

Chapter Five

“Having Composed Ninety-Four Operas” – Vivaldi as Opera Composer and Impresario (1713–1739)

On 2 January 1739 the sixty-two-year-old composer wrote a letter that was bitter and filled with disappointment to his patron Marchese Bentivoglio. It was written under the emotional influence of the crushing failure of his opera *Siroe re di Persia*, and contained the phrase “doppo 94 opere da me composte” (having composed ninety-four operas). Understandably enough, when the letter was first published in 1967 this claim to having composed ninety-four operas created some confusion since slightly fewer than fifty Vivaldi operas were known at the time.¹ Was it conceivable that the scores of almost fifty operas had disappeared without a trace, along with all mention of them? Or had Vivaldi simply exaggerated the number of works he had written? It seems unlikely that these questions will ever be answered satisfactorily. Nonetheless, the figure Vivaldi names is entirely plausible if we include all operas he produced or with which he was connected in a significant way, including *pasticci* produced by him and revivals of new versions of his own and other works. After all, when Vivaldi wrote this letter he had been working in the theater for twenty-five years, and opera and opera business had been at the center of his activities for much of his career.

The Highs and Lows of an Operatic Career

Vivaldi made his debut as an opera composer during the spring of 1713 in Vicenza, a city within the Venetian Republic. When his first opera, *Ottone in Villa*, was performed on 17 May at the small Teatro delle Garzerie, he was thirty-five years old and had for some time been renowned as a violinist and composer of instrumental works (fig. 14). Perhaps during the autumn of that year, and certainly no later than the beginning of the 1714 Carnival season, Vivaldi became involved in the Venetian operatic world, not as composer but as impresario. Presumably he became impresario of the Teatro Sant'Angelo through Francesco Santurini, an influential Venetian theater producer who had also leased (and himself been impresario of) this theater for many years. The



Figure 14. Autograph score of the opera *Ottone in Villa*, opening of act one. Vivaldi's monogram, located in the upper left-hand corner, found in many of his scores, probably means: L(aus) D(eo) B(eataeque) M(ariae) D(eiparae) A(men) (Praise be to God and Mary, the blessed Mother of God, Amen).

Sant'Angelo became *Vivaldi's* theater. Of the somewhat more than twenty of his stage works written for Venice between 1714 and 1739, eighteen were premiered at the Teatro Sant'Angelo.

The relatively small Teatro Sant'Angelo, located directly on the Grand Canal, was of modest importance in the hierarchy of the Venetian opera houses (fig. 15). It was unable to hire the most famous vocal stars, to mount lavish productions, or to charge high admission, unlike the renowned houses of San Giovanni Grisostomo and San Cassiano.² Vivaldi's debut at this small theater is proof of the difficulties faced in establishing a career in opera in Venice, an important operatic center. According to Reinhard Strohm, "the large theaters of San Giovanni Grisostomo and San Cassiano were firmly in the hands of the composers C. F. Pollarolo, F. Gasparini, A. Lotti, and Albinoni",³ that is, the leading opera composers active in Venice around 1710 to 1715. I will deal at a later point with the question of why even later Vivaldi was unable to make a breakthrough in the city's leading opera houses.

In the late seventeenth century, the office and the responsibilities of an opera impresario (for houses run-for-profit but not including court-

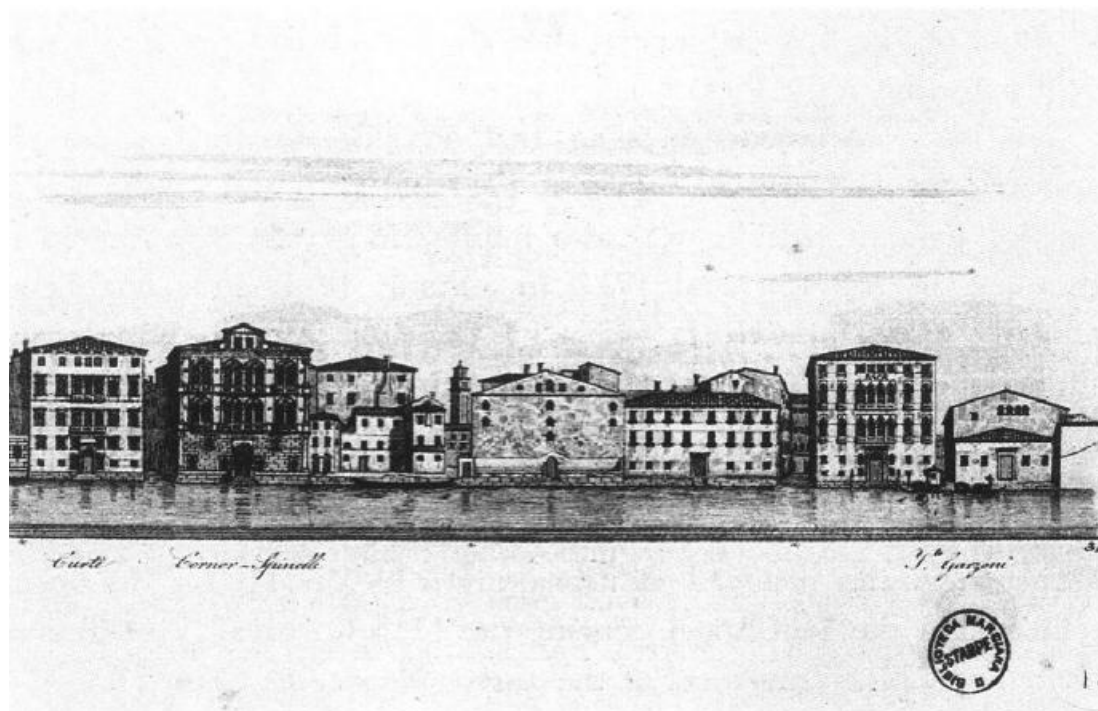


Figure 15. The left bank of the Grand Canal with the facade of the Teatro Sant'Angelo. Detail of an 1828 engraving by Antonio Quadri. The theater is the center building immediately to the right of the tower.

run houses) were more like those of today's artistic director than those of today's impresario. The impresario was responsible for running all the artistic and business matters of the theater, which he usually rented, and for negotiating and signing contracts with everyone connected with productions. He engaged singers, instrumentalists, technical staff, and other support staff either for a single production or, if the theater premiered more than one opera per season, for all operas performed during a *stagione*. Inasmuch as none of the participants in the staging of an opera other than the impresario had any financial stake (beyond their fee) in the production, all profits earned by a successful opera went to the impresario. (Of course, if a production was a failure, all losses were suffered by the impresario). Whereas the composer was paid a relatively modest sum for writing an opera – in 1736, Vivaldi claimed that the customary fee for writing an opera was one hundred sequins⁴ – the risky profession of impresario was potentially highly lucrative. If one also considers that the impresario's influence on the artistic side of an opera production enabled him to choose the libretto, the composer, and, not least of all, the cast, it becomes obvious why a man like Vivaldi found being an impresario enticing. We should not underestimate, however, the allure of the financial aspect; after all, Vivaldi had repeatedly seen that his position at the Pietà was not secure.

We have documents proving that Vivaldi was first appointed impresario for the Carnival *stagioni* of 1714 and 1715, and a great deal of evidence suggests that he was also impresario at the Sant'Angelo in autumn 1716 and Carnival 1717. In autumn 1714, after staging an unusually successful *Orlando furioso* by Giovanni Alberto Ristori and another opera by Michel Angelo Gasparini, Vivaldi produced his first opera written for Venice: *Orlando finto pazzo*. Unfortunately, Vivaldi's first setting of Ariosto's epic poem came at the worst possible time since the opera was followed only a few weeks later by a revival of Ristori's *Orlando furioso* that included additional music by Vivaldi. Of the operas performed at the Sant'Angelo during the 1715 Carnival, Vivaldi contributed only his arrangement of the *pasticcio Nerone fatto Cesare* (RV 724) that is mentioned in Uffenbach's diary. Uffenbach calls the opera a "bad work", though his negative criticism is mostly directed at the plot and decor. After attending the opera for the first time, he wrote on 19 February:

In the evening I saw, at the small St. Angelo opera house, an opera entitled *Agrippina*, composed entirely by and produced by Vivaldi.⁵ I did not, however, like it nearly as much as the first, for neither the subject matter nor the decor nor, especially, the costumes were bourgeois. Nero, sung by Fabri, a woman, was dressed in the French manner, while others wore Spanish attire, and still others Persian, in short, a quite absurd mishmash of things that did not belong together; and Vivaldi only played a short violin solo.

On 28 February, nevertheless, he bothered to attend a second performance and in a diary entry recorded later for that date he stated:

That is why I preferred to go to the St. Angelo, where they were still performing the aforementioned bad opera *Nerone fatto Cesare* or *Agrippina*, in which neither inventiveness, stage machinery, nor costumes were to any avail. Yet the singers were, as always, very good, and Vivaldi played a rather long solo on the violin, which I liked particularly. Following his performance an oboist attempted to make a big impression, but the result was so horrible that it was impossible to tell what he had intended, which is why I did not like it.



