasting impressions on Antonio. Since Paul Everett was able to argue plausibly several years ago that Vivaldi's most important Venetian copyist was none other than Giovanni Battista Vivaldi,⁸ we can assume that Antonio's father gave indispensable help to his famous and busy grown

son. In the autumn of 1729 Giovanni Battista, then seventy-five, accompanied his son on a trip to central Europe (“Germania”). There is no indication that the young Vivaldi studied violin or composition with any of the leading Venetian teachers of the period nor that he traveled outside Venice, even briefly, to study music. Francesco Caffi’s conjecture that Vivaldi studied with Giovanni Legrenzi remains unproven.⁹ It seems likely that Antonio’s father would have brought his gifted son to his *primo maestro*, one of the leading musical authorities in Venice, but Antonio was only twelve when the master of the St. Mark’s orchestra died. Whatever the case, it seems likely that the boy began to study composition at an early age.

As with other details of Vivaldi’s musical training, uncertainty remains as to the personal reasons that motivated him to prepare for a musical career while training for the priesthood. Was it clear from the beginning that he would not perform his priestly functions? Or did he give up celebrating mass for reasons of health, as he states in a letter written in 1737? Answers to these questions abound with contradictions and inconsistencies. The fact that he took up a post as *maestro* at the Pietà in September 1703, only a few months after he had been ordained, indicates that he pursued the status and priestly title of *Don* largely to gain social prestige, while always intending to make a career in music. The title page of his first printed collection of works, the Trio Sonatas, Op. 1, bears the name “D. [Don] Antonio Vivaldi Musico di Violino Professore Veneto”, which roughly means “... violinist and professional Venetian musician”. One should remember that such combinations of careers were by no means unusual in Italy at the time; many clergymen had professional or artistic careers unrelated to their vocation. Given the several thousand priests living in Venice during Vivaldi’s lifetime, this practice must have been a virtual necessity.

In August 1703 the governors of the Ospedale della Pietà resolved to raise the level of musical training and of performance quality at the institution. This action, initiated by Francesco Gasparini, who since 1701 had held the office of *maestro di coro* or musical director of the Pietà, brought about the opportunity for Vivaldi to be appointed, immediately after his ordination, to a musical position at the Ospedale della Pietà. As a result of Gasparini’s proposal to employ new viola, violin, and oboe teachers, Vivaldi was appointed *maestro di violino*. His annual salary for the post was sixty ducats – fully four times more than

his father's beginning salary as violinist in the Cappella Ducale. Vivaldi was not hired indefinitely; the *congregazione*, the institution's governing board, had to vote annually on his appointment just as it did for the other teaching posts at the Pietà. In 1709, for the first time, Vivaldi's employment at the Ospedale della Pietà was interrupted because he had not received the two-thirds majority vote, required since 1708, for continued employment.

It was recently revealed that during his first years at the Pietà, Vivaldi also carried out priestly functions at the orphanage. When he was appointed *maestro di violino*, he was also given a curacy, or *mansioneria* (1 September 1703), which entailed celebrating mass daily for a stipend of eighty ducats per year.¹⁰ The money was provided by a private donor, not by the Pietà. The first *mansioneria* lasted two years, though Vivaldi was paid only half the twenty ducats that he should have received between June and August 1705 because he read only forty-five of the ninety stipulated masses. Vivaldi was again appointed curate of the Pietà from September 1705 to November 1706, again for eighty ducats.¹¹

Early biographical literature teems with extravagant tales telling why Vivaldi ceased to perform his priestly duties. Wasielewski relates the following anecdote:

Once, while reading daily mass, he was overcome by the urge to compose. He interrupted his priestly functions and went into the sacristy to discharge his musical thoughts and then returned to end the ceremony. Of course, the matter immediately created a stir and Vivaldi was brought before the church authorities for disciplinary action. The body in question was lenient and decided to relieve him of the duty of celebrating mass in the future, since it appeared that he was not quite right in the head.¹²

On another occasion, in a letter to Marchese Bentivoglio at Ferrara and in answer to charges by Cardinal Ruffo, Vivaldi provided a rather lengthy explanation of why he had not said mass. He contended that the difficulties caused by his congenital chest ailment, or angina pectoris (*male di petto ossia strettezza di petto*), had compelled him to leave the altar on three occasions before completing the service and that this was the sole reason why, in all twenty-five years, he had not celebrated mass.¹³

Considering the other symptoms he described, it is likely that he had asthma¹⁴ – a disease that would have made it very difficult for him to say mass every day. Doubts recur as to whether Vivaldi was telling the whole truth about his reasons for not saying mass, largely because his illness clearly did not limit his many artistic activities nor keep him from undertaking extended concert tours.