In autumn 1716 the Sant'Angelo performed Vivaldi's newly composed opera *Arsilda Regina di Ponto*, followed during Carnival 1717 by his *L'Incoronazione di Dario*. These performances were followed by an interruption of his collaboration with this theater. Vivaldi's next operas, *Tieteburga* (autumn 1717) and *Armida al campo d'Egitto* (Carnival 1718), were both produced at the competing San Moisè Theater, from which he had received a *scrittura* (opera commission) during the Carnival of 1716. In January 1716 *La costanza trionfante degl'Amori e dell'Odi* premiered at the San Moisè, and during Carnival 1718 it was revived at the same house. It is entirely possible that the composer had management responsibilities at the Teatro San Moisè during this time.

In spring 1718 when Vivaldi left Venice to take up the post of court music director in Mantua, he not only had composed several operas but also had managed opera houses, apparently devoting a great deal of

energy to the opera business. In any event, he must have been involved in the Mantua theater while at the same time discharging his immediate duties as court music director, as shown by documents dated 27 and 28 May 1718.⁶ Initially, he shared the duties of impresario with Pietro Ramponi, but during the following year he was the sole impresario. To be sure, the status he enjoyed there was not that of a free agent impresario because, strictly speaking, this activity was part of his “services for the court”.⁷ On the other hand, he later proudly pointed out that he was used to acting as an independent businessman (“un franco intraprenditore”).⁸

When Vivaldi returned to his native city after two years in Mantua – where he produced the three new operas *Teuzzone*, *Tito Manlio*, and *La Candace* – it at first seemed he would resume his ties with the Sant’Angelo. Surprisingly enough, in autumn 1720 he confined himself to the production of a single new opera, *La verità in cimento*, and to the composition of the third act of the *pasticcio* *Filippo Re di Macedonia*, which opened the 1721 Carnival season (acts one and two were by Giuseppe Boniventi). Five years passed until in autumn 1725 another Vivaldi opera, perhaps a *pasticcio*, *L’inganno trionfante in amore*, was performed at the Sant’Angelo. We have no adequate explanation for this long interruption in his Venetian opera productions. The conjecture that Vivaldi may have been “put for a time under a cloud”⁹ following publication of the operatic satire *Il teatro alla moda* probably overestimates the effect of this thin book. To be sure, those familiar with the Venetian opera scene were aware that the opera composer Aldiviva, who was lampooned in Benedetto Marcello’s anonymous book, was Vivaldi. At the same time, their awareness also indicated how prominent the *prete rosso* had become in Venetian theater.

During the 1721 summer season Vivaldi premiered his new opera (the *drama pastorale* *La Silvia*) at the Regio Ducal Teatro in Milan. This event was followed by a period of over a year (from autumn 1721 to December 1722) in which he seems to have ceased theater activities altogether – a rarity indeed in the composer’s life. Also, between 1723 and 1725 he wrote relatively little for the theater. Yet the *scritture* he received during 1723 and 1724 were “opera commissions of the very highest order”¹⁰ – comparable only, in Strohm’s opinion, to those he obtained from the Teatro della Pergola in Florence and from the Teatro Pubblico in Reggio Emilia. For both the 1723 and 1724 Carnival *sta-*

gioni he composed an opera for the Teatro Capranica in Rome (*Ercole sul Termodonte* and *Giustino*). He also composed the second act of the 1724 *pasticcio* *La virtù trionfante*. If we are to believe Quantz, it must have been a considerable success. According to the German composer, the so-called Lombard style took the Romans by storm. “Lombard style” refers to the use of the characteristic rhythms  or  that had become especially popular during the middle of the eighteenth century. “The latest I have heard”, the German musician wrote about his 1724 stay in Rome, “was that the so-called Lombard style, totally unknown to me but recently introduced to Rome by Vivaldi in his operas, has so captured the imagination of that city that they do not wish to listen to anything not in this style”.¹¹ This was one of the high points of Vivaldi’s popularity as an opera composer.

During the 1725 autumn season he returned to the Teatro Sant’Angelo and produced seven new operas (including *pasticci*) through the Carnival season of 1728: *L’inganno trionfante in amore* (autumn 1725), *Cunegonda*, *La fede tradita e vendicata* (Carnival 1726), *Dorila in Tempe* (autumn 1726), *Farnace*, *Orlando* (Carnival and autumn 1727), and *Rosilena ed Oronta* (Carnival 1728) (figs. 16 and 17). A document from



Figure 16. Title page of the libretto for *Orlando*, performed at the Teatro Sant’Angelo, Venice, in November 1727.

ATTORI

ORLANDO innamorato d'Angelica. *La Sig. Lucia Lancetti Virtuosa di S. A. S. la Sig. Principessa Violante di Toscana.*

ANGELICA Amante poi Sposa di Medoro. *La Sign. Benedetta Serofina Virtuosa di Camera di S. A. S. F. Eletor Palatino*

ALCINA Maga innamorata di Ruggiero. *La Sig. Anna Girò.*

BRADAMANTE Sposa di Ruggiero, poi in Abito da Uomo sotto nome di **ALDARICO**. *La Sig. Maria Catterina Negri.*

MEDORO Amante poi Sposo di Angelica. *Il Sig. Casimiro Pignotti Virtuoso di S. M. il Rè di Polonia Ellett. di Sassonia.*

RUGGIERO Sposo di Bradamante. *Il Sig. Gio: Andrea Taffi.*

ASTOLFO innamorato di Alcina. *Il Sig. Gaetano Pinetti.*

La

La Musica è del Signor Don Antonio Vivaldi Maestro di Capella di S. A. Sereniss. il Signor Principe Filippo Langravio d'Assia d'Armeftat.

A 3 MU-

Figure 17. The cast given in the libretto to *Orlando*.

1726 shows that the composer again became the theater's impresario or at least undertook some of that post's responsibilities. On 13 October in his capacity as *direttore delle opere in musica* at the Teatro Sant'Angelo, Vivaldi engaged the singer Lucrezia Baldini for the third and last Carnival opera *Farnace*. The contract stipulated a fee for the singer of two hundred ducats and the following mode of payment: the first third before the first performance, another third after half of the performances, and the remainder on the Thursday before Lent.¹²

The 9 November 1726 premiere of *Dorilla* saw the first stage appearance of Anna Girò – only sixteen or seventeen at the time – in a Vivaldi opera. She soon became his favorite prima donna as well as a close personal friend. Recent research has shown that the singer's actual name was Teseire – Italianized to Tessieri – whereas Girò was a sobriquet her father had used.¹³ (His death certificate, dated 22 September 1737, reads: “Pietro Teseire detto [called] Girò”).

The most surprising biographical information about Anna Girò, which only became known in 1988, concerns an occurrence that followed Vivaldi's death. On 20 July 1748 the singer married a widower,

Count Antonio Maria Zanardi Landi, from Piacenza, and the age given in the marriage certificate – “about thirty-eight years” – means that Anna Girò was considerably younger than had commonly been assumed.

In response to the accusation that Vivaldi had had an affair (*amicizia*) with Anna Girò, he replied, in the previously quoted letter of 16 November 1737, with high-sounding assertions concerning Anna’s modesty and piety. Also, in a letter dated 23 November of the same year, he assured her half-sister, Paolina, who was about twenty years older, that he had never lived in the same house as the Girò sisters, though he did not answer the principal accusation that Anna Girò was his lover. He explained that the sisters accompanied him on his travels through many European cities (“in moltissime città d’Europa”) because of his need for medical care. This explanation, however, could only have applied to Paolina, who was something of a nurse to him. The *prima donna* Anna Girò could hardly have been expected to play nurse!

Anna Girò, a mezzo-soprano whose voice was apparently neither big nor brilliant, was unanimously described as a singer with both special acting talent and a strong stage presence. The following account of the *Farnace* performance at the Sant’Angelo in February 1727 is characteristic: Vivaldi’s “student” performed “wonders” in the opera “although her voice was not especially beautiful”.¹⁴ The most vivid portrait we have is by Carlo Goldoni, who depicted his encounter with the *prete rosso* and Anna Girò in 1735.¹⁵

Even during a period in which it hardly took more than a few weeks to compose an opera, the amount of music performed by Vivaldi between autumn 1726 and Carnival 1728 in opera alone was remarkable. In addition to the four new operas he produced at the Sant’Angelo between 9 November 1726 and 17 January 1728, he wrote one each for Florence and Reggio Emilia. The Teatro della Pergola in Florence, which, during the summer of 1718, had performed his *Scanderbeg*, now mounted *Ipermestra* for the 1727 Carnival. During the spring season, the Teatro Pubblico in Reggio gave his version of Metastasio’s *Siroe Re di Persia*. In December he wrote another opera, *L’Atenaide*, to open the 1729 Florence Carnival *stagione*. The Venetian patrician Abbé Conti, who attended *Ipermestra*, wrote that the opera put the Florentine theater back on its feet and earned the composer a great deal of money.¹⁶

Although some of the approximately thirty operas and *pasticci* that Vivaldi had written up to this time were performed north of the

Alps – albeit some in heavily altered form¹⁷ – he apparently did not receive many commissions from the opera houses of central and northern Europe. According to current research, there was only a single commission from this area, the one that came from the theater of Count Franz Anton Sporck in Prague for 1730 and 1731 (figs. 18 and 19).

Vivaldi's association with Sporck's theaters – the count owned an “Opera Hauss” in his Prague palace and a theater at his summer palace in Kuks – must have come about through the Venetian opera company that the music- and theater-loving Bohemian aristocrat (whom we also come across in the life of Johann Sebastian Bach) had engaged in 1724. The company produced “almost sixty operas by Venetian composers” during the following decade.¹⁸ The manager of this opera troupe was the Venetian singer and impresario Antonio Denzio, who in 1716 sang the part of Artabano at the premiere of Vivaldi's *La costanza trionfante* at the Teatro San Moisè and who was apparently in constant contact with Vivaldi. During the summer of 1724 Denzio performed the opera *Orlando furioso oder Der rasende Orland*, which consisted mostly of arias from Vivaldi's 1714 *Orlando*. The composer named in the libretto (Antonio Bioni) was probably responsible only for the recitatives and for adapting

FARNACE
Drama per Musica
 Da rappresentarsi nel Teatro
 Di Sua Eccellenza
 IL SIGNOR
FRANCESCO
ANTONIO
 Del S. R. I.
Conte di SPORCK.
 La Primavera dell Anno 1730.
 CON LICENZA DE SUPERIORI.
 Stampato in Praga, da Giovanni Wenceslao Helm,

Figure 18.
 Italian title page of
 the libretto to *Farnace*
 for the Prague
 performance
 of spring 1730.

Figure 19.
German title page
to *Farnace*.



the opera. *La Tirannia castigata* (RV Anhang 55) was also a compilation, having arias from earlier Vivaldi operas.

Between 1730 and 1732 an abundance of Vivaldi works were performed, and this during a period in which the composer was probably away for a time in Prague. I will come back to the trip Vivaldi began in autumn 1729 and to the places where he stopped during his travels, which lasted until about spring 1731. Let it suffice for now to point out that there can be little doubt that he repeatedly stayed in Prague. Perhaps Vivaldi was present, in spring 1730, when his opera *Farnace* was revived at the Sporck theater in a version probably by Denzio. It is virtually certain that in the autumn of the same year, he attended the first performance of his new opera *Argippo*. In spring 1731 at the Sporck theater, Denzio produced the Vivaldi opera *Alvilda regina dei Goti*. This was a new work for which Vivaldi had, however, written only the arias. According to the Italian libretto, he wrote “all the music except the recitatives and the buffo arias” (that is, all the intermezzos). During Carnival and spring 1732 both *La costanza trionfante* (under the title *Doriclea*) and *Dorilla in Tempe* were revived. It is rather unlikely that Vivaldi was present because he produced a new opera for both Mantua

and Verona during the 1732 Carnival *stagione*: *Semiramide* at the Teatro Arciducal in Mantua on 26 December 1731 (with Anna Girò in the title role) and *La fida ninfa* to initiate the Teatro Filarmonico on 6 January 1732.

Vivaldi's opera output during the 1730s differs in a number of ways from that of the preceding period. First, his association with the Sant'Angelo Theater became increasingly sporadic. Following one new opera in the 1733 autumn *stagione* (*Motezuma*) and one during Carnival 1734 (*L'Olimpiade*) and the revival of the *Dorilla in Tempe*, which had been enriched with arias by Hasse and Giacomelli, he did not work with the theater again until Carnival 1738. That season included performances of the new opera *L'oracolo in Messenia*; the *pasticcio* *Rosmira* (with arias by, among others, Hasse, Handel, and Pergolesi) arranged by Vivaldi; and *Armida al campo d'Egitto*, which had first been performed twenty years earlier. Anna Girò sang a leading role in all three productions. *Feraspe*, the last opera Vivaldi wrote for the Sant'Angelo, is also his last known work for the stage; it premiered on 7 November 1739.

When one considers the level of prestige among the circle of theaters outside Venice where Vivaldi worked during the last years of his life, a somewhat different picture emerges of his operatic activities. (Of the other prestigious Italian opera centers, only Florence is represented, and that by a single commission: *Ginevra Principessa di Scozia*, Carnival 1732.) All other major cities had considerably less important operatic activity. This is true of Mantua, where Vivaldi resumed working as impresario in 1732 and of Verona, where, after *La fida ninfa* and until 1737, he produced *Adelaide*, *Catone in Utica*, and the *pasticcio* *Il Tamerlano*, and where, at least for the 1735 Carnival, Vivaldi also acted as impresario (fig. 20). In particular this also applied to Pavia (for the revival of *Farnace*, May 1731), to Treviso (for the revival of *Farnace*, Carnival 1737), and to Ancona (for the revival of *Siroe*, summer 1738). I will discuss Vivaldi's Ferrara opera projects separately.

As for the number of new operas, Vivaldi's customary rapid pace continued until early 1736. The period from Carnival 1735 to Carnival 1736 displays a clear highpoint of operatic activity with the composition of four new operas: *Adelaide*, *Griselda*, *Aristide*, and *Ginevra*. During this time Vivaldi first worked for the San Samuele opera house in Venice. For this house, which Reinhard Strohm characterizes as "a small, exclusive theater with high admission prices",¹⁹ Vivaldi wrote

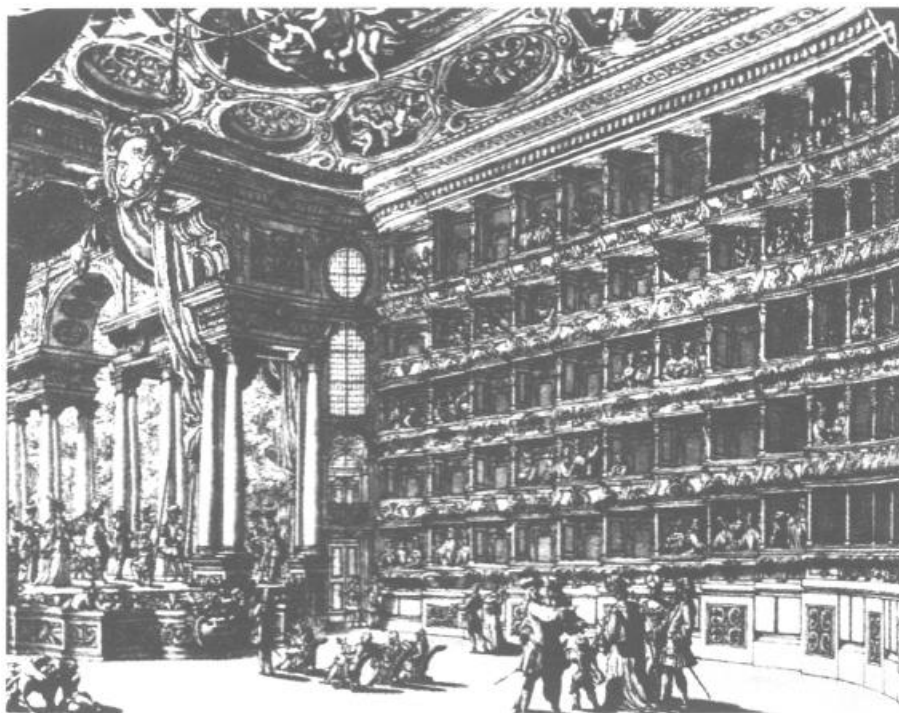


Figure 20. Interior of the Teatro Filarmonico in Verona during a rehearsal of *La fida ninfa* (1732). Drawing by Francesco Bibiena.

Griselda (for the spring *stagione*) and also composed his only musical comedy, the “dramma eroi-comico” *Aristide*. The libretto to *Aristide* was by the young Carlo Goldoni, although he used an assumed name, Calindo Grolo, and Vivaldi used the name Lotavio Vandini. The owner of the Teatro San Samuele, Michele Grimani, had commissioned Goldoni to revise Apostolo Zeno’s 1701 *Griselda* for the setting by Vivaldi. It is also possible that the two great Venetians worked together on intermezzos at this time, although we are not sure whether the *prete rosso* worked with Goldoni on several intermezzos written by the aspiring playwright between 1735 and 1736 (*La bottega da caffè*, *L’amante cabala*, *Il Filosofo*, and *Monsieur Petiton*). At any rate, the music to these farces is lost.