We have no way of determining exactly when Vivaldi stopped actively carrying out his priestly duties. The letter mentioned above states that he had ceased celebrating mass twenty-five years earlier, which would have been in 1712; yet a few lines further on he claims that he had said mass for one year or a little longer (*un anno o poco più*) after having been ordained a priest. Perhaps the end of the second *mansioneria* in November 1706 marked the end of his activities as a clergyman. *Il prete rosso* (the redheaded priest), as he was always called in his native city, would have been twenty-eight at the time.

An Unspectacular Debut as Composer: The Sonatas Op. 1 and Op. 2

Vivaldi's beginnings as a composer are obscure. We are unable to determine precisely when he began to compose seriously, and we know nothing about his first works. We can assume with certainty that sometime between the ages of seventeen and twenty-two (at the latest), Vivaldi began to compose more or less ambitious works; that would have been during the second half of the 1690s. It is entirely uncertain whether any of these early pieces belong to the corpus we possess today. In order to avoid speculation, we are forced to confine ourselves to what has come down to us, that is, his first printed collection: the twelve Trio Sonatas, Op. 1.

The collection was published sometime between mid-1703 and 1705 by the Venetian publisher Giuseppe Sala under the title *Suonate da camera a tre, due Violini, e Violono o Cembalo*. It was dedicated to a "Nobile Veneto", Count Annibale Gambara, originally from Brescia. The year of publication is uncertain (in spite of the fact that the only extant copy of the Sala edition – a fragment at that – bears the date 1705) because certain aspects of the title page seem to indicate that the existing copy is

a later printing. One indication for an earlier date is the reference to Vivaldi as a cleric (“D.”), but not yet as *maestro* at the Pietà, as would later be customary. This would suggest that the first edition was issued during mid-1703.¹⁵ As previously mentioned, “Musico di Violino Professore Veneto” was the only title given to Vivaldi on the page.

During the time of Monteverdi and the young Schütz, it was something of an unwritten law that composers should make their debut with a collection of printed madrigals. Beginning around 1700, at least in Italy, the virtually obligatory proof of artistic maturity was an Op. 1 of trio sonatas – proof that the sonata for two melody instruments (preferably two violins) and continuo had become the leading form of Italian instrumental music during the seventeenth century. Vivaldi followed this custom, as did Giuseppe Torelli, Antonio Caldara, Tommaso Albinoni, and Arcangelo Corelli – the composer who perfected the *sonata a tre* during the 1680s and 1690s. Corelli is also associated with the two standard sonata types that held sway during the following decades: the *sonata da chiesa* (church sonata), typically four movements – slow, fast, slow, fast – and the *sonata da camera* (chamber sonata), consisting of a prelude and a number of dance movements (suite). The church sonata was characterized by contrapuntal writing (for example, fugal in the fast movements) and a generally noble and serious style, while the more popular chamber sonata with its dance movements (invariably in two parts) largely avoided the strict contrapuntal style. Corelli published four collections of trio sonatas between 1681 and 1694. Op. 1 and Op. 3 each contain twelve church sonatas; Op. 2 and Op. 4 each consist of twelve chamber sonatas.

Vivaldi’s Trio Sonatas, Op. 1, are all *sonate da camera*. Most of them are in four movements, yet they exhibit considerable variety within this pattern. They all open with a “free”, that is, non-dance, movement usually labeled *preludio*, while virtually none of the trio sonatas share the same type and sequence of dance movements. For example, Sonata No. 7 (RV 65) contains the movements Preludio, Largo – Allemanda, Allegro – Sarabanda, Andante – Giga, and Presto, while Sonata No. 11 (RV 79) consists of a Preludio, Andante – Corrente, Allegro – Giga, Allegro – Gavotta, and Presto. Of the dance forms (allemanda, corrente, giga, gavotta, and sarabanda), the gavotta was used regularly as a final movement whereas the other forms were arranged in various orders. Vivaldi’s first work was typical of period sonatas in its blurring of the

distinction between chamber and church sonatas. In Vivaldi's case this was largely shown by use of free movements (independent of dance models) and by use of increased imitative writing in the dance movements. The process of interpenetration that became dominant around 1750 resulted in a more or less neutral sonata.

Vivaldi's Trio Sonatas, Op. 1, are not innovative since they do not add anything clearly new to the works of his immediate predecessors or contemporaries, nor do they set themselves apart through a distinct idiom of their own. These works can hold their own against the best Italian chamber sonatas of the time, yet they are still heavily dependent on their models, especially on Corelli's works, which Vivaldi certainly knew. The final piece of the Trio Sonatas is clear proof of Vivaldi's debt to his predecessor and to his tradition. As in the last of Corelli's Violin Sonatas, Op. 5 (Rome, 1700), Vivaldi's Sonata No. 12 (RV 63) consists of nineteen variations on the sarabande-like *La follia*, a theme that was very popular at the time (ex. 1). The *follia* variations are the most difficult and easily the most effective element in the complete sonata set; they are extremely inventive and vary considerably in form, in configuration, and in expression.