Following Vivaldi’s highly productive operatic period of 1735–36, the subsequent drop in output and activity was all the more dramatic. During the remainder of his life he composed only *Catone in Utica* (Verona, spring 1737), *L’oracolo in Messenia* (Sant’Angelo, Carnival 1737), *Feraspe* (Sant’Angelo, autumn 1739), and the *pasticcio Rosmira*. To the best of our knowledge, Vivaldi did not embark on any opera projects after December 1739. Was he tired of this enervating business by

age sixty-one? Did other activities take up all his time? The composer's intense efforts to get his foot in the door of the Ferrara opera house (between autumn 1736 and late 1738/early 1739) do not seem to validate such an inference. If anything, the events in Ferrara reinforce other suppositions.

Ferrara, which belonged to the Papal States at the time, became the hub of Vivaldi's operatic efforts because of the Marchese Guido Bentivoglio d'Aragona. He was an influential Ferrarese aristocrat whom the composer had met in Rome; also, he managed the Teatro Bonacossi with some other noblemen. Vivaldi regarded him as his patron. A 1715 petition by Vivaldi to the Marchese's father, Luigi Bentivoglio, documents a long-standing tie with the Bentivoglio family. It was through Marchese Guido Bentivoglio that Vivaldi attempted to establish himself in Ferrara as an opera composer and impresario. We have an abundance of information on his efforts owing to more than thirty letters (including fourteen of the slightly more than twenty preserved letters written by Vivaldi).²⁰

In October 1736 Vivaldi's first attempt in this direction was a partial success inasmuch as the composer received a commission to arrange two operas. To be sure, these were not, as originally planned, the two Vivaldi operas *Ginevra* and *L'Olimpiade* that were revived at the Teatro Bonacossi, but rather they were the two Hasse operas *Demetrio* and *Alessandro nelle Indie* for which he had arranged and written some new music. Vivaldi must have taken this as something of an affront against his own operas. He was told that the version of *Demetrio* that had been performed at the end of December 1736 was considered to be far too long. .

Since Vivaldi was unable to go to Ferrara for these first projects, an animated correspondence was soon flowing between Venice and Ferrara. While the letters initially dealt with both the planning and the arrangements for the two performances, following the premiere of *Demetrio* they were restricted to disputes over money between Vivaldi on the one hand and the Ferrarese impresario Abbate Bolani and his Venetian theater agent, Daniele Lanzetti, on the other. Regardless of whether Vivaldi's claim for six sequins twenty lire (as reimbursement for additional costs) was just, the *prete rosso's* conduct in the matter was not blameless. Lanzetti maintained in his letter of 12 January 1737 to Bentivoglio that Vivaldi had exaggerated his expenses and had used

threats to force him to confirm that Vivaldi's increased demands were correct.

Compared to the serious personal and artistic defeats and disappointments the composer was subsequently to suffer in Ferrara, the trouble he experienced during this first season was a bagatelle. Still, the fact that Bentivoglio requested his services again on 3 May 1737 illustrates Vivaldi's situation, what his market value was, and the demand he was in at the time.

In a letter of 5 May Bentivoglio advised Vivaldi against the performance of a new opera in Ferrara in autumn 1737, yet the correspondence from these weeks also indicates that in November at the latest, preparations had begun for the production of an opera that was scheduled to open in Ferrara at the beginning of Carnival. On 16 November, during this preparatory phase, a decree by the archbishop of Ferrara, Cardinal Tommaso Ruffo, struck like a bombshell: the apostolic nuncio to Venice informed Vivaldi that the archbishop of Ferrara had prohibited him from going to Ferrara and from putting on an opera there. The reasons given were that Vivaldi, who was a priest, had not been saying mass and, further, that he was having an *amicizia* (friendship, or affair) with the singer Anna Girò.

The letter that Vivaldi sent on that same day to Bentivoglio is the most important and revealing personal document we have from his hand. The text was rambling, full of rationalizations and self-defense. It was a letter in which the sixty-year-old composer told, as it were, his life story. That the text constantly betrayed the writer's deep agitation and that this apologetic representation of his life cannot be compared to an objective and complete biography is hardly surprising given the unexpected blow he had received; he must have considered it a great injustice.

The archbishop's severe action must have been perplexing in a country in which clergymen were granted a remarkable degree of freedom. The edict that Ruffo issued in January 1738, forbidding clerics under his jurisdiction from taking part in Carnival amusements, can be taken as an indication of the sweeping campaign that the cardinal began at that time and an indication that, as has been rightly surmised, he also wished "to set an example using Vivaldi".²¹ Despite Bentivoglio's efforts, Ruffo stuck to his decision not to allow Vivaldi to serve as impresario for the planned opera performances. "He has assured me",

Bentivoglio wrote to Vivaldi on 20 November, “that he will adhere to his decision even if the pope personally orders him to rescind, and that he would rather lose his episcopate than waver in his decision; he believes he must act that way”.²²

Being excluded from working in Ferrara placed Vivaldi in an extremely difficult situation with respect to his contractual obligations as impresario. “For this opera I am burdened with six thousand ducats in signed contracts”, he wrote to Bentivoglio on 16 November. Could another impresario be engaged? Or would the project have to be canceled? At Bentivoglio’s suggestion a certain Picchi, an impresario who lived in Ferrara, was hired to head the undertaking and he immediately came to loggerheads with Vivaldi. Picchi accused Vivaldi of charging excessive fees. In a letter dated 30 November, Vivaldi rejected Picchi’s charges as ludicrous: “If I had been able to hire musicians and dancers for less, please believe me, I would have done so from the start. I swear to Your Excellency that if someone else had to put together this company it would cost twenty-four thousand lire instead of fifteen thousand”. We do not know the outcome of this affair, but we do know that there was no opera *stagione* in Ferrara during the 1738 Carnival.

The Ferrara affair was not yet over for Vivaldi. Following Cardinal Ruffo’s sudden resignation in June 1738, Vivaldi tried to secure for himself the Ferrara Carnival season for the coming year. *Siroe re di Persia* and *Farnace* were chosen. But this third attempt also failed owing to the artistic fiasco of the first performance of *Siroe* at the beginning of the Carnival season (late December 1738). Vivaldi, who was unable to attend, blamed the failure on the performance rather than on the work itself, saying it was a faulty reading due especially to the harpsichordist’s poor playing of the recitatives. This, however, did nothing to change the outcome: the opera was a failure and *Farnace* was canceled. Was there a plot against Vivaldi? On 2 January 1739 he wrote in a letter to Bentivoglio, still shocked from the cancellation news from Ferrara, that his reputation in Ferrara was “flagellata” (scourged).

This is the last letter we have from Vivaldi to Bentivoglio, though it did not spell the end of the Ferrara affair. Two months later and as a result of *Farnace* having been canceled, a disagreement arose between the composer and the stage designer, Antonio Mauro, who had acted as impresario during the Carnival *stagione* in Ferrara. On 4 March 1739 Mauro sent Vivaldi a *scrittura extragiudiziale* (notarized letter) and in-

sisted that the composer, as the actual impresario of the Ferrara opera productions, pay all costs for all the hired singers, musicians, dancers, and other production staff. He, Mauro, had only confirmed and signed the contracts “pro forma”, whereas it was Vivaldi who had in fact concluded them. A second letter dated 16 March by Mauro and a previous letter of 12 March by Vivaldi furnish additional details and cast an unflattering light on Vivaldi’s business practices as well as on his character in general. Even if we assume that intrigues of this sort were more or less part of the proverbially scheming theater world of the time, the behavior exhibited here was anything but in the *prete rosso*’s favor.

The events associated with the Ferrara opera are perhaps the best evidence that Vivaldi’s operatic career was already on the decline. Even though he achieved some considerable operatic successes, they had never really (and certainly not for any length of time) allowed him to join the ranks of the top composers dominating the European operatic world. If Giuseppe Tartini said to Charles de Brosses that Vivaldi had “always been hissed” as an opera composer, he was probably referring to such individual flops as the Ferrara *Siroe*.²³ The real meaning of this statement is that Vivaldi’s operas did not achieve as exceptional an effect and influence as did his concertos.

Historical Significance and Evaluation of Vivaldi’s Operas

Any attempt to describe the historical position and importance of Vivaldi’s works for the musical stage within the context of the vast opera production of the early eighteenth century should perhaps begin with the admission of the possibility of bias in favor of the composer owing to his exceptional importance as a writer of instrumental concertos. Comparisons of this kind are dangerous. On the one hand, one tends to regard Vivaldi’s operas as worthy of being considered outside the mass of contemporary works in the genre, while, on the other, if one considers his eminence as a concerto composer, a genre in which he was far more influential than in opera, then he tends to be underrated. Difficult though it may be to exclude these factors entirely, we would do well to keep them in mind. It is also useful to ask whether Vivaldi’s

extraordinary reputation as a concerto composer was more helpful than harmful to the reception of his operas during his lifetime.

The number and quality of commissions (*scritture*), the frequency with which his operas were revived, and, in general, the diffusion of his operas are the crucial indicators of how much Vivaldi was in demand as an operatic composer during his day. These criteria yield a relatively unified picture. Reinhard Strohm has demonstrated that, on the whole, Vivaldi's operas were "concentrated in second- and third-rank theaters", and that he received relatively few "opera commissions of the very first rank".²⁴ Only a relatively small number of his operas can be considered "hits" in the sense that they were revived in a number of other theaters. By this standard, Vivaldi's most popular operas were *La costanza trionfante* (1716) and *Farnace* (1727); each had six revivals. Moreover, the vast majority of these repetitions were probably the result of promotion by the composer rather than of desire by the theater in question. I have not taken into account the reuse of popular arias in his own or in other operas – a very common practice at the time. Today we are unable to determine to what extent Vivaldi arias were used in opera productions outside the composer's purview; nonetheless, librettos and, what is more important, extant arias provide certain clues. For the period 1714–1737, Strohm was able to find, in performance venues ranging from Naples to Hamburg and from Prague to London, slightly fewer than twenty Vivaldi arias used in *pasticci* that were not arranged by Vivaldi. Strohm further gave "about 190" as the total number of Vivaldi arias contained in collections and manuscripts. In his opinion such a number was "a relatively low figure for a productive opera composer from this period".²⁵

Although the information we have today about how frequently Vivaldi's operas and arias were performed is rather unreliable, one central point in evaluating Vivaldi's career in opera remains valid: he never made a genuine breakthrough as an opera composer and was unable to hold the stage for any length of time in any of the leading Italian and foreign opera houses. In this regard his works for the stage not only fall considerably behind those of the leading operatic masters of his time (such as Alessandro Scarlatti, Leonardo Leo, Leonardo Vinci, Johann Adolph Hasse, and Baldassare Galuppi) but they also were not as popular as some less prominent opera composers. Was it lack of specific, elemental talent for this genre that kept him from enjoying major success? Was it difficult for him to lead or adapt to the changes in operatic fash-

ion and in audience taste? Or did he churn out operas assembly-line fashion? There is a serious, inherent difference between a relatively short violin concerto and an opera that lasts a number of hours in that a musically uninteresting violin concerto will merely be forgotten, whereas an opera that does not contain a minimum of truly inspired and electrifying numbers will be remembered as a failure.

These questions are not subject to simple answers. It is more likely that a number of complex causes brought about the specific qualities and irregularities of Vivaldi's opera career. The following brief attempt to characterize the nature, the style, and the language of Vivaldi's operas will probably touch on some of these causes, but this is not the main objective of my effort. I do not believe that trying to explain why Vivaldi was not a great success in opera is the proper point of departure when trying to grasp the specific character of his operatic art. We must instead attempt to recognize its central features and its specific qualities.

Vivaldi began to compose operas at a time when the type of opera that was to become known as *opera seria* had become established in its essential qualities. This category came about through overall form (three acts), the internal structure (the alternation between recitative, which carried forward the plot, and reflective arias, as well as the almost complete avoidance of vocal ensembles), and the dominance of the da capo aria to the virtual exclusion of other aria forms. As a rule, the chorus was restricted to the finale, whereas the indication *coro* in the libretto and score meant in fact an ensemble of soloists. To be sure, the preceding is a cursory definition of the form that was officially designated *dramma per musica* and whose principal feature was a reform of the libretto.

The platform from which the leading group of Italian librettists attempted around 1700 to reform the opera text was classical, deriving either wholly or in part from the literary academies, especially from the Accademia dell'Arcadia, which had been founded in Rome in 1692. From this academy emerged the leading reform librettist (the Venetian Apostolo Zeno, who became vice president of the Arcadians in 1698) and the central figure of eighteenth-century operatic verse (Pietro Metastasio). Influenced by the rationalism of French Classical drama, they set about pruning the earlier Venetian librettos of extraneous episodes and other additions in order to transform the *dramma per musica* into a stage work of literary value that had a unified plot. The works

for the musical stage that “at the end of the seventeenth century bore more resemblance to a conglomeration of grotesque and adventurous scenes and character types than to a drama”²⁶ were transformed into the *opera seria*. In these new operas only *serious* characters played. There were other strict and binding conventions too: limits in the number of characters and in their relation to each other (two couples, a ruler, and one or two confidants [*confidenti*]); *restriction* to a plot that was generated and advanced by intrigues and that had the obligatory happy ending (*lieto fine*); and proscription even of the scene sequence (ending, in the vast majority of cases, with an exit aria). I will omit the other rules.

All Vivaldi’s operas were written according to this scheme. Upon closer inspection, however, the librettos he set tended not to adhere strictly to the classical ideal. Vivaldi frequently used an adapted older libretto and had a typically Venetian predilection for subjects with exotic settings and fairy-tale-like plots, often in Oriental settings and with traces of the more colorful seventeenth-century libretto scene. *La verità in cimento* is set in the realm of the great sultan, *Armida* in Memphis, *La costanza trionfante* in Armenia, *L’Incoronazione di Dario* and *Feraspe* in Persia, *Semiramide* in Assyria, and *Il Teuzzone* in China, to name only a few. On the other hand, he employed relatively few librettos based on Greco-Roman history and mythology and set about as many opera texts rooted in medieval legends (*Orlando*, *Tieteberga*, *Ginevra*, and *Alvilda*).

With the exception of one libretto by Goldoni (*Aristide*), Vivaldi did not set original librettos by the great writers of his time, chiefly due to the low prestige of the opera houses with which he was associated. Vivaldi’s several settings of librettos by Apostolo Zeno, by Francesco Silvani, and by Agostino Piovene were not the first settings of those librettos; in each case they had already been set to music by others, as had the three *drammi per musica* by Metastasio. His version of *L’Olimpiade*, however, followed the original setting by Antonio Caldara (which premiered in Vienna during the summer of 1733) by a mere six months, thus assuring him a high position among the roughly fifty settings – including those of Pergolesi, Hasse, Traetta, Leo, and Jommelli – of one of the imperial laureate’s most famous librettos.

Recent opera research has somewhat revised the traditional view that the principal musical traits of this type of opera were developed by the so-called Neapolitan school. We know today that Venetian composers made a considerable contribution to the style of early-

eighteenth-century opera, even if this basically applies only to the period up to about 1720. Composers such as Carlo Francesco Pollarolo and Francesco Gasparini were exponents of the older style, and Antonio Lotti, Tommaso Albinoni, Giovanni Porta, and Francesco Maria Orlandini were representatives of the middle and younger generation, developing the newer style. Antonio Vivaldi belonged to the latter group, and he seems to have been one of the composers who, in the decade between 1710 and 1720, contributed new impetus to aria style in particular. Reinhard Strohm, one of the leading scholars of the opera of this period, considers the turning to consistently homophonous orchestral writing, supported throughout by instrumental figuration, and the provision of new possibilities for expressing musical effects in opera to be some of the most original and influential accomplishments of the Venetian opera composers of the time.²⁷ Together with Orlandini (the operatic novice who was ten years Vivaldi's junior), Vivaldi, whose background was in instrumental music, was a leading exponent of this new kind of aria. "Come l'onda" (As the wave) from his first opera, *Ottone in Villa*, is an impressive example.

In addition to pieces of this type, there were many attractive arias in the galant style with simple harmony by which the composer enriched the range of aria types. In these small, charmingly melodic forms the violins usually double the voice part, while the bass part "supports the harmony and is usually non-thematic", as Hellmuth Christian Wolff put it in 1968: "The style and sound of what was previously called *Neapolitan* opera ... was fully developed, largely *before* the first operas of Leo, Vinci, and Pergolesi".²⁸ This may explain why Vivaldi became a relatively well-known opera composer within the space of a few years.

According to Strohm, Vivaldi was unable after the mid-1720s to continue and expand this rise to prominence largely because he was inept at fully absorbing certain changes in operatic taste that had begun in Naples about 1720. The grand, supple vocal line as found in the arias of Johann Adolph Hasse, which had begun to influence the *bel canto* ideal, went against Vivaldi's grain. His vocal style may have been too heavily colored by a purely instrumental ideal. Yet the operatic style that had been in demand since the beginning of the Hasse era was one in which the voice – with a characteristically cantabile melody – was the dominant bearer of dramatic expression. Thus Vivaldi had to accept the fact that instead of producing his two operas, as originally planned, Ferrara

wanted a pair of Hasse operas for the 1737 Carnival season. The change in taste also explains why his late *pasticci* (*Dorilla in Tempe*, *Tamerlano*, and *Rosmira*) were laced with arias by the “Neapolitans” – Leo, Giacomelli, and, most of all, Hasse. Such experiences probably led to what has been seen as his “waning ambitions as an opera composer”²⁹ and to his eventual abandonment of the genre entirely. He showed an inability to accept and to incorporate new developments into his own operatic style. The music of the operas he wrote during the 1730s – during his late fifties – was no longer modern.