Adagio

VI. I VI. II

B.c.

Example 1. Sonata in D Minor, Op. 1, No. 12 (RV 63), Follia.

The opening movements of the sonatas run the gamut from a Corellian, solemn Grave to a free, concerted, gigue-like miniature Allegro (Sonata No. 9, RV 75). A wide variety of dance movements are used – for example, the gavottes range from a very simple short movement consisting of a mere eight bars (two times four bars, Sonata No. 1, RV 73) to the tenth sonata's Gavotta, which has a high degree of stylization using tightly organized imitation and repeated sections of fourteen and twenty-eight bars (ex. 2). I could demonstrate much the same variety by using examples from other dance movements.

Presto

VI. I

VI. II

B.c.

6/4 6 5 7/2 6 5/4 3 6

Example 2. Sonata in B-flat Major, Op. 1, No. 10 (RV 78), Gavotta.

The tendency for the first violin to dominate is another notable compositional feature. Sonatas Nos. 7, 8, and 11 contain no fewer than six solo movements in which the second violin merely accompanies.

In general, what I have said about the Op. 1 trio sonatas applies to Vivaldi's second set of published works, the twelve Sonatas for Violin and Continuo. They were first published without an opus number in 1709 by Antonio Bortoli of Venice. Bortoli announced their publication late in 1708. The designation "Op. 2" appeared on the 1711 reprint by Estienne Roger of Amsterdam. The violin sonatas were dedicated to King Frederick IV of Denmark and Norway, who made an incognito visit to Venice between 29 December 1708 and 6 March 1709 during Carnival and attended a Pietà concert conducted by Vivaldi on 30 December.

The Violin Sonatas, Op. 2, are *sonate da camera*. Six of the works are in three movements, while the other six are in four. The four-movement works contain a second free movement in addition to the opening movement. Rather conventional movements are juxtaposed with others that are effective and distinctly individual in both language and overall character. Consider the correnti of the first and second sonatas with their abundant rhythmic surprises, or the striking Allemanda of the Sonata No. 10 in F Minor (RV 21), with its sustained dotted rhythm in the upper voice, or a movement such as the perpetual motion – like Capriccio – Presto of the Sonata No. 12 in A Minor (RV 32), in which the violin executes a single sixteenth-note figure, etude-like, reaching as high as f^4 . Movements that are similar to this Capriccio, in which the bass does nothing more than accompany the virtuosic violin part, alter-

nate with movements in which the melody and bass lines toss motifs back and forth in characteristic baroque rhetorical gesture, such as in the ninth sonata's *Preludio* and in the *Capriccio – Allegro* (a concertante movement) of the same sonata.

The thematic materials in these early sonatas show several striking resemblances to themes found in the composer's later works. For example, the opening theme of the third sonata's *Preludio* is identical to that of the 'Domine Deus' of the *Gloria* (RV 589), and the theme of the fourth sonata's *Allemanda* (ex. 3) is the same variation as that of the famous gavotte theme from Corelli's *Sonata in F Major, Op. 5, No. 10*, which Vivaldi used in one of the trio sonatas (*Op. 1, No. 5, Preludio*) and in one of the concertos (*Op. 3, No. 7, Allegro*).

Allegro



Example 3. *Sonata in F Major, Op. 2, No. 4* (RV 20), *Allemanda*.

Of the striking and original sonatas (nos. 2, 9, 11, and 12), the twelfth is the most technically difficult. The violinist must play long passages in fourth position – a technical difficulty that surpasses any found in Corelli's writing. Like Vivaldi's other sonatas, however, the twelfth sonata contains no passages in double stops.

Vivaldi followed his sets of sonatas (*Opp. 1 and 2*) – both of which were reprinted outside Italy a number of times, proving their popularity – with only two other groups of sonatas of six works each: four *Sonatas for Violin and Continuo, Op. 5* (RV 18, 30, 33, and 35), published with two *Trio Sonatas for Two Violins and Continuo, Op. 5* (RV 72 and 76), by Jeanne Roger of Amsterdam in 1716, and six *Sonatas for Cello and Basso Continuo* issued in 1740 by the Parisian house of Le Clerc le Cadet. While the *Op. 5 Sonatas* add little stylistically to *Opp. 1 and 2*, the cello sonatas represent a distinct change. In the cello sonatas, the fusion process between chamber and church sonata into works of four movements (slow–fast–slow–fast) has been taken a step further; almost all the bipartite movements (and they are not given dance names) emphatically repeat the opening theme in the tonic during the second repeat.

Vivaldi's most interesting and original chamber works are probably not among his printed sets but rather among the handwritten ones, such as the violin sonatas that the composer dedicated to his German student, Johann Georg Pisendel, and some concertos for chamber ensemble.