The preceding point of view is of secondary importance today in our evaluation of Vivaldi’s operas. Rather than being interested in new developments in the history of the genre and in how progressive his operatic style was at that time, we are simply concerned with the quality and the effectiveness of these works. This is difficult for a number of reasons. We know only a small portion of Vivaldi’s operas and have at best a sporadic knowledge of those of his contemporaries. In order to do justice to Vivaldi as an opera composer we must accept that his operas belong entirely to the genre of *opera seria*. We regard such operas as strange and lacking in aesthetic value. Vivaldi accepted as givens the oft-cited stereotypes of *opera seria*’s unchanging group of characters and plot mechanism, its unequivocal artificiality, most clearly seen in assigning the roles of male lovers to high *castrati* or female voices, and its unvarying alternation between often endless *secco* recitatives and autonomous da capo arias. Therefore, his success or failure as an opera composer must be seen within the framework set by the rules of *opera seria*.

By far the largest portion of the libretto was intended for recitatives, which were formally contrasted with the aria texts and consisted of unrhymed seven- and eleven-syllable lines rather than rhymed shorter lines as found in the arias. As a rule, *recitative* means *recitativo semplice* accompanied by harpsichord, also known as *secco recitative*. Such recitative did not receive a great deal of attention from the composer. The fact that much of this recitative consisted of conventional turns of phrase and musical language is all the more understandable when one considers that the audience of the day often listened with less than rapt attention. A passage in one of Vivaldi’s letters indicates that the effect and effectiveness of recitative was largely dependent on how the singer *recited* and on an imaginative accompaniment. When Vivaldi learned of the criticism leveled against the performance of the recitatives in his

opera *Siroe re di Persia* for the opening of the 1737 Carnival season in Ferrara, he blamed the harpsichordist, accusing him of being incapable of accompanying them. The practical knowledge – that recitative stands or falls on lively and flexible performance – has been confirmed in modern performances of this type of opera.

Nonetheless, Vivaldi's opera recitatives reveal a widely varying degree of musical interest and emotional involvement that is largely dependent on the nature of the dramatic situation. At the culmination of a plot conflict, when the characters' inner struggles and emotions come into focus, Vivaldi was capable of infusing his recitatives with a melodically expressive power and a remarkable degree of musical concentration. One of the principal means was harmony, as illustrated by an excerpt from a recitative in act three of *Tito Manlio*. Manlio, who is awaiting his death sentence in prison, tries to hearten his lover Servilia and pours his outburst of feelings into phrases that go beyond conventional harmonic progressions (ex. 19). Monologues frequently stand out dramatically – for example, again in *Tito Manlio*, the scene in which

The image shows two systems of musical notation for a recitative. Each system consists of a vocal line (treble clef) and a piano accompaniment (grand staff). The lyrics are written below the vocal line.

System 1:
 Vocal: Non pianger più; l'av-ver-sa ma-lig-ni-tà degl' astri me-co sopporta, e
 Piano: Accompaniment with figured bass notation: 6# (under the first measure), 4 3# (under the last measure).

System 2:
 Vocal: soffri l'ingiusti-zia del fa-to che al nostra-mor sempre nemica fù. Deh,
 Piano: Accompaniment with figured bass notation: 5 6 (under the first measure), 7 3 4 4 (under the second measure), 7 b (under the third measure), b (under the fourth measure).

(Continued)

Example 19. *Tito Manlio*, act three, recitative Servilia/Manlio.

cara a-ni-ma mia, deh, cara a-ni-ma mia, non pianger più.

5 b 6 2 4 3

Example 19 continued.

the protagonist signs his son's death sentence, or in the moving moment in *L'Olimpiade* where Megacle, helpless, falls into despair at the sight of his beloved Aristeia, who has fainted. In this instance the composer used one of the most emphatic means of intensifying expression: the transition from *secco* to accompanied recitative, a musical device Vivaldi used sparingly. The monologues expressing Orlando's great jealousy and madness in the 1727 *Orlando* are particularly powerful. The final scene of act two, in which Orlando learns with absolute certainty that his beloved Angelica irretrievably belongs to another, changes twice from the opening *secco* recitative to *arioso* or *accompagnato* for the texts "Her tears well like springs and brooks" and "I hurl helmet and armor away. Fall to the ground, you chains and plates". The act culminates in a movement, which, though formally an aria, is outside any clearly discernible form (ex. 20).³⁰

Such attempts to break down the neat separation and transition between recitative and aria in favor of a continuous musical scene are rare with Vivaldi, though not with Handel. Even movements that would normally be designated *arioso* are not common in Vivaldi, though they often create a powerful effect. "Sonno, se pur sei sonno" (Sleep, if indeed you are sleep) from the prison scene in *Tito Manlio* is a good example. As a rule, there is a clear separation between the recitative and the self-contained aria, with the main interest being reserved for the aria. The vast majority of the arias are da capo, divided into parts: A A' B A A'. The aria text, most often in two stanzas, is set with stanza 1 as A, stanza 2 as B, in which A' includes a musically varied and expanded repetition of the words of A. Following B, which is distinct from A (at least in part) and in a key other than the aria's principal key, A is repeated in its entirety in a richly ornamented, virtuosic, and intensifies form.

Larghetto

vi. I/II, Va.
Orlando
Hò cento vanni al

B.c.

tergo
Hò ducent'occhi in fronte,

e nel furor ch'hò in sen m'ad-di-ro al-men al-

(Va. col Basso)

-men con mille cuo - - ri. Sov-ra que vanni io m'ergo,

Va. 8^{va}

(Continued)

Example 20. *Orlando*, “Hò cento vanni al tergo”.

Adagio
 Va.
 Quelle pu - pil - le io gi - ro. Con tutti i cuor, con tutti i cuor So - spi - - -

Allegro
 il tempo à piacimento
 -ro. Occhi, vanni, furor, cuori, oh mar-

Adagio
 (Allegro)
 -to-ro! Amanti e Sposi Ange-li-ca, e Me - do-ro?

The score consists of three systems of music. Each system includes a vocal line (soprano and tenor parts) and a piano accompaniment. The first system starts with an *Adagio* tempo marking and a *Va.* (Vivace) instruction. The second system begins with an *Allegro* tempo marking and includes the instruction *il tempo à piacimento*. The third system features a return to *Adagio* tempo, with a brief *(Allegro)* section. The piano accompaniment is characterized by dense chordal textures and rhythmic patterns.

Example 20 continued.

The overall form of the da capo aria is the following (including the opening and concluding instrumental ritornellos, which round out the form):

Aria part A: introductory ritornello; vocal period A (with a modulation from the tonic key to the dominant); middle ritornello; vocal period A' (with a modulation back to the tonic); concluding ritornello.

Aria part B.

Aria part A: as in A given above, at times with a shortening of the opening ritornello.

During Vivaldi's time the da capo aria was the dominant formal model for solo vocal music and something of a counterpart to the contemporary solo concerto movement, with which it shared essential features and common historic roots. This link is most evident in the ritornello principle and, at least in Vivaldi's case, in the frequent structural similarity between concerto movement and aria ritornello. In certain groups of arias, vocal bravura comes close to being like the virtuosity that occurs in prevailing forms of solo instrumental works. The close affinity between Vivaldi's concerto movements and his arias is not only of a general nature, marked by a number of analogous formal and structural patterns, but also involves specific musical similarities and borrowings. In addition to a relatively large number of instances in which the composer employs the same motivic material for a concerto movement and for an aria, there are examples of entire arias that have been adapted from concerto movements. Walter Kolneder described in detail the best known of these: the transformation of the first movement of the *Bassoon Concerto* (RV 450) into the aria "Socca dardi" (Her proud gaze hurls arrows) from *Griselda*.³¹ Still, Kolneder's use of the term *aria concerto* is questionable.

What is true in general about the type of opera Vivaldi wrote also holds true for its most prominent musical components: the arias. In acquainting ourselves with their particular aesthetic qualities, we must begin by accepting as givens the formal, syntactic, and expressive clichés and conventions of the *seria* aria. Most of all, we must constantly bear in mind that these arias reproduced stylized, stereotypical effects that arose from certain standard plot situations rather than from the individual feelings of a particular plot character, and that these recurred in each

opera. The jealousy and revenge arias, the laments, the slumber and victory arias were thus to a large extent interchangeable and were developed not least to allow vocal stars to use their gifts to the fullest effect. This led to the common aria types, the names of which were already known during the eighteenth century – the *aria patetica*: an expressive, slow song usually of lament; the *aria di bravura*: an allegro or presto aria expressing an effect such as jealousy, rage, revenge, or triumph; the lyrical *aria cantabile*; the *aria parlante* with its loquacious patter; the *aria di mezzo carattere*: a moderate andante type of aria; and several others.

All this must be kept in mind when discussing Vivaldi's arias. By itself, the fact that Vivaldi "recycled" many arias in later operas without the slightest change reveals his automatic observance of these principles. If one also considers that each libretto required the setting of twenty to thirty aria texts, it makes perfect sense that the majority of Vivaldi's hundreds of arias conformed to prevailing standards and patterns. These were pieces that translated words into general effects, pieces forgotten after one hearing because they lacked a genuine, original idea – the lasting element of individual form and invention. It remains to be seen whether the percentage of such arias written by Vivaldi was higher than that of other contemporary opera masters. Ultimately, this is less significant than the achievement wherein the composer managed, time and time again, to produce arias of intense beauty, unmistakable individuality, dramatic effectiveness, and spontaneous artistic conviction.

The first examples that I give come from the group of arias frequently referred to as *tempesta* (storm) arias: tonal images full of agitated passion in which unfettered nature was portrayed as representing turbulent emotions. This aria type was by no means original, and, indeed, represented an especially popular variation of the *aria di paragone* (comparison aria), which was legion in *opera seria*. Yet the results Vivaldi occasionally attained, in terms of energy and compelling imagery, are among the most exciting in this type. As previously mentioned, his first opera, *Ottone in Villa*, contains an excellent example, the presto aria, "Come l'onda", in which wildly climbing and crisscrossing scales of thirty-second and sixty-fourth notes paint a picture of storm waves crashing into each another (ex. 21). Anyone who knows the storm scenes from *The Four Seasons* or the various "sea storm" concertos, such as "La tempesta di mare", will immediately be struck by the similarities in this aria to the instrumental vocabulary he used for these storm

Presto

Ob.I
Ob.II
Ob.I u. II
VI.I
VI.II
Ottone
B.c.

a - - gi - ta - - - - -
ta da venti, e pro-celle

Example 21. *Ottone* in *Villa*, ‘Come l’onda’, bars 66 ff.

images. Again and again, extremely rapid rising or falling scales and long arpeggios together with *concitato* effects of very quick repetition of a given note (not used, however, in the example here) played a crucial role in such programmatic pieces.

Special demands are made on the voice in this type of aria: seething passions are portrayed by sweeping runs, arpeggios, and leaps that require great virtuosity. There are many examples of these challenging

demands: in Lucio's aria "Fra le procelle del mar turbato" (In the midst of storms in the raging sea) in *Tito Manlio*, or in the magnificent aria "Sorge l'irato nembo" (The furious storm rises) from *Farnace* (also included by the composer in *Orlando*, which was composed soon afterwards). Following slowly rising thirds, the contralto must sing an ascending octave scale in thirty-second notes.

Tempest arias were not the only arias imbued with these expressive and structural means. The devices were also closely associated with most of the arias that expressed great inner agitation through a comparison to a given event in nature. Prime examples of such numbers are the great C minor aria "Gemo in un punto e fremo" (I wail and tremble) from *L'Olimpiade*, with its characteristic passage "Ho mille furie in sen" (A thousand furies reside in my breast) and Licori's grandiose E minor aria "Alma oppressa da sorte crudele" (My soul oppressed by cruel fate) from *La fida ninfa* in which the ritornello begins with a large, anguished leap of a tenth.

The slow arias, which cover many nuances from grief-stricken lament to effusive love song, achieved their effect from the beauty and expressiveness of a melodic line or the grace of their harmonic or instrumental color. What else could one say about a love aria as wonderful as Angelica's "Tu sei degli occhi miei" (You dwell in my eyes) from *Orlando*? Every Vivaldi opera known to us contains at least one aria of this type: vocal numbers borne along by the directly affecting power of unabashed lyric sentiment. Alongside pieces accompanied by strings alone, we frequently encounter arias with obbligato instruments – especially among the love arias. In *Tito Manlio* (third act, prison scene) Servilia's great *aria di bravura*, with obbligato viola d'amore and violin,³² "Tu dormi" (You sleep) is complemented by the beautiful aria "Non ti lusinghi" (Do not allow yourself to be driven to cruelty) that is accompanied by an oboe. Likewise *Orlando* has two beautiful arias, one with flute, "Sol da te mio dolce amore" (With you alone, my sweet love), and the other with viola d'amore, "Qual candido fiore" (Like a white flower). Actually, the aria with obbligato solo instrument was largely out of fashion during the time between 1720 and 1730, yet Vivaldi used it again and again with telling effect.

Vivaldi employed a special instrumental effect in Licida's exquisitely lovely larghetto sleep aria "Mentre dormi" (While you sleep) in *L'Olimpiade*. The muted strings are joined by a horn, its gentle calls,

often on sustained notes, easily blending with the strings as though from a distance. Instrumental color, as the dominant aspect of the composer's invention and musical thought, is as impressive in this aria as the sonic canvases painted in some of the *tempesta* arias. This is equally the case for the aria “Deh ti piega” (Oh, relent) from *La fida ninfa*, whose highly original, memorable contour comes from a persistent instrumental motif that permeates the entire A section.

Finally, arias that at times express indefinite and complex situations and feelings display remarkable structure and convincingly translate text into musical terms. The formal and highly original G minor aria “Se cerca, se dice” (If she searches, if she says) from *L'Olimpiade* tends toward this group. Another aria – Clistene's F minor aria “Non so donde viene quel tenero affetto” (I know not whence this tender feeling comes) – from this opera, however, is a model of another kind. Clistene sings this number when unexplainable compassion stays his hand from slaying Licida, who is in reality the son he thought was dead, but who confronts him as his killer. A strangely convoluted violin figuration appearing in an indefinite, searching line provides the musical equivalent of his mysterious, unexplainable feelings (ex. 22).



Example 22. *L'Olimpiade*, ‘Non so donde viene’, beginning of the ritornello.

The aria “Gelido in ogni vena” (Frozen in every vein) from *Siroe re di Persia* is a similar masterpiece.³³ It is an *ombra* (shade) scene, so popular in *opera seria*, here set to a Metastasio libretto. Osroe, king of Persia, thinks he sees the shade of his son, Siroe, whom he has condemned to death for presumed high treason (later his innocence is proven); he “feels the blood flowing coldly through his veins, he is filled with and oppressed by terror”.³⁴ The musical form that Vivaldi used for both stanzas created, by means of an insistent monotony (a persistent fixation on a single musical idea), an almost physically palpable feeling of paralysis and terror. From the opening ritornello of the “Winter” concerto in *The Four Seasons*, he took the evenly pulsating *paralysis*-motif, which he had labeled “frozen trembling in icy snow storms”, and employed it

here in another way as a semantically crucial figure (ex. 23), using abrupt, dynamic contrasts with sudden, sforzando-like forte segments and “descending scales in legato sixteenths” to depict the “flowing of blood”.³⁵

VI.I *Larghetto*

VI.II

Va.

B.c. *senza Cembali* *f p f p*

Example 23. *Siroe re di Persia*, ‘Gelido in ogni vena’, beginning of the ritornello.

The pleasant galant arias seem rather plain in comparison with such substantial pieces. Nonetheless, it was apparently these small, tuneful arias that Vivaldi’s contemporaries appreciated, and we must not overlook the fact that some of them contain a wealth of original and musically interesting ideas. Most of these arias are stylistically simple, indeed often plain; the first and second violins frequently have the same line as the voice, and the violas are limited to the ritornellos. The composer relies on pleasing, ingratiating melody and often on graceful dance rhythms. Triple time and certain dance patterns are especially frequent. Rosana’s appealing A major aria from *La verità in cimento* (the theme reappears in the first movement of the Concerto in A Major – RV 159) is a good example of the writing found in these pieces (ex. 24).

Allegro

Example 24. *La verità in cimento*, ‘Solo quella guancia bella’, beginning of the ritornello.

The instrumental part was sometimes reduced to such an extent that the singing voice was doubled by only one instrument, as for example in

Lucio's buffo aria "Parla a me speranza amica" (Friend hope speaks to me) from *Tito Manlio*. In this aria the buffo style was restricted to the music; on the other hand, the three arias by the servant Lindo from the same opera are pure buffo arias in both text and music. The last of Lindo's arias in particular, "Brutta cosa è il far la spia" (Playing the spy is an ugly business), is from its very beginning the stuff and substance of unmistakable buffo patter (ex. 25).

Allegro

Lindo Brutta co-sa, brutta, brutta, brutta, brutta è il far la spi-a, la spi-a,

B. c.

ma, ma far tutto ogn' ora suole ch'il pan d'altri hà da man-giar

Example 25. *Tito Manlio*, 'Brutta cosa è il far la spia', bars 4 ff.

The pastoral opera *La fida ninfa* contains particularly fine examples of the melodic galant style, though the tone is more bucolic and the accompaniment is, in general, richer. In Elpina's aria "Cento donzelle festose e belle" (A hundred maidens, cheerful and fair), the sound of the muted violins, dominated by light syncopations, acquires a characteristic coloration from a pair of flutes. The magical grace of Elpina's song "Aure lievi" (Light breezes) takes on an inimitable airiness and a lightness through the shifts of the Lombard rhythm. To be sure, the aria is marked *Molto andante* and is rather removed from the intentionally light or buffo-like pieces (ex. 26).

The "isolation of characters"³⁶ has been recognized as a defining element of *opera seria*. Thus vocal ensembles played a decidedly secondary role. This is regrettable in Vivaldi's operas because some of his ensembles are particularly successful. Representative of these ensembles, which attain a deeply intimate expression, are a number of love duets, such as the Manlio/Servilia duet "Non mi vuoi con te, o crudele" (You do not wish me to be with you, o cruel one) in the final act of

Elpina

vi. I/II Andante molto

Au-re lie-vi che spi-ra-te

Va. Bc.

Example 26. *La fida ninfa*, ‘Aure lievi che spirate’, bars 25 ff.

Tito Manlio, the G minor Megacle/Aristea duet ‘Ne’ giorni tuoi felici’ (In your happy days) from *L’Olimpiade*, or the gentle pastoral ‘Dimmi, pastore’ (Tell me, shepherd) from *La fida ninfa*. In the Manlio/Servilia duet there is a section in thirds that clearly pointed ahead to the setting of ‘Mann und Weib, und Weib und Mann’ in the Pamina/Papageno duet in Mozart’s *Die Zauberflöte*. A special kind of “duet” is the magnificent *ombra* scene in the second act of *Ottone in Villa* in which Gaio’s lover Tullia answers him in a ghost-like echo (fig. 21). The aria that begins “L’ombre, l’aure, e ancora il rio” (The shadows, the breezes, and the brook) creates its special effect with a very free structure resulting from constant tempo changes and especially from an extremely subtle disposition of sound. In addition to the string orchestra, which occasionally features a violin solo or duet, two violins and two flutes play *in scena*.

Several of the ensembles that are larger than duos have an artfully polyphonic structure with double or multiple counterpoint. A good example is found in the trio “S’egli è ver” (If it is true) from *La fida ninfa* with its three interchangeable voices. The “Non più regina” (No longer queen) trio from *Griselda* is surprising owing to ‘the contrasting motifs and the fast repartee recalling the comic opera of the period’.³⁷ In some cases, characters are developed by means of the use of distinct themes. In conclusion, the quintet “Anima mia, mio ben” from *La verità in cimento* (based on a quartet from his preceding opera *La Candace*) and the quartet “Io crudel?” from *Farnace* deserve to be touched upon as remarkable examples of Vivaldi’s art of ensemble writing. A wide variety of forms of interaction develops among characters, from dialogue –



Figure 21. Autograph score of *Ottone in Villa*, beginning of the echo scene ‘L’ombre, l’aure’.

one character at a time – or the overlapping of single voices to voices grouped by pairs, to the chorus of all voices (ex. 27).

It should come as no surprise that a composer of such creativity and skill as Vivaldi managed to sustain the dramatic tension of a scene despite added instrumental sections, usually called *sinfonie*. The connections with his programmatic concertos are especially close, ranging from almost identical themes and figuration – for example, the “storm at sea” music in *La fida ninfa* – to the utilization in operas of complete movements or parts of movements from concertos. When Manlio is led to his execution in the final act of *Tito Manlio*, for example, a sinfonia is played in which the musical substance is identical to the first movement of the Concerto ‘Funebre’ (RV 579).

All instrumental introductions that open Vivaldi’s operas follow the standard form of the Italian sinfonia: fast – slow – fast. In principle, this *sinfonia avanti l’opera* shared no thematic material with the following

Berenice

Jo cru-del? Jo crudel? Giustori - go-re ti con-danna ò tradi - - to-re.

Pompeo

Non sei degno di mer-

B.c.
(alle Str. col Basso)

Tan-to fa-sto? Tan-to

Tamiri

Ma-dre, oh Di-o! Du-ce, oh Di-o!

Farnace

E viltà. E viltà.

cè, non sei degno di mer-cè. Tanto or - go-glio? Tanto or-

(Continued)

Example 27. *Farnace*, “Io crudel?” (quartet), bars 40 ff.

Nò nò nò Nò nò nò non è tempo di pietà
-- ce mer-cè Du-ce oh Dio! pie--tà, quest'è troppo crudeltà
e vil-tà, e vil-tà e vil-tà, e vil-tà
Nò nò nò Nò nò nò non è tempo di pie-tà
falso? Morte attendi.
pietà, pie-tà. Ma - - dre, pie-tà, Du -
e morte voglio.
-goglio?

Example 27 continued.

opera and was, therefore, a more or less autonomous and interchangeable instrumental work. Of course, in some cases, the *sinfonia* made use of thematic material from the opera, as, for example, in *Giustino*. It is nonetheless entirely typical of the relatively neutral character of Vivaldi's works in this form (most of which are for strings alone) that he reused a number of them with later operas – that is, the *sinfonia* to *Arsilda* for *Teuzzone*, the one for *Armida* for *Ercole*, and the *Dorilla* *sinfonia* for *Farnace*. Only in the last case did he change a movement and that because the original final movement had been directly linked to the opening chorus of *Dorilla in Tempe*.

The Italian opera *sinfonia* of the period has been fittingly described as “brilliant, cheerful, festive music”,³⁸ though this actually applied only to the first movement, which characteristically was a relatively short allegro with brilliant writing for the unison strings. The main purpose of an orchestral work that was meant to open an opera was to provide an energetic call to order; Vivaldi met this requirement as well as any of his contemporaries. The very opening of such a work was typical: sound reduced to sheer motion rather than music that had the distinct melodic qualities of a theme. Whatever they were – scale-like figures and arpeggios as in the *sinfonia* to *La verità in cimento*, string tremolos as in the *sinfonia* to *Armida* and *Giustino*, wide-ranging arpeggios as in *Arsilda*, or pithy quadruple stops as in the *sinfonia* to *Griselda* – the main object of the opening was to set the home key (almost always C major) in broad strokes, while at the same time providing kinetic drive for the movement (ex. 28). Yet the *sinfonia* movement was also characterized to a large degree by contrast. Embedded between the sections, which put forward the sumptuous tutti figuration, were exquisitely delicate groups of motifs and occasionally a new kind of expressive lyricism.



Example 28. *Sinfonias* to *Arsilda* and *Griselda*, opening themes.

As with his opening allegros, Vivaldi developed a single, relatively fixed type of middle movement (ex. 29) – a supple, lyrical andante in which the effect derived entirely from its delicate color and from the soft, elegant flow of an upper voice played by the first and second violins. These ingratiating, serenade-like cantabile movements were usually marked *sempre piano* or *pianissimo* and *senza cembali* (without harpsichord accompaniment). These middle movements are of historic interest simply as very early examples taken from genuinely autonomous opera sinfonia. Many of the contemporary Neapolitan sinfonias “contained only a few slow bars of transition instead of an independent middle movement; these bars occasionally even grew directly from the first movement”.³⁹ Vivaldi on the other hand, and almost from the start, wrote middle movements for his sinfonia that were almost as weighty as

The image displays two musical excerpts. The first excerpt, titled "Andante pianissimo", features a Violin I/II part (Va.) with a melodic line characterized by grace notes and trills, and a Bassoon (B.c.) part with a simple, steady accompaniment. The second excerpt, titled "Andante Piano sempre tutti", also features a Violin I/II part (Va.) with a more active melodic line and a Bassoon (B.c.) part with a similar accompaniment. The second excerpt is marked "Senza Cembali" (without harpsichord).

Example 29. Sinfonias to *Arsilda* and *Griselda*, middle movement themes.

those in his concertos. The final movements, however, were clearly less important, consisting usually of miniature two-part dance movements, either in 3/8 or 2/4.

Period sources show that Vivaldi's opera sinfonias were played during his lifetime as independent concert pieces. About half of the ten works that we currently possess and that can clearly be identified as opera sinfonias have come down to us in copies having nothing to do with opera performances. This applies, for example, to the sinfonias to *Arsilda*, *L'incoronazione di Dario*, and *La verità in cimento* of the Dresden manuscripts. No link to a particular opera has been found for several other works that are largely in the opera sinfonia style; their original purpose has yet to be explained.⁴⁰ Such questions arise primarily from the close resemblance of the opera sinfonia to another genre Vivaldi used: the concerto for string orchestra without soloists, which he occasionally called *concerto ripieno*.

As indicated in the list of operas contained in the appendix, nine of the fifteen Vivaldi operas that have come down to us complete have been performed during the past fifty years, and some of them have been recorded. *L'Olimpiade*, which led the Vivaldi opera revival in September 1939, remained a favorite for a number of years. The greatest renaissance so far of the composer's operas came around the time of the Vivaldi Year (1978); from 1977 to 1979 eight of his operas were performed or recorded.⁴¹ In light of the slight progress in the revival of baroque opera in general – with the exception of Handel – these figures are high indeed. Of course, Vivaldi has profited considerably from his reputation as an instrumental composer. Reinhard Strohm and others have pointed this out, with Strohm calling the many performances of Vivaldi operas in and around 1978 “an almost grotesque overestimation of Vivaldi's operas”.⁴² The standing of Vivaldi's operas will largely depend on the future success of pre-Mozart operas in general.